

## 3-Year-Olds: Tweens of Toddlerhood

**By 3, children have successfully passed through the independence-seeking period so often called the “terrible twos,” and they haven’t yet reached the second surge of independence typical of 4-year-olds. Three can be the most enjoyable of your child’s preschool years. Three-year-olds are usually pleasant to be around because they are easier to understand verbally, intellectually and emotionally.**

### Be Prepared to Offer Comfort

In this 12 month period your 3-year-old will change quickly. How she behaves will depend on whether she is a “newly three” or a “nearly four.” As she matures, you’ll notice a significant difference between 3 and 3-and-a-half.

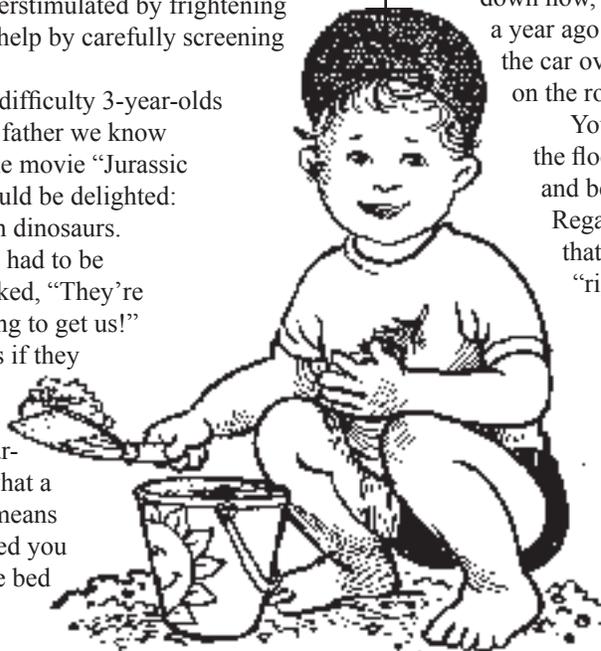
She will sometimes feel insecure and need extra support and comfort from you early in this year. She will cue you when she’s anxious by withdrawing a bit, or announcing without warning, “You don’t love me!” The best response for all of you adults: accommodate the child when you can while reassuring her that she is safe and loved.

### What’s Real? What’s Not?

Because her power of creativity and imagination are developing, a 3-year-old has difficulty distinguishing between what’s real and what’s not. Her developing brain can’t do it. Highly sensitive children are easily overstimulated by frightening images or stories. You need to help by carefully screening what’s appropriate.

Not fully appreciating the difficulty 3-year-olds have with real vs. imaginary, a father we know took 3-year-old David to see the movie “Jurassic Park.” He was sure the boy would be delighted: after all, he was fascinated with dinosaurs. When he screamed so much he had to be taken to the lobby, David shrieked, “They’re coming to get us, they’re coming to get us!” Indeed, the dinosaurs looked as if they were about to jump off the screen and charge up the aisle!

So be forewarned: A 3-year-old will likely be terrified by what a 9- or 10-year-old loves. (This means that some children will also need you to check for monsters under the bed and in the closet.)



### Strong Emotions, More Control

By 3, most children experience the anguish of jealousy, and even as they declare, “Don’t look at me,” you’ll see how they suffer when other children get the attention they have just rejected.

To everyone’s relief, however, 3-year-olds are usually less often frustrated as they master both language and body movement. Unless your 3-year-old is temperamentally intense, the tantrums will also diminish. As your child develops some emotional control, the irritations that caused major problems at 2 will be minor issues, hardly noticed. As she nears her fourth birthday, mild mood swings are often well tolerated.

### Playing with You and Others

You may be noticing that your little one is starting to play with you, not just alongside you. She can now speak of “we,” instead of only “me.” She can actually engage with you in play! How much fun is that? A “newly three” is getting ready to make a friend. Engaging with another is a huge step in social development, one that you can encourage by creating opportunities for her to play with other children.

When you play with your 3-year-old, let her lead the action at least part of the time. Step out of the directive role that parents almost always assume and simply make observations.

Your new, non-directive role sounds like this: With much admiration in your voice, you say, “You have the car upside down now, and the driver flew out! Wow!” Six months or a year ago you might have told your toddler, “Now turn the car over, put the person back inside and put it back on the road.”

