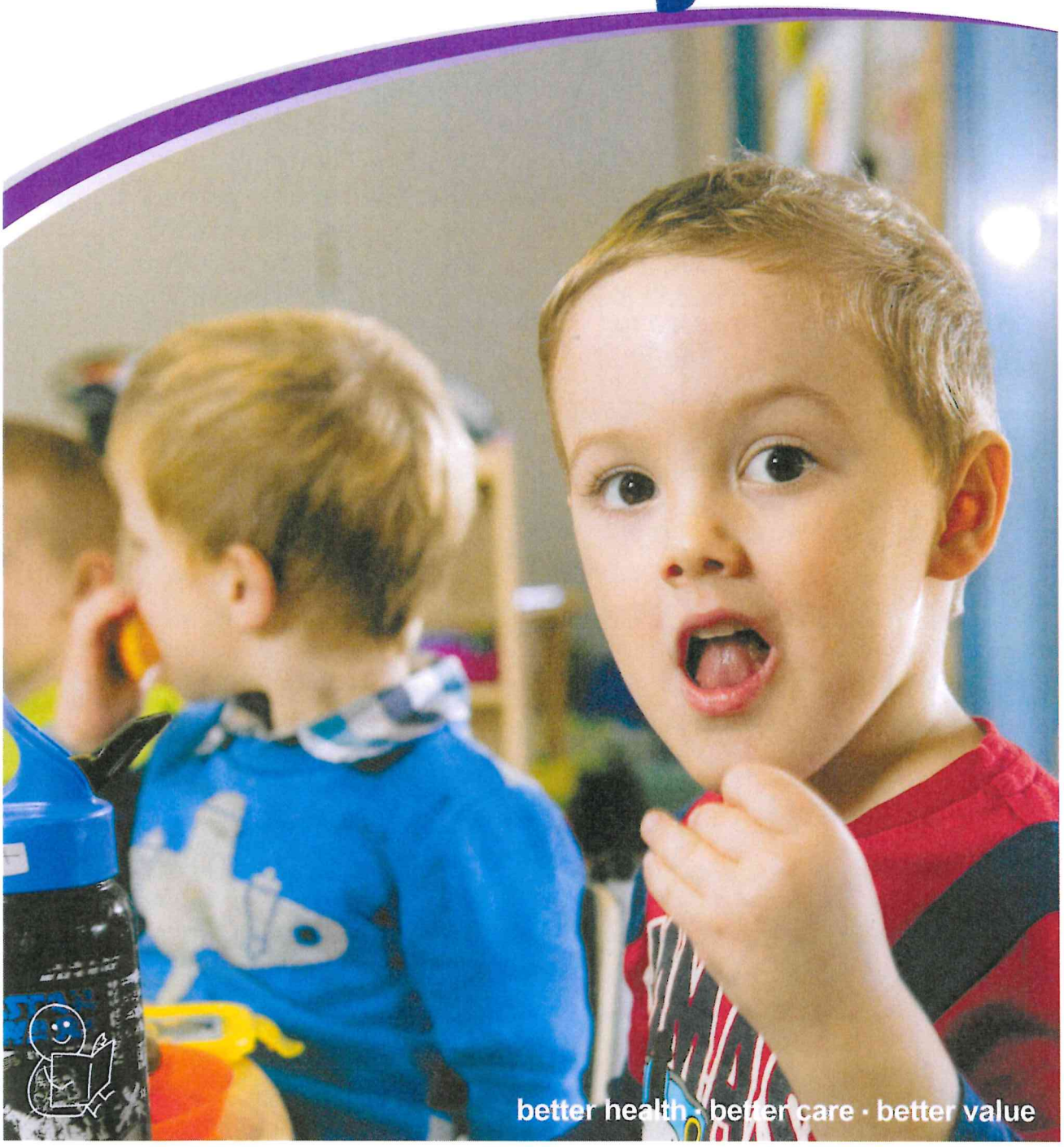
Government of Western Australia
Child and Adolescent Health Service
WA Country Health Service

child development
3-4 years



Your 3 to 4 year old is moving out of babyhood into childhood.

She's beginning to be OK about spending time away from you.

She has a rich imagination, and loves to play and be physically active. However, this means she may be scared of things too, or hesitate to try new things.

All 3 to 4 year olds are different and develop at different rates.

If you are worried about your child's development, or if she can't do things she used to do, it's important to see your doctor or child health nurse. If there is anything wrong, getting in early will help – and if nothing's wrong, it's good to know that she's developing normally.



