

New skills prepare 3s and 4s for school and beyond

As toddlers grow into their 3s and 4s, emotions begin to emerge and need managing. Independence becomes a new theme. Developmental milestones can come fast, as those uncertain toddlers bloom into bigger, more distinct personalities, and get ready to take on the world—and school.

Three- and four-year-old children are a wonder to behold. In such a time of rapid change, many parents look for reassurance that their little ones are still meeting typical developmental milestones—and to learn what they can do to support healthy child development. If there are delays, catching them early and getting intervention services is key.



Jane Squires, Ph.D., is an expert on early childhood development and identification of delays, and lead author of the *Ages & Stages Questionnaires®, Third Edition (ASQ®-3)*. She stresses the importance of involving parents in the monitoring of young children's development. After all, who knows your child better than you? Together, parents, pediatricians, and child care providers present a child's best opportunities to meet developmental milestones and be ready for school and beyond. Below, Squires shares some information about what skills to watch for as your child grows, and provides activity ideas to support your child's development along the way.

Children's social-emotional skill development and competence is a particularly important indicator of school readiness. "Checking in on progress in these areas is an essential part of preparing for school," says Squires. "Self-regulation and other social-emotional skills that help the child cooperate and listen in the classroom are often more predictive of academic and job successes than pre-academic skills."

Meeting Milestones

Here are some pointers on what parents should know about the development of three- and four-year old children compiled from the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#).

At age 3: calms down within 10 minutes after you leave them, like at a childcare drop off; notices other children and joins them to play; talks with you in a conversation using at least two back-and-forth exchanges; asks "who", "what" "where", or "why" questions, like "Where is mommy/daddy?"; says first name, when asked; talks well enough for others to understand, most of the time; draws a circle when you show them how; avoids touching hot objects like a stove, when you warn them; strings items together, like large beads or macaroni; puts on some clothes by themselves, like loose pants or a jacket; uses a fork to eat.



At age 4: pretends to be something else during play (teacher, superhero, dog); asks to go play with children if none are around, like "Can I play with Alex?"; comforts others who are hurt or sad, like hugging a crying friend; avoids danger, like not jumping from tall heights at the playground; says sentences with four or more words; says some words from a song, story, or nursery rhyme; talks about at least one thing that happened during the day, like "I played soccer."; answers simple questions like "What is a coat for?" or "What is a crayon for?"; names a few colors of items; tells what comes next in a well-known story; draws a person with three or more body parts; catches a large ball most of the time; serves themselves food or pours water, with adult supervision; unbuttons some buttons; holds a crayon or pencil between fingers and thumb (not a fist).

How parents can help

Parents should make a priority of being present and engaged with young children. Read to them, interact, cuddle, create things together, take them places.

Squires suggests some simple activities parents can try with their children to enhance social-emotional development.



With a 3-year-old child:

- Encourage your child to identify/label their emotions and those of others.
- Play games that involve taking turns (ex. Follow the Leader) and following simple rules (ex. Red Light, Green Light).
- Stage a pretend argument between dolls and talk with child about what happened and how to work through problems.
- Tell a favorite story (ex. Goldilocks & the Three Bears) and see if your child can tell you how the characters in the story felt.
- Get down on the floor and play! Follow your child's lead and ideas.
- Tell silly jokes and simple riddles. Laugh with your child!
- Let your child know every day that they are awesome and loved!

With a 4-year-old child:

- Provide opportunities and supplies for creativity and inventiveness.
- When doing housework or yardwork, give your child a job to do on their own, such as emptying a waste basket or watering a plant.
- Have simple props for make-believe play, such as store or school.
- Encourage independence by letting your child fix their own snack, or choose their own clothes.
- Take your child to the store, a restaurant, and the library. Explore new places and talk about how people are alike and how they are different.
- Make puppets out of popsicle sticks by gluing on paper faces. Put on a show about two children who meet and become friends.
- At least once per day, be sure to hug, cuddle, and praise your child for new skills, independence, creativity, expressing emotion, and sharing.

School systems can also help



You can also call your local public elementary school to ask about free evaluation and to find out if your child can get services to help. They are required to provide this service to you free of charge. A team of professionals will evaluate your child and determine if early intervention or special education services may be needed. If no problem is found but you still believe there is a need for services, you can request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) to be paid for by the school system, or have your child tested privately at your own expense. Knowing your rights, being your child's advocate, and acting early are among your most important jobs as a parent.

Additional Resources for Parents:

Ages & Stages Questionnaires

www.agesandstages.com

www.agesandstagesresearch.com

American Academy of Pediatrics

healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/preschool

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones

www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/toddlers.html

www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/concerned.html

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html

National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations

challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu

National Parent Helpline

www.nationalparenthelpline.org

Parenting Counts

www.parentingcounts.org/information/timeline

Vroom

www.vroom.org

ZERO TO THREE

www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/parent-favorites

www.bpub.fyi/Lets-Play-App