

Children develop intellectually, physically and socially, step by step, in a progressive manner. Skills are learned gradually as a child moves through the stages of development. In order to provide an age appropriate program with activities that enhance the numerous stages of growth and development in children, the adult should have a good understanding of where the child is coming from, where the child is at currently, and where he or she is heading in the near future, developmentally. The following information will provide a basic overview of patterns of development in your growing child.

The Emerging Preschooler (2-3 years old)

Because of a child's growing desire to assert her independence, this stage is often called the "terrible twos." However, this can be an exciting time. She will experience huge intellectual, social, and emotional changes that will help her to explore her new world, and make sense of it. During this stage, toddlers will be able to follow two- or three-phrase commands, sort objects by shape and color, imitate the actions of adults and playmates, and express a wide range of emotions.

Cognitive Development

1. Finds objects even when hidden under two or three covers
2. Begins to sort by shapes and colors
3. Begins make-believe play

Language Development

Language is usually well developed in most two-to-three-year-old children, but they may speak so quickly that they are difficult to understand. Many children will now begin to use language to ask questions and give directions. Vocabulary is increasing rapidly, and the two-and-a-half-year-old will be learning about 50 new words each month. By three years of age, most children will have a vocabulary of about 900 words, and they will speak in sentences of three to four words. Many will begin to use pronouns, including the personal pronoun "I." Most children will be able to repeat short rhymes and sing short songs.

Physical Development

Hands/Grasp. By two years of age, most children can turn the pages of a book one at a time. Children this age are often learning to twist or turn objects with their hands. As a result, they may be able to turn a doorknob to open a door. As children approach three years of age, they get increasingly better at using their hands. At two years of age, most children will probably use a crayon by holding it in a fist-like grasp, and as children approach three years of age, they will begin to use a more mature grip (between the thumb and first two fingers) of a crayon or pencil. They will probably begin to draw pictures, too, instead of scribbling. By three, many children will be able to use scissors, and they may be able to perform tasks like threading beads onto a string. Between two and three years, most children can take off their clothes, such as pajamas or pants, by themselves.

***Standing/Walking.** During the period from two to three years, most children become very mobile, and they begin to use this new mobility to explore the world around them.

Many children this age love to climb up and down furniture, and also in and out of objects such as big boxes. It is also at this time that many children will begin to run. Some can even walk up and down stairs alone, while holding onto a rail.

Social/Emotional Development

Temper tantrums are quite common during this time. Most children this age assert their independence by saying "no," by throwing temper tantrums, and by demonstrating stubbornness. This negativism is a normal and important part of development. This is simply how children let the world know that they have ideas of their own, and that they want to make some decisions for themselves. Many children protest just for the fun of finding out how it feels to say "no." Care Givers should be careful not to overreact to the minor rebellions of their two to three year old children, because if they react too strongly to these rebellions, they run the risk of reinforcing rather than discouraging the negativism.

As children approach their third birthdays, they will begin to play with other children. Group play will require adult supervision.

Developmental Warning Signs

The following are signs of possible developmental delay (remember to always consult your pediatrician because children develop at their own particular pace):

1. Often and has difficulty with stairs
2. Persistent drooling or very unclear speech.
3. Cannot copy a circle by 3 years of age.
4. Does not "pretend" play.
5. Has little interest in other children.
6. Extreme difficulty separating from mother.
7. Cannot communicate in short phrases.

Ideas for Care Givers

1. Set up a special time to read books
2. Encourage child to engage in pretend play.
3. Play parade or follow the leader
4. Help child to explore her surroundings by taking her on a walk or wagon ride.
5. Encourage child to tell you her name and age.
6. Teach child simple songs like "Itsy Bitsy Spider", or other cultural childhood rhymes.

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