Social and emotional

Your 3 year old is at the very beginning of learning how to get on with others. He can now control strong feelings a lot better, but will probably still have some tantrums.

He starts to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but only when he's feeling safe and happy.

- Three year olds often enjoy being and playing with other children. Your child is learning that other people are real and have feelings – so he may be upset when other people are upset.
- Taking turns is a skill that he'll learn as he approaches 4, but he'll still not be able to share his own special things if he's upset or worried.
- He can now wait a short time for what he wants, such as 'we will go out after you eat your lunch'.
- Your 3 year old is less likely to have kicking and screaming tantrums than when he was 2. He's eager to please you, so with your help, he might try something else or wait a few minutes.
- Your child may still be scared of monsters, noises, the dark or some animals.

- He now has a sense of humour, and likes to laugh at situations and repeat silly words.
- Give your child choices but keep them limited – 'you can wear your red shoes or your blue ones'.
- It's OK if he still needs a dummy, blanket or other comforter when he's tired or away from home.
- Three year olds can have strong ideas of what 'boys' and 'girls' should be like – girls wear pretty dresses and boys are like Superman.
- Your child is starting to take responsibility for toileting, but he may still have accidents (wet pants) during the day and be wet at night.

Developing understanding

Your 3 to 4 year old's 'inner world' is very powerful. It can be difficult to sort out 'pretend' and 'real'. Can a witch really put a spell on you? Can children grow wings and fly like in picture books?

Three year olds do not tell 'lies' as such, but sometimes imagination and reality get mixed up. Never laugh at her confusion and give her small amounts of simple information when explaining things.

Your 3 year old:

- can now understand that her mind is separate from you and that you can't read her mind
- still doesn't really understand about things like height and size. She thinks that a tall thin glass holds more than a short fat one – so there can be mistakes with pouring
- shows some understanding of time and that night follows day
- understands the meaning of tall, short, big and little
- can say she's a girl (or he's a boy) and whether other children are boys or girls, but she doesn't understand that this is permanent
- can tell you how old they are
- may be able to draw a person by the time she's 4. The person will probably have a big round head with eyes and a mouth, maybe with legs poking straight out of the head

A 4 year old can copy a cross and a square, and build a bridge with 3 bricks.

Physical development

In this year, your child will really enjoy physical activity – to run, jump, swing, climb, dance and ride his tricycle.

He might get tired and cranky if he doesn't have some quiet time between 'exercise'. Remember, you still have to make sure he stays safe and always supervise your child.

He may also become less coordinated and lose his confidence for a while between 3½ and 4.

Your child:

- will love to splash and play with water. Some 3 year olds are afraid of the pool or sea, while others love swimming. **Always supervise children around water.**
- will be able to walk along a plank because his balance is better
- can use pedals on a tricycle
- can roll and bounce a ball, but still find it hard to catch
- can throw a ball using shoulders and elbow.

By 4, your child can:

- hold a pencil correctly
- button clothes
- cut with scissors.

Language

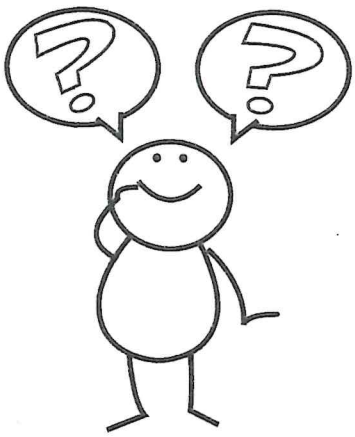
Your 3 year old is now talking in simple sentences. There is so much going on inside her head that often the words can't come out fast enough to describe it all!

She might stumble when expressing herself – it can be exhausting to listen and explain things to your child, but enjoy being able to share in her rich imagination.

- She'll love to be read to, but may want the same book over and over.
- She'll usually be able to let you know what she wants in most situations.
- Some 3 year olds speak very clearly, while others still use some 'baby talk'.
- You child may stumble over some words, but this will probably clear up by itself.
- Your 3 year old can understand 1000 or more words. She can understand 'place' words – under, on, beside, back, over.
- She'll ask lots of 'What', 'Who', 'Where' and 'Why' questions.
- She can talk about what happened yesterday and about tomorrow.

Help her by building on what she says to you. Be patient. Don't correct 'wrong' words – be positive and include the correct word in your answer.

Some children become such enthusiastic talkers that their constant questions can become annoying. Try to slow this down by asking her questions instead, or for some quiet time – at least for a few minutes!



ALERT

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:

- is not speaking in a way that you can usually understand
- is not using sentences of three or more words
- is not interested in using the toilet or is frightened to use it
- is scared of things for a long time
- can't jump with feet together
- doesn't seem to understand what you say to them.

