especially for parents

Understanding three to six-year-olds

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 the 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 muscle 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 concerned with other people. They want to be with other children and share 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, shout, and hit to get what they want. Their social problems stem from their natural self-centeredness and desire to gain 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 talking with adults and asking many questions to satisfy their curiosity.

Keep your answers simple—preschoolers aren't concerned about scientific explanations.

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 strength 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 too 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 bad 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 children their unpleasant mood are not going to disrupt the family. Take children away to their room saying, "It seems you need time out. When you feel better come back and play where we are." Emphasize that children can come outside when they feel better rather than sitting a time limit on their stay. Many spats between playmates can be resolved by the children without parental interference. However, be on guard against uncontrolled 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, "smery, werfy, derfy" which brings 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-old's reflects imagination and love of pretending. Small-scale woodworking tools or household equipment particularly fascinate them. Climbing, swinging, swinging, 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 the interest in books by helping them write their own story. For 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 your child's name. Children are proud of their art, often showing 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 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 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 coordination 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 of the bathroom may not be familiar to you, but the main thing is they are beginning to get 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 see more of 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.

Usually, 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 shaky 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 lying or taking things as mistakes and help them understand why it is wrong.

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.
Children at 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.

**Promoting the self-image**

Parents talk a lot about how they want their children to grow. They worry about their children's progress because they know early experiences influence a child's self-image and social accomplishments. Good adjustments begin in childhood and continue step by step through life.

Pressures, are not likely to ask themselves, "What kind of a person am I?" or "How much do I like myself?" They do, however, create inner pictures of themselves based on how well they seem to be doing, how much they are loved, and how they are pleasing you. Successful experiences build pleasant inner pictures of self-confidence called self-image. "I can do it," becomes a child's foundation for action. Repeated failures and discouragement build pictures of despair. "I'm a flop," was the constant remark of a four-year-old whenever things didn't go well. When children have pleasant inner pictures, they have high self-esteem.

High self-esteem is not self-centeredness. It simply means that children see themselves as helpful, enjoyable, strong, and dependable. Preschoolers' constant demands for recognition of accomplishments are not self-centeredness. Instead, they seek reminders of their worth to make them glad to be who they are. Children with high self-esteem accept daily risks while children with low self-esteem withdraw from new learnings and adventures because they fear failure.

Children aren't born with self-esteem. You help create it by reflecting positive or negative responses to their efforts. Your words and actions convey powerful messages that tell children whether they are valued and enjoyed or whether they are an extra burden.

Everything that happens to children affects their self-image. Important and unimportant incidents raise or lower their self-esteem. For example, if you're always too busy but hurry, or nag about how to clean up, children consider they're not as important as other things or people. If you can say to them, "You've done a great job this morning," they'll give you a lot of self-confidence. Their self-esteem is reinforced with your time and attention, the way you love and accept them, and the way you encourage them to do better. "I'm a flop," was the constant remark of a four-year-old whenever things didn't go well. When children have pleasant inner pictures, they have high self-esteem.

Be sensitive to children's feelings. Shyness, anger, extreme dependence on you, misbehavior, or nervous habits may signal a troubled self-image. Put yourself in your children's shoes. Is there enough recognition, tenderness, and encouragement flowing their way? They will learn to feel big and proud by telling them that they are doing well. If day after day, children experience more comfort than discomfort, more encouragement than discouragement, and more attention than lack of it, they develop good feelings about themselves.

No parent intentionally contributes to feelings of low worth in their children; however, sometimes carelessly or thoughtlessly, the best of pictures are not presented to children. Here are a few items to think about:

**Appropriate expectations.** Few children can live up to parental expectations. Standards are important to work toward but can become detrimental to children's views of their abilities. Children do their best to learn manners, remember rules, sit still, and share, but they are beginners and rarely achieve perfection. Since they measure themselves by your standards, do you make them feel that they're improving? A child who cannot meet a parent's expectations, soon gets the message, "I have little faith in you when you aren't measuring up." Remembering what children of each age can do will help you have more realistic expectations.

Promote trust. Let children show unhappy or angry feelings without fear of rejection. It's easy to share in their accomplishments and joy, but their feelings are also part of getting along in different situations. You increase self-images when you understand and comfort children in difficult times. Avoid degrading them in front of others or allowing others to tease or belittle them. Preschoolers must believe you are on their side.

Respond immediately when children rebel as well. "You were helpful when we were in the grocery by sitting quietly in the cart" makes a child proud. They strive to hear you say it again. Too often children's desirable behaviors are taken for granted while attention is focused on mistakes. This makes it difficult for children to gather enough positive pictures of themselves to build a high self-esteem. Constant encouragement for positive efforts, praise for tasks well done, and a sense of humor about mistakes give children the background for building high self-esteem.

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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.

Well-meaning parents often limit their conversation with preschoolers to giving orders or disciplining them. Many parents pay little attention to a child's feelings or concerns. Make
conversation with your children each day. Take turns listening and speaking so you can better understand one another. Parents may want to:

- practice making frequent up-lifting remarks to children
- focus on the effort going into an activity or action
- look for the good rather than the poor parts in an effort
- find ways to correct mistakes without discouraging positive activities
- look for and comment on a child’s potential skill.

Preschoolers are filled with wonder at what they see and can do. Share the delight of their discovery and mastery with them as you grow together.

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