

Supporting the prime and specific areas of development

What does it mean to be three?

What every practitioner needs to understand
about the development of three-year-olds

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Updated in accordance with the 2012 Early Years Foundation Stage

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Published by Practical Pre-School Books, A Division of MA Education Ltd,
St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Herne Hill, London, SE24 0PB.

Tel: 020 7738 5454

www.practicalpreschoolbooks.com

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ISBN 978-1-907241-40-6



Focus on three-year-olds

What does it mean to be three? covers the time span from when children are rising threes until they reach their fourth birthday. Significant developmental changes happen over these months, affecting young children and their families. Some boys and girls have already experienced time away from their parents. However, for other children, this is the year when they will join some kind of early years provision for part or all of their week. They may join a nursery or pre-school, they may spend time with a childminder – some threes will experience a combination of different types of provision.

The approach and ideas of this book are relevant to practitioners who are working with three-year-olds anywhere in the UK. However, the structure of the book follows the statutory framework for England of the Birth to Five Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This new edition of *What does it mean to be three?* has been updated following the revised framework, implemented from September 2012. The main EYFS documents can be accessed through the Department for Education website (details on page 54). At the time of writing, Scotland is the only other nation in the UK that has specific guidance about best practice with under-threes (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010).

A learning journey across early childhood

In England, early years practitioners have been working within the EYFS since September 2008. The revised statutory framework and supporting guidance are much reduced in length and some details, like the early learning goals (ELGs) for the end of the stage, have been changed. Of course, everyone has to become familiar with the revised framework. Yet, early years provision with established best practice will not need to make sweeping changes to their approach to children and families. The crucial elements of best practice have not changed.

One focus of change is that the six areas of learning from the first EYFS framework have become seven areas, divided into three **prime** and four **specific** areas. This framework is one way of considering the breadth of children's learning. But of course babies and children do not learn in separate compartments; the whole point is that their learning crosses all the boundaries. The overall aim of identifying particular areas of learning is still to ensure that early years practitioners do not overlook important areas of development.



Personal, social and emotional development

Young girls and boys need to be respected for what they are at the moment. Their development unfolds in a secure way, because they are encouraged to relish what they are currently learning. Three-year-olds need to have had a well-supported year of being two and now they deserve the freedom to enjoy being three-year-olds.

Personal and emotional well-being

Young children attending any kind of early years provision need to be enabled to form close and affectionate relationships with familiar adults. Best early years practice has long integrated a 'key person approach', and this aspect continues to be statutory in the revised EYFS (Lindon, 2010). Rising threes and three-year-olds need to feel that they are noticed, liked and have become a valued part of any kind of group setting or their childminder's home. Those adults are responsive to the needs and individuality of young children.

In a nutshell, adults need to care and show that they care about young children.

Some three-year-olds will be coping with separation from their parent(s) at this stage of their early experience. However, the separation experience will be different for individual children. Separating from the main carer will be a significant issue, when this setting is the first out-of-home care for a child. But some three-year-olds continue in their nursery or with their childminder. Group early years provision usually has age-banded rooms, so the key person and parent may have worked closely together to ensure a happy transition from the room for under-threes. Of course, some threes have been waiting for the day they can join the nursery that has become familiar because of older siblings. The person most affected by the separation may be their parent, especially if this child is the youngest in the family.

Threes, just as much as younger children, need to feel emotionally safe and at ease with their important adults

in their early provision. They need the reassurance that a cuddle and other forms of touch are available if they are sad, unwell or just a bit uncertain. However, affectionate touch is also part of friendly communication when young children, and you, are happy about something or so proud of what you have done together.

Three-year-olds are still very young children and it is important to emphasise this fact. They can be daunted and disheartened, if too much is expected of them and adults do not tune-in to the three-year-old outlook. On the other hand, with supportive adults and a friendly, accessible environment for learning, three-year-olds can be very competent in their chosen enterprises, articulate communicators and excellent company. Confidence is an invisible internal feeling but three-year-olds, like anyone else, show this feeling through their behaviour within a relaxed, well-resourced learning environment.

The layout gave children choice about how to deal with the balancing section. Some, like Josh (3yrs, 3mths) chose to manage the planks on their hands and knees. Josh came to the end and pushed the planks back together to ease his turn. Then he walked back upright until he reached the part where the two planks were creating a gap.

Josh levered himself between the planks to hang down and then dropped the short distance to the ground. He emerged, went to the slide end of the structure, climbed up to the planks. Then he said to me: "That's a trick. Shall I do it again?" I nodded and said an enthusiastic "yes". This time Josh put an arm over each plank and hung a few moments before dropping.

When you organise and manage time with children's well-being at the heart of your decisions, then you gain an understanding of what I call the 'big little things' that matter

LOOKING CLOSELY AT THREES

In the garden of Mary Paterson Nursery School, the children were able to access a range of fixed and temporary climbing structures. I watched as over one day many threes and fours clambered over a structure made up of a sloping ladder connected to a pair of horizontal planks, supported by two bases, and a slide down the other side of the plank. Initially the planks were set close together and then, within the day, a practitioner pulled them slightly apart to create a further challenge.

LOOKING CLOSELY AT THREES

One aspect of experience, that becomes clear when you observe young children, is their delight in small spaces in their environment, as well as the larger spaces. In my time spent with Buckingham's Nursery, I could see the benefit for the children from adult thoughtfulness about creating 'cosy corners' in every room.

The senior team had worked with each room leader, so that every age group had an inviting indoor space where they could snuggle up. Each room had developed a slightly different space. The practitioners then watched to see how children used the resource over a couple of weeks and then adjusted accordingly.

Threes and fours were keen that I should see and get into their cosy corner, created by a lightweight tent, erected in one part of the room. Cushions and other items completed a very comfortable environment, used regularly by the children.

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS: UNFAMILIAR ROUTINES

Your own setting will seem familiar to you, but you will help three-year-olds and their parents or other family carers by looking at the environment and routines with a fresh eye.

For instance, what is the experience like for a three-year-old? What might be similar to home and what will be different? This question is not only for group settings; a childminder's home will have differences from this child's family home. You know your routines, but how do you, supported perhaps by your helpful four-year-olds, make these routines clear for newly arrived threes and their parents?

Most threes will already be familiar with routines: the pattern of their current day. So, if they look worried or seem uncooperative, you cannot conclude that a child is unable to understand or follow routines in general. They are most likely just puzzled by the unfamiliar way in which you run your day or session.

You may, of course, need to support threes from vulnerable families in which there has been little or no consistency for this child. Threes may also have been over-indulged within their family, with few or any boundaries set by their parents.

Then your task – and partnership with parents – will be different. You will be introducing the novel idea that there can be a reassuring predictability to the day, or that young children have to allow sometimes for the needs of other people.