

Personal, social and emotional development of two-, three- and four-year-olds

A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

This is a handbook on the emotional development of two-, three- and four-year olds. We are using the division of chronological age for ease of reading. In reality there is great variety between children at any given age at this early stage in life. The best way to consider a child's emotional development is in the wider context of their overall development, family life and social context.

Some children will meet their developmental tasks without difficulty, others may take longer. What makes for good health in personal, social, and emotional development (PSED) is a child making progress at the pace that suits them.

Support for the whole family is essential when thinking about a young child's development. We learn who we are and how to be from the people we grow up with, and as such any approach has to be a family approach.

These are broad developmental ideas, presented here with the intention to support those working in early years who have an interest in PSED. The intention behind keeping things broad is to keep the unique makeup of each child in each family 'front and centre'; with people who know the child best being the experts on what is to be expected or unusual for them.

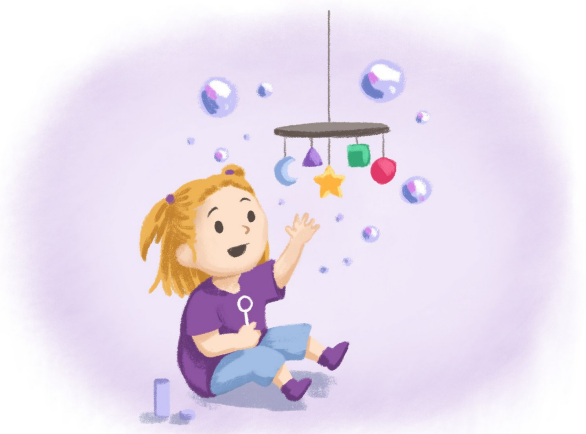
Let's meet our two-year-old

How the world looks to them

For our two-year-old, they are the centre of the world. Their experience is mostly marked by physical sensations, and feelings like happiness, excitement and sadness are felt with the whole body. They are developing new skills all the time, which makes the world a really exciting place, but sometimes an overwhelming place too.

The two-year-old loves their special people very much, and although they notice and understand when others are upset or worried, they can't yet really imagine the world from another's perspective. For most of the time they are not able to use their understanding of others to control their impulses.

The two-year-old's sense of time is not like ours, being able to hold on and wait is incredibly difficult. This makes caring for them a highly specialist activity!





A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

Personal, social and emotional development of two-year-olds

Sense of self

Our two-year-old knows who they are, and will respond to their name. They will have a strong sense of what they like, who they love and who to go to for comfort. One of their developmental tasks is to develop their own individual sense of identity. Their language development mirrors this emotional development with the move from referring to themselves by their name, to “me” and then to “I”. The two-year-old experiences feelings very powerfully, and will need help from adults to manage their emotions.

Grown-ups

By now, our two-year-old will have a well-established understanding that loved grown ups come back. They can be helped when missing parents or carers by being reminded who is collecting them, and what that adult is doing while not with the child, as well as what the child will be doing while they are apart. Our two-year-old’s fast developing understanding of language means adults can help them feel safe by letting them know what to expect and when. The two-year-old child will be experimenting with how they can assert themselves and this can look like contrary or oppositional behaviour at times. Children at this age are starting to use pretend play and can use imaginary games and stories to bring their powerful feelings from ‘real life’ into the arena of play, where they can explore their strong feelings and their relationship with their parents or carers in a manageable way for the whole family.

Other children

At two, children are interested in other children and are beginning to play ‘with’ rather than only ‘alongside’ others. However, since they are not yet able to follow rules without help, they will need an adult to show them how to do joint play, and to help manage turn taking and so on.

The two-year-olds limited capacity to manage their impulses mean that peer relationships as we think of friendships are still a little way off.

Example

Jenny is two years and three months old. She lives with her mum and stepdad, Jack. Her mum has gone into hospital to have a planned caesarean. Jenny arrives at nursery with her grandmother and tells you that mummy and Jack got taken by the baby in mummy’s tummy. How do you respond?

Questions you might consider:

- What are the gaps in Jenny’s understanding?
- How can you talk with Jenny about the changes in her family?
- Would you follow this up with the family and if so, how?

A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

Personal, social and emotional development of two-year-olds

Main preoccupations

At this stage of emotional development a key task is separating from parents and carers, both physically and emotionally. For example, being able to settle at nursery and make good relationships with adults there. This helps with a second key task, of establishing a sense of individual identity separate from their parents or carers. A way we can see this happening are the ways our toddler starts to assert their own needs and wishes more. Children's worries at this time also reflect these developmental tasks.