Your play is still interactive: you’re still down on the floor, moving toys around, making sound effects and being silly. But you are no longer the teacher.

Regardless of how hard it is for you to step out of that role, who’s to say that grown-ups know the “right” way to play?

### Importance of Self-Directed Play

There are more serious reasons to allow children to direct play. As child therapists will tell you, children will use play to act out and often resolve—all on their own—the concerns they are struggling with. When adults direct play, they inhibit this essential process. By contrast, if you step back and only observe, your child’s

play will help you understand what she is dealing with—with emotions, with concerns, with relationships.

Even when there are not pressing situations to work through, a 3-year-old's developing imagination can power wonderful stories, skits, and make believe of all sorts. Stuffed animals come alive, dolls develop as characters. Take advantage of invitations to engage in this fantasy world, and be prepared for your child's quick and abrupt exit to some completely different activity. A 3-year-old's attention span is often only eight to 15 minutes—under the most fascinating of circumstances, and on a good day.

## Activities and Playthings

With such short attention spans, children need dozens of activities during a day to rotate among. Many are simple and can be incorporated into such other activities as taking a walk.

For large muscle development, your child—sometimes with your participation—can:

- Do exercises such as jumping jacks and arm circles
- Balance on one foot and then the other
- Jump over lines on the sidewalk
- Ride a tricycle

For small muscle development, encourage your child to:

- String large beads on shoelaces
- Practice buttoning, snapping and zipping
- Assemble simple puzzles

As art and sensory development projects, suggest:

- Potato printing
- Making soapy water in a dishpan and blowing bubbles
- Marching to music

## Dealing with Whining

Although 3 may be the most pleasant year so far with your child, there is an annoyance you're likely to experience: whining. To deal with this age-old problem, here is a technique that will be effective if—and only if—you are consistent in your response to it.

Demonstrate a whiny voice, and then a strong voice. Say, "I can hear you better when you use your strong voice." Then ignore the whining. This is hard to do because simply giving her whatever she wants will stop the whining fast (if only momentarily) If you succumb to this temptation, your child can quickly train you to capitulate to her demands. Remember, she has a powerful means of reinforcing the behavior she wants from you—stopping whining. Despite how difficult it is to ignore whining, remember that you are doing your child a huge favor by taking control of this issue immediately: incessant whining, now or later in life, will make you child unappealing to friends, family, teachers—in fact, to everyone.

## Caring for Yourself

By now you know it's vital to take breaks. You know that your enthusiasm for parenting depends on respite. Now that your child is 3, you can actually take a break *with* her. Of course, this is much easier with a more sedentary child.

When she's building with blocks, serving the teddy bears tea or pushing train cars on the track, you can practice being "non-directive." Stretch out on the floor near your child, making noncommittal comments and taking a rest from your usual teaching and correcting role. If it's warm, relax while she digs in the sandbox or at the beach.

With many children, a simple activity like flopping on your backs to watch the clouds move, or sitting on a park bench to feed squirrels will also provide mental and physical respite for both of you. Other activities that are safe and require a minimum of teaching and correcting include:

- Hopping into the bathtub together
- Curling up together for a nap if you both agree that you're tired.
- Snuggling in an oversize chair to listen to an audiobook
- Watching snow fall or raindrops splash on the window

(Of course, a walk or lunch all by yourself with a grown-up friend is a fabulous treat, too!)

## Other Resources

*Is This a Phase? Child Development & Parent Strategies, Birth to Age 6* by Helen F. Neville, B.S., R.N.

*The Self-Calming Cards* by Elizabeth Crary, M.S., and Mits Katayama

*The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain, and the Spanish edition, *Así me siento yo*

## Red Flags

Consult your health care provider if you observe any of these issues with your 3-year-old:

- a "nearly 4" doesn't engage in interactive play
- inconsolable terror after nightmares and or thoughts of scary imaginary creatures
- extreme frustration, complete with tantrums
- language does not include sentences of several words understandable to other adults
- family connections stay limited almost exclusively to the primary caregiver
- acts out inappropriate sexual or other abusive actions in play with toys, other children, self or animals

