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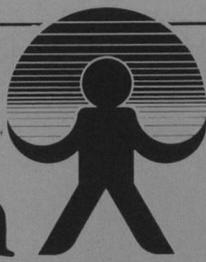
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Oregon's Children



Letters for parents of preschoolers: Letter 1

Oregon's Children



Fascinating Preschoolers Letter 1

Oregon State University Extension Service

Fascinating Preschoolers

Children develop while following a distinctive pattern that flows from one stage to another. Within each stage, children adopt new and independent actions leaving behind some dependencies of babyhood.

Children vary in the ages at which they reach and leave each stage. They progress according to their own internal timetable in intellectual, social, physical, and emotional steps. Skills that come easily and early to one child may be difficult and come later for another child.

While each child is distinctive, they are alike in many ways. Years of observing young children have produced information that helps parents know children are going to experience times when things go smoothly and times that are quite discouraging. Growth and change is a struggle for children and parents.

Preschool children are still basically self-centered. Their gradual growth in skills and social interest in others is developing through the first seven or eight years of life. Play is their natural way of learning. They use all of their senses to actively explore, imitate, and experiment with people, things, and behavior.

Three-Year-Olds

You'll discover three-year-olds are a calm, cooperative relief after coping with two-year-olds. Around the third birthday, activity is more balanced and smooth. But by 3½ children again turn non-conformist and become very strong-willed. A strong inner drive prompts their occupation with gaining a sense of control of who they are and what they can do and direct. It is appropriate that they make some decisions for themselves, but your patience and understanding will be challenged as you help them understand the necessity for family routines and rules.

Physically, three-year-olds have increased running, jumping, and climbing skills. Improved muscular control allows them to balance on narrow surfaces, use alternate feet for going up and down stairs, and manage small objects like buttons, snaps, and zippers. Some become picky eaters and all openly assert their likes and dislikes in food. Parents worry about decreased appetites but three-year-olds usually need less food as their growth rate slows.

Socially, three-year-olds are becoming more conscious of other people. They want to be with other children and show an increased desire to please others most of the time. You'll enjoy their willingness to cooperate with you. While playing with others has growing importance, three-year-olds have much to learn about cooperative play. They are beginning to share but still push, shove, or hit to get what they want. Their social problems stem from their natural self-centeredness and desire to call attention to themselves. "Look at me! I can ride the trike better than Billy!" is a bid for superiority. Help them feel good about themselves and reduce competitiveness with simple responses like, "You are a real whiz when it comes to riding a trike."

The third year is characterized by emotional extremes and some negativism. While children at this age are not as rigid or inflexible as they were a year ago, they can be very demanding and lose control from time to time.

Three-year-olds rapidly progress intellectually. Experimenting with vocabulary building means they pay more attention to words and how to make sentences. Have their hearing checked to insure that words are heard and spoken correctly. They enjoy chatting with adults and asking many questions to satisfy their curiosity. Keep your answers simple — preschoolers aren't concerned about scientific explanations.

Three-year-olds are learning to connect ideas and objects. Numbers and counting, naming objects, colors, different shapes, animals, and people are now firmly learned. They like sorting objects



according to size, shape, and color. When you look at magazines or books, point out houses, barns, nests, or stores. They like to look for happy or angry people, funny people or animals, dads, moms, babies, or boys and girls.

Play is the main occupation of three-year-olds. They have no preference whether it's with boys or girls. They are attracted to water, sand, or garden soil. A three-year-old enjoys building blocks, climbing, throwing, puzzles, musical activity, and story telling.

Three-year-olds carefully observe activities in the home and on television. Imitation is the source of active pretending during play. They spend weeks as Superman or Strawberry Shortcake. Grown-up tasks are part of play, too, so capitalize on their willingness to help with doing dishes, making beds, folding clothes, cooking, and sweeping the floor.

Four-Year-Olds

Exuberant and adventurous describes four-year-olds. They love excitement and anything new. Their creative imagination leans toward inventing more things to do, but their interest span tends to be short.

At four, physical control and energy has increased considerably. They like outdoor play that involves rough and tumble games, as well as running, jumping, hopping, skipping, and climbing. They rarely admit they're tired. Since they now think they're too old for naps, plan for daily quiet time. Tantrums, silliness, or aggressiveness usually are signs of fatigue.

At this age, children require companionship. They feel badly if they are isolated from the play group. Peers have become so important children may defy their parents in order to please playmates. Four-year-olds can play simple games in groups, but the games may end suddenly. It happens because each child wants to make the rules and decisions without regard for anyone else. In general, this is the year when taking turns and sharing gets better.

Children this age still turn to parents to solve most of their problems but they are torn between parent and peer influences. They discover subtle ways to resist you rather than flatly saying, "No."

Although four-year-olds have learned to handle an amazing number of emotional upheavals, many have wide mood swings. They may be pleasant one moment, in a rage the next. This calls for both firmness and freedom on your part. Many parents find that giving a "time out" period teaches chil-

dren their unpleasant moods are not going to disrupt the family. Take children gently to their room saying, "It seems you need time out. When you feel better come back and play where we are." Emphasize that they can come out when they feel better rather than setting a time limit on their stay. Many spats between playmates can be resolved by the children without parental interference. However, be on guard against uncontrollable fighting or use of objects that could harm either child.

