

DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS FOR 3 & 4 YEAR OLDS

The Three-Year-Old

Things quiet down, briefly, at three for most children. Two-and-a-half seemed to love to resist. Three seems to love to conform. The typical three-year-old uses the word “Yes” quite as easily as he formerly used the word “No.”

Two-and-a-half seemed to be all “take.” Three likes to give as well as take. He likes to share – both objects and experiences. “We” is another word that he uses frequently. It expresses his co-operative, easy-going attitude toward life in general.

Three tends to be in good equilibrium with people and things around him, perhaps because he is in better equilibrium within himself. He no longer seems to need the protection of rituals, of doing everything always the same way. Greater maturity has led him to feel much more secure – secure within himself and secure in his relations to others.

Not only has the need for rituals dropped out, but almost every other aspect of Two-and-a-half-year-old behavior which made trouble for him and those about him, seems to have disappeared, or at least lessened, as well. The child is no longer rigid, inflexible, domineering or grasping. No longer does everything have to be done his way. Now he cannot only do it your way, but can enjoy the doing.

People are important to him. He likes to make friends and will often willingly give up a toy or privilege in order to stay in the good graces of some other person – something of which he was incapable of earlier.

Increased motor ability allows daily routines and other necessary activities to be gotten through with minimal difficulty. It also allows him to carry out successful play activities that earlier baffled and enraged him.

But above all, his increased ability with and interest in language help him to be a delightful companion, an interesting group member. His own vocabulary and ability to use language have increased tremendously in most cases. His own appreciation of the language of others has increased similarly. Now he cannot only be controlled by language, but he can be entertained and can entertain himself. He loves new words and they can often act like magic in influencing him to behave, as we would wish. Such words as “new”, “different,” “big,” “surprise,” “secret,” “might,” “could,” “guess,” are active motivators to get him to perform necessary tasks.

Two-and-a-half often seemed to resist just as a matter of principle. It was safer. Three goes forward positively to meet each new adventure.

The Three-And-A-Half-Year-Old

Temporarily at three, many children reach what most parents and teachers consider to be a delightful stage of equilibrium. The child’s wishes and his ability to carry out those wishes seem, for a while, to be in remarkably good balance. Three-year-olds, for the most part, seem to be well pleased with themselves and with those about them, and the feeling tends to be reciprocal. They seem also, so far as their outward behavior shows it at least to feel secure within themselves.

At three-and-a-half there comes in many, a tremendous change. It is as though in order to proceed from the equilibrium of the 3-year-old stage to that which is usually attained by five years of age, the child’s behavior needs to break up, loosen up, and go through a phase of new integration. All this comes to a head in many at three-and-a-half years of age – a period of marked insecurity, disequilibrium, and incoordination.

This poor or new coordination may express itself in any or all fields of behavior. It may express itself only temporarily and very lightly in some children, for a considerable longer period and much more markedly in others. It is so characteristic of this particular age period that though certain environmental factors may exaggerate it, in many cases we can fairly consider that it is caused by growth factors alone. Certain byproducts of behavior started at this period, such as stuttering, may continue longer than they should within the more usual course of growth.

Thus, you may look for incoordination in any or in all fields of behavior. Motor incoordination, for example, may express itself in stumbling, falling, fear of heights. A child who has previously shown excellent motor coordination may go through a period of extreme motor disequilibrium.

Hands alone as well as the total body may be involved. Thus, a child whose hand and arm movements have up until now have been strong and firm, may suddenly draw with a thin, wavy line, or may build with a noticeable hand tremor.

The Four-Year-Old

For every age, it seems possible to discover a key word or words, which describe the structure of behavior at that time. If we can find and remember those words, it often helps us tremendously to understand and appreciate the child of that age. For four, the key words are “out of bounds.” If we can remember those words and smile sympathetically when we say them, it can be of immeasurable aid in helping us to deal with any four-year-olds who may come our way. For the four-year-old is, almost more than the child or any other age, out of bounds – and out of bounds in almost every direction.

Thus, he is out of bounds motorwise. He hits, he kicks, and he throws stones. He breaks things. He runs away.

He is out of bounds emotionally. Loud silly laughter alternates with fits of rage. “You make me so MAD,” he will tell you.

Verbally, he is almost more out of bounds than in any other way. The language of a typical four-year-old can be almost guaranteed to shock anybody except perhaps a hardened nursery-school teacher. Profanity (where did he ever hear such awful language?) is rampant. Bathroom and elimination words come into common use. He uses them not only incidentally or where they might be appropriate, but may dwell on them and rhyme with them – accompanying his rhyming with much silly laughter which shows that he fully appreciates their inappropriateness.

And in interpersonal relations, he is quite as out of bounds as anywhere else. He loves to defy parental commands. In fact, he seems to thrive on being just as defiant as he can manage. Even severe punishment may have little chastening effect. A terrible toughness has seemed to come over him – he swaggers, swears, boasts and defies.

His imagination, too, seems at this time to have no “reasonable” limits. This new-found flight through imagination, which often begins at three-and-a-half, may be a high point for the enjoyment of imaginary companions. These, most parents accept fairly well, Four’s tall tales, particularly when they strike the adult as just plain lies, are less well accepted. Yet, to the average four-year-old, the line between fact and fiction is a very thin, flexible line. He may not actually be telling falsehoods. It’s just more interesting that way, and he may come to believe his own imaginings, which become real to him.

How firm a stand you, as a parent or teacher, take toward all these out-of-bounds behaviors is up to you. Certainly there are limits. Even the very simple social situation of a nursery school group requires a certain toning down of a four-year-old exuberance. Home life requires perhaps more.

You will, inevitably, need to use a good deal of firmness in dealing with your four-year-old. But you will feel less hopeless and less angry as you deal with him if you can keep in mind that behaving in an out-of-bounds manner is not only an almost inevitable, but also a probably quite necessary part of development. The three-and-a-half-year-old was, certainly, too insecure for practical purposes. Four seems to most of us overly secure and too brashly confident in his own abilities. Nature seems to have this awkward way of going to opposite extremes as the child develops. Eventually the swings of the pendulum become less extreme and settle down to a narrower range as the individual’s basic personality is less swayed by age changes.

The four-year-old needs to be allowed to test himself out. He needs to be allowed to go up the street on his bike in both directions and with expanding limits. We hope there are neighbors whom he can visit and who will receive him and will notify his mother of his visit. He needs to be allowed to run ahead on a walk and to wait at the next street corner. He is surprisingly responsive if he has been allowed some initial expansion. The reins of control can be held loosely, but there are always those moments when they need to be pulled up short and sharp.