Our toddler's newfound separateness can make them worry about losing their loved people. This might be seen in very clingy or even negative behaviours (such as biting or hitting out) which keep grown-ups close, as well as communicating the toddler's upset, worried or scared feelings.

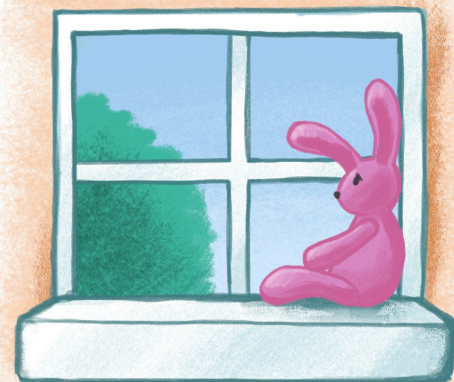
Ways to manage emotions

Children at two manage their worries in physical ways. Disruptions in sleeping, eating and toileting can often echo changes, worries or difficulties in the family. Children may start to assert strong aversions to things, people or places, which can be a way to manage a fear of loss as well as the need to assert their developing independence. Young children use play to try out their developmental needs and achievements, as well as their anxieties. Games about hiding, surprises, saying goodbye and coming back are all very popular with this age group.

What we would hope for them

In everyday situations, a healthy two-year-old is enjoying exploring their expanding world. They have steady and consistent relationships with loved adults who help the toddler build their developing independence and capacity to separate in manageable small steps.

This is a stage full of contradictions, the toddler might seem very grown up one minute and then like a baby again in the next moment. Part of their developing sense of self means we would expect some opposition to adult wishes, and this is a sign of them discovering who they are, rather than a deliberate act to annoy the adult. It might feel very hard going for the adults at time in these situations. At two, children love using their body and being with adults and other children, for example in dancing, climbing, singing and reading. These activities are an opportunity for increased happiness and wellbeing.



A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

Personal, social and emotional development of three-year-olds

Let's meet our three-year-old

How the world looks to them

Our three-year-old's world has changed a lot in the last year. Now, they have more of a sense of time and can understand a bit more what is now, what was before and what is later (though it's often hard to wait!). This means the world can be a bit more organised, with the young child sorting their experiences of the world in an increasingly ordered way. The world is still marked by strong emotions and these remain rooted in the body, though the three-year-old is starting to be able to name some feelings. Our three-year-old is also becoming more aware of other people's feelings, although it is still difficult for them to imagine those feelings being different from their own.



Example

Jamal (three years six months old) has been attending the child-minding setting for 18 months now. He is well settled and has a good relationship with the childminder. He is one of the eldest children in the setting and is often praised for his kindness towards the younger children, sharing toys and breaking away from his own play to help the younger ones with their activities. Recently Jamal has shown an interest in superhero play and this is an interest that has become a central part of all Jamal's play in the setting. Jamal's parents have shared that he has a new Spiderman costume at home and has been practising slinging a web around the house, wearing the costume throughout most of the day.

- One afternoon, Jamal tells his childminder that Spiderman is cross because his toy got taken away. The childminder has not observed an incident in the setting that afternoon. What do you think? What might Jamal be trying to communicate to the childminder?
- What might Jamal's experience be and does the childminder need to take any action?
- Why might Jamal talk about Spiderman rather than himself?

A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

Personal, social and emotional development of three-year-olds

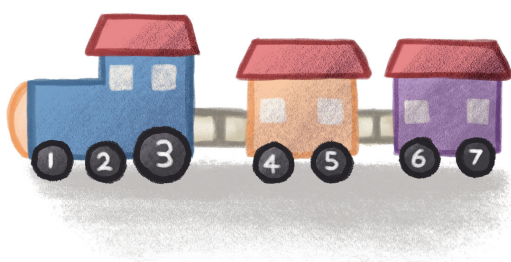
Sense of self

The three-year-old is increasingly interested in who belongs with who, who is the same and who is different. There is a lot of curiosity about gender, how families are different and how people look. This interest underpins the child's sense of self – for example: "Abi has a daddy like me!"

They are exploring their sense of themselves as children who can do more grown up things, like use the toilet and share with friends, while at the same time still being a very young child who becomes ashamed very easily and needs a lot of care and encouragement from the adults around them. Talking with the three-year-old about the story of their day, or week, or life, helps them put these different experiences of feeling grown up and younger together into a story of themselves.

Other children

Friendships are starting to form and children are exploring their own personalities as they find they play more with some children than others. Children will still need help to enjoy shared play, but are increasingly able to manage the skills of turn taking and sharing.



Main preoccupations

Our three-year-old can feel proud and pleased of their achievements, for example in self-care. They can also worry about suddenly feeling very young and feeling powerless and ashamed. For example, when our three-year-old does something that adults don't like, and is 'told off', this reminds them that they are still small and this can produce very intense feelings of shame.