Four-year-olds continue the rapid intellectual growth characteristic of preschoolers. With a longer attention span they spend more time engaged in activities of interest. They expand their language skills by attempting new, big words. They make up rhymes and words of their own like, "smerfy, werfy, derfy" which bring on gales of laughter and more improbable words. They also discover swear words and "potty talk." It's best to ignore undesirable words as much as possible. Make it a habit to praise words you want to hear like "please" and "thank you," or offers of help.

The play of four-year-olds reflects imagination and love of pretending. Small-scale wood working tools or household equipment particularly fascinate them. Climbing, swinging, sliding, and riding a trike are favorite outdoor activities. Indoors they can spend a lot of time with creative materials: paper, scissors and paint, books, musical instruments, and building blocks.

Encourage their interest in books by helping them write their own. After a trip to the zoo, a birthday party, or any event, help them cut and paste pictures into a booklet of 4 or 5 pages. Under each picture print words your child chooses to represent the picture. Children are proud of books they write, often reading them again and again.

Five-Year-Olds

Five-year-olds are generally happy people who find themselves satisfying. They find life appealing as they bubble with affection and cooperation. But as with previous pleasant stages the mood changes at about age 5½ when a fresh set of strong demands and emotional upheavals affect their behavior. They seem to want too much, try things that are too difficult, and make new claims on the center of attention. Children approaching six feel pressured by themselves and others to act more grown-up than they really are.

During the fifth year, well-developed motor skills allow children to perform more complicated tasks like riding a two-wheel bike. Better eye-hand coor-

dination lets them lace and tie shoes and handle a knife and fork more easily. They can use paint, scissors, pencils, or other art materials constructively. They now show right or left hand preference.

Initiative, or planning and organizing, is characteristic of this age. Their plans and routines in the bathroom may not be familiar to you, but the main thing is they have something in mind for getting the job done. Efficiency comes a bit later.

Five-year-olds reach a new level of cooperation in play with others. Most of them are happy, successful group participants. They want to be in on everything others do. But they are not ready for competitive games and are very discouraged by losing. Play for preschoolers is different than it is for adults. It's a child's beginning stages of thinking, planning, and organizing. These are also the years of their peak imagination—the rules for play are always their own.

Socially, five-year-olds have made great progress in learning what is "right" to say and do. They are more sympathetic toward others and usually in control of their emotions. They enjoy their independence and like to be given responsibility for running simple errands or taking a message to a neighbor.

Although fives can distinguish between what is true and false, they may exaggerate or tell "tall tales." Preschoolers deal with a shakey sense of reality and many unknowns. Was it real or wasn't it? Is it mine or isn't it?

Honesty is learned gradually. It begins to take shape in a child's thinking during this year. Families communicate the value of truth or not taking other's things with and without words. Lies may be imaginative tales, failure to understand your questions, or given in anticipation of punishment. Taking things is part of learning to distinguish what is theirs and what belongs to others. Even knowing that something belongs to someone else does not wipe out a desire to have it. This is not stealing. Accept their lying or taking things as mistakes.

Five-year-olds can understand reasons for behavior. Without being preachy or making them feel like criminals, help them return articles to their owners and praise their honesty. They soon get the idea that certain things belong to others. Make sure they have their own treasures too.

Five-year-olds talk a lot! They are very curious and constantly ask how, what, when, and where. They have many stories to tell that flow more logically now. They'll sit for a chat or enjoy talking on the telephone. Their interest in exploring words is rapidly expanding. They ask, "What does this say?" It's time-consuming for you, but learning words is a powerful accomplishment for fives.

Clocks and telling time become a new source of interest. They have little concept of next week or next month, but, when the clock hands are straight up and down, it's time for dinner.

Children of this age are interested in everything from the smallest leaf to the biggest machinery. Satisfy this yearning to see and touch things in your surroundings—a walk in the woods, a trip to a farm, or watch street construction. Collect and save objects from their excursions for stories and books.

Practice Safety

Although preschoolers have become increasingly independent they still need your constant protection from injury. Even though they are resourceful, their natural curiosity threatens their safety. You can prevent most accidents if you control or eliminate hazards.

Teach children about safety rules and their need to be cautious around playground equipment, automobiles, high places, or water. Be careful not to over-emphasize caution so your child fears normal play and exploration. Sparingly use warnings and explain why they must be cautious.

Preschoolers are not yet predictable enough for you to assume they won't experiment with matches, household cleaners, or medicines. Garages filled with garden supplies and tools are fascinating for young explorers.

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death and injury for children. The best way to protect children under five during sudden braking, swerving, or a crash is to use a child restraint system. Five-year-olds are safest in the back seat with the lap seat belt fastened across their hips and shoulder strap attached behind them.

It's always a problem to keep children orderly during long auto trips or even when car pooling from day care. Provide children with activities to pass the time. Most importantly, make it clear that drivers can't drive standing up and children can't ride standing up. If you fail to gain their cooperation, stop the car until they sit and buckle. You may have to make several stops before they realize you mean what you say. Most accidents happen less than 25 miles from home at speeds of less than 30 mph.

Prepared by Shelley Lindauer, graduate assistant, and Marcelle Straatman, Extension human development specialist, School of Home Economics.

Dear Parents: Psychologists define love as helping someone to grow. Aside from the unconditional affection you freely give your children, helping their growth lies in understanding the world from their point of view. This letter about child development will help you enjoy their progress and appreciate their individuality as they solve the challenges of growing up.

Sincerely,

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