Activities

Give your child lots of freedom for physical activities – riding a tricycle, ball games, learning to swim. However, 3 and 4 year olds are too young for team or competitive games.

- Allow your child as much time as you can to 'get things right' or do it for himself – be patient!
- Give him plenty of warning before he has to finish an activity and pack up his toys, or get ready to leave the house.
- Provide simple games with turns and rules so he's starting to learn about cooperation.
- Children of this age enjoy rhythm – encourage this by providing music, songs and rhymes, and lids to bang on. Sing simple songs with him.
- He'll enjoy painting and drawing, so provide big pieces of paper and pencils, textas or paints. Talk about the story their drawing tells.
- Provide books with pictures that tell a story – ask questions about the pictures and talk about the story.

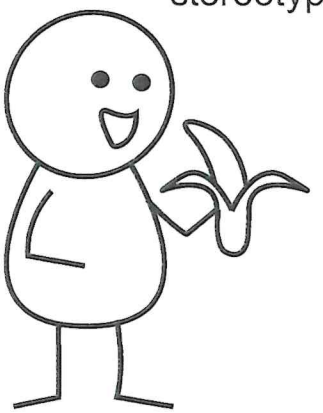
At this age, it's OK to let him watch a few appropriate TV programs or DVDs. Just like books, he may want to watch the same thing over and over again.

Provide lots of love, fun, approval and encouragement. But you also need to start setting limits that you can and are prepared to enforce.

Toilet training

Some children are ready to start toilet training when they are two, while others will take a little longer. Children who are 'fussy' about getting things right are sometimes anxious about using the toilet in case it all 'goes wrong'.

If you have another baby, your toddler may 'go backwards' for a short time in her toilet training. If you are worried at all about toilet training, please talk to your child health nurse or doctor, or check out some of the resources on the back of this booklet.



Summary

Social and emotional

During this year, your child will begin to:

- sometimes play cooperatively with other children
- learn about sharing and taking turns (but still not manage competitive games)
- separate from you (parents) more easily in familiar places
- become more independent and resistant to help from you
- show care for other children who are upset
- be involved in complicated make-believe play.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:

- doesn't play with other children or adults
- is excessively aggressive or withdrawn with other children
- plays in repetitious, stereotyped ways.

Motor development

During this year, your child will probably begin to:

- climb ladders and trees
- stand, walk and run on tiptoes
- ride a tricycle skilfully, turning safely
- stand on one foot for several seconds
- be better at ball games.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:

- is not doing these activities as well as other children of the same age.

Daily activities

During this year, your child will probably:

- eat well with a spoon and fork
- use the toilet, though she may still have 'accidents' when she's upset, tired or 'forgets to go' when busy. She may still wet the bed.
- enjoy helping adults with daily activities.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:

- isn't toilet trained and reliably dry during the day by the end of this year
- starts wetting again after becoming dry during the day.

Speech and language

During this year, your child will probably begin to:

- talk in complex sentences with mostly correct grammar
- speak clearly enough for most people to understand (although she still might not be able to manage some sounds – s, r, z, th, v, f)
- enjoy stories and jokes
- ask lots of questions.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:

- still speaks unclearly or is not talking in sentences
- can't follow instructions
- doesn't talk during play.



Your child is unique

Every child is different and may develop at different rates.

So, if your child does not do all these things, he may be 'working' on a different area of his learning and development.

However, children usually follow the same pattern of development, and it's good to feel that your child is developing normally, in his own unique way.

If you are worried about your child's development, or if your child is very different from other children, talk with your doctor or child health nurse. If there is a problem, it's better to get help early.

For more information contact

- **HealthyWA**
  www.healthywa.wa.gov.au
- **Local child health nurse**
- **Local family doctor**
- **Ngala Helpline** (8am–8pm everyday)
  (08) 9368 9368 (Outside metro 1800 111 546)
  www.ngala.com.au
- **Raising Children Network**
  www.raisingchildren.net.au
- **Kidsafe WA** (8.30am–5pm weekdays)
  (08) 9340 8509 (Outside metro 1800 802 244)
  www.kidsafewa.com.au

We've used 'he' and 'she' in turn – please change to suit your child.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

This publication is provided for general education and information purposes. Contact a qualified healthcare professional for any medical advice needed.

©State of Western Australia, Child and Adolescent Health Service, 2017

Produced by Child and Adolescent Community Health 2011, Revised December 2017 CAH-003424

HealthyWA
healthywa.wa.gov.au