

# Three to Four Years

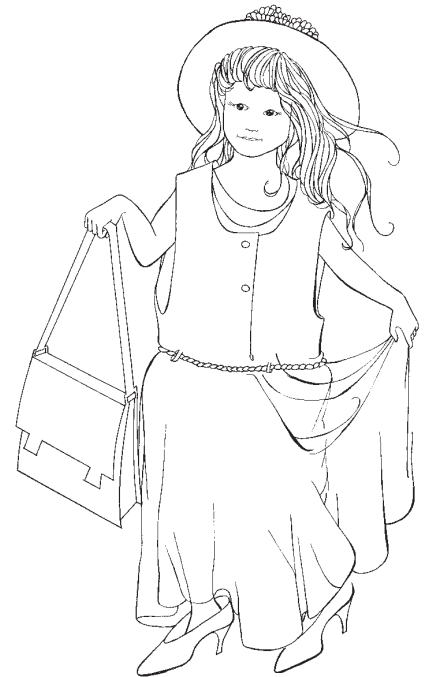
## Developmental Tasks

Learning to distinguish between reality and fantasy

Becoming comfortable with personal sexual identity

Learning to make connections and distinctions between feelings, thoughts, and actions

Learning to solve problems by initiating and creating



## What's Happening in the Brain?

During this stage, the child's brain:

- ❖ Has increased to 80% of its adult weight
- ❖ Is refining neural connections made through regular stimulation. Connections used frequently will grow stronger, while connections will weaken if used infrequently (e.g., a child exposed to English and Spanish at home is more apt to be bilingual than a child only exposed to English at home and Spanish at school).

## Domains

Physical	Typical Characteristics	Suggested Behaviors for Effective Parenting
	Runs, jumps, and begins to climb ladders; may start to ride tricycles; tries anything; is very active; tends to wander away	Carefully supervise physical activities; set necessary limits.
	Scribbles in circles; likes to play with mud, sand, finger paints, etc.; may begin to put together simple puzzles and construction toys	Provide materials and activities to develop coordination (sand, crayons, paint, puzzles).
	Dresses him/herself fairly well, but still cannot tie shoes	Provide opportunities for child to select clothing and dress him/herself.

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Physical

Typical Characteristics	Suggested Behaviors for Effective Parenting
Is able to feed self with a spoon or fork	Let the child feed him/herself.
Takes care of toilet needs more independently; stays dry all day (but perhaps not all night); becomes very interested in his/her body and how it works	Label all body parts without judgment, and answer questions about body functions simply and honestly.

Emotional

Is sensitive about the feelings of others toward him/herself	Develop a warm relationship with the child, and demonstrate love for and confidence in the child through words and actions.
Is developing some independence and self-reliance	Encourage independent activities.
May have fear of unusual people, the dark, animals, etc.	Don't make fun of the child, provide a night light, and never force the child to participate in activities which are frightening to the child.
Is anxious to please adults and is dependent on their approval, love, and praise	Give approval through facial expressions, gestures, and verbal responses; emphasize the family's love for the child and avoid negative remarks about him/her. (Note: Some temporary regression and jealousy are common when a new baby arrives.)
May strike out emotionally at situations or persons when having troublesome feelings	Offer love, understanding, and patience; help the child work with and understand his/her emotions.

**Social**

Typical Characteristics	Suggested Behaviors for Effective Parenting
Mother (or primary caregiver) is still very important, but the child is able to leave her for short periods	Express interest in what the child has been doing while away from caregiver(s).
Imitates adults and begins to notice differences in the ways that men and women act	Model the behaviors you want the child to copy, since at the start of gender role development the child will imitate adults.
Starts to be more interested in others and begins group play, though groups are not well formed; likes company, but is not ready for games or competition	Provide enough toys/materials so that several children can use them together; as necessary, help the child find socially acceptable ways of relating to others.

**Mental**

Continues to learn through the physical senses	Provide many sensory experiences (sand, water, pictures).
Uses imagination a lot; starts dramatic play and role playing; likes to play grown-up roles (Mommy, Daddy, fire-fighter, astronaut, superhero, etc.)	Provide props for dramatic play (old clothes, shoes, make-up).
Begins to observe and recognize cause-and-effect relationships	Point out and explain common cause-and-effect relationships (how rain helps flowers grow, how dropping a glass makes it break, how hitting hurts a person, etc.).
Is curious and inquisitive	Explain things in terms understandable to the child, answer questions honestly, and help the child put feelings and ideas to work.
Shows interest in words and writing	Say nursery rhymes and do finger plays together. Encourage four-year-olds to tell stories to younger children and expose child to other languages.

Typical Characteristics	Suggested Behaviors for Effective Parenting
Begins to know right from wrong	Provide clear limits and enforce them consistently (but not harshly).
Finds others' opinions of him/herself to be important	Praise the child whenever you can do so honestly; focus on specific behavior(s) and offer clear, specific feedback. (Say: "You ate all the peas, and peas are good for you," or "That drawing has such wonderful, bright colors," instead of "I like that drawing.")
Is more self-controlled and less aggressive	Notice and reinforce instances of self-control (the ability to wait, to share belongings, etc.).
Uses extreme verbal threats ("I'll kill you!") without understanding the full implications	Don't take threats personally or too seriously.

### Indicators Related to Developmental Lag or Potential Trauma

Excessive fears (especially of adults and strangers) and/or extreme separation anxiety

Shyness and/or lack of interest in others; not playing

Threatening or bullying peers

Excessively repetitive behaviors (especially around food)

Persistent speech problems

Bedwetting; toileting problems

Imitating abusive or upsetting behaviors witnessed in adults, especially during play (e.g., hitting dolls, drug play, etc.)

Regular sleep disturbances including night terrors and nightmares