To prevent shame becoming overwhelming, our three-year-old needs adults to set firm but gentle boundaries. As the child's world opens up and they start to navigate new experiences such as pre-school, playdates and new relationships with adults and children, they still need the consistency and safety of their special adult to return to – their parent, carer or key person.

Ways to manage emotions

At three, the child still displays their feelings through their body, so disturbances in sleep, eating and toileting can all express an emotional difficulty. Children at this age are also able to show you (very effectively!) when they are feeling angry, scared, sad or happy.

They do this through their behaviours but also with their developing language skills. Talking with children about feelings in a simple way helps give them another way to express their emotional needs from a young age.

A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

Personal, social and emotional development of four-year-olds

Worries about being powerful or powerless are increasingly managed by taking on imaginary roles, such as a superhero, story character, or animal (puppies and kittens are helpful as cute, little creatures that also have claws and teeth!).

Children can take to an extreme of this divide and deny any feelings or experiences of vulnerability or independence.

What we would hope for them

We want our three-year-olds to be developing their self-confidence and independence, made possible by having a secure base provided by a consistent adult or adults to care for them. The ideal scenario is that the young child can curiously engage with the world around them. Their capacity to play is broadening into imaginative games where they can test out ideas about who belongs with who, their strong feelings about this and their often contradictory experiences of sometimes feeling like a grown-up and sometimes like a baby.



Let's meet our four-year-old How the world looks to them

Our four-year-old is well rooted in where they belong. They thrive on routine and this allows them to feel safe enough to increasingly explore the world further, through relationships and activities outside the family. They have developed impulse control to a level where they can wait for short periods but will need help with this. They will still need to see and hear an adult giving them an instruction, as they still use their body as the main way to express and communicate their feelings.

Sense of self

Our four-year-old has a strong sense of self and is developing increasingly sophisticated layers of their identity. For example, their sense of who they are includes who they are linked to (their family), where they live and where they go, but also what they do or can do. For example: "My name is Tony, I live with daddy and I can ride a bike".

Other children

Children at this stage of life are interested in other children and, depending on individual personalities, are able to enjoy group play such as chasing and running as well as adult supported activities like singing or shared craft.

A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

Personal, social and emotional development of four-year-olds

Our four-year-old will be drawn to some children more than others and this is the start of early friendships. Four-year-olds are echoing the adult voices they are hearing as part of their development.

They can deliver the messages they have heard about themselves to others with great seriousness and intent. Children are beginning to develop a sense of right and wrong but it is easier to tell others than to apply it to the self at this stage of development.

Main preoccupations

The emotional developmental task for the four-year-old is to start transferring the capacities they have developed in their close family relationships into group settings – to learn to be part of a group. Along the way, our four-year-old will have to tolerate feeling left out, and will probably leave others out, as they start to learn how to manage being part of a group outside their immediate family. This relational achievement is gradual and only possible when the child is very secure in their primary relationship with their parents or carers. Although challenging, group life also brings with it new and exciting types of play, learning and relationships.

In order to manage this move, the child needs to build up resilience, confidence and some positive self-esteem. Our four-year-old child loves people paying them attention and giving them praise for their newly developing skills.

Ways to manage

While developing these new and important social and emotional skills, the child learns from those around them and can use the 'voice' of adults to bolster themselves as they work out how to 'be' in their expanding social world. We saw earlier how a four-year-old can be very indignant when they see a child behaving in a way that they have been struggling with themselves. By taking on the adult's voice, the child manages their worries about being unsure, meeting adult expectations and the fear of displeasing their special adult. This early bid for independence can be seen in a range of behaviours where the four-year-old strongly asserts their will, or extreme distress and opposition when this is prevented.



A WHISTLE-STOP GUIDE

Personal, social and emotional development of four-year-olds

Example

Rosie (four years seven months) has been in Reception for three months. She has started to display a very stern manner at dinner time and tells her family in a strict voice to use their forks properly. When her parents laugh at this she gets very upset and has been inconsolable on occasion.

- What role is Rosie taking on?
- Why might Rosie feel the need to take on this role?
- How can you support Rosie and her parents?

What we would hope for them

For our four-year-old, we want them to be exploring a wider range of relationships with children and adults. We want them to be happy, confident and still learning new skills in a childcare setting ahead of starting school. We want them to be able to enjoy playing alone as well as with other children, and be able to manage short periods of play without direct adult supervision. All these experiences will increase their levels of self-esteem, which in turn will bolster their ability to form positive social relationships and continue to learn through play.

