

## The Three-Year-Old Child

The sky is not always blue for the child approaching three. Clouds drift in and out and the weather can be unpredictable, but the rays of sunlight that pierce even the darkest days are brilliant. The two-year-old claimed the world by naming it, but the three-year old astounds us with the verbal ability to express more and more complex relationships.

Language has an inherent order and logic that helps the child develop the capacity for thinking. Thoughts first arise because of speech and are expressed through speaking. At a certain point, outer speech becomes inner speech and then, thoughts begin to arise ahead of speech. We could say that movement brought to stillness allows speech to arise, and speaking brought to stillness allows thinking to arise.

Karl Koenig expressed this process in a fairy tale picture. He called thinking the sleeping beauty in the castle of the head that is kissed awake by the "I." The objectification of the world that is required for thinking is strengthened first by the freedom that the child experiences in uprightiness and learning to walk, then by the power of language to describe things and relationships. The differentiation between the self and everything else culminates in the child's saying, "I." The sense of self as separate is referred to in developmental psychology as the emergence of self.



The sense of oneness with everything fades somewhat with the emergence of self, but along with the capacity for thinking comes the capacity for fantasy or imagination. Imagination becomes the basis for a new kind of play that may have begun during the third year of life, but comes into fuller bloom after the third birthday.

Play was usually a solitary affair for the one-year-old, and two-year-olds typically engage in what is called "parallel play," but the three-year-old is genuinely interested in

interacting with other children and in creating imaginative scenarios taken from real life or the world of stories. While adult help in getting started or sorting out difficulties may be required, three-year-olds slip readily into imaginative play.

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The three-year-old is also becoming more confident physically and enjoys challenging him or herself in new movement activities. Even though the seeds for the emotional/social life and for thinking have already been planted by the age of three, movement is still the primary mode of learning for the child before the age of seven. At any given moment, it is likely that the three-year-old may have a different plan or agenda than that of the parent, and can be bold, assertive and quite stubborn at home. On the other hand, he or she can also be sensitive, shy and reticent, especially in new social situations, and in those situations will not want to be the visible focus of attention.

### **Challenges for the parents of the three-year-old:**

Because of the child's new capacities, it can be tempting to over-stimulate the three-year-old with intellectually oriented activities. This can be a hidden challenge for parents. Even asking the child many questions and giving them too many choices can tax their forces and cause unnecessary stress. Offering two equally good choices (for clothing, food or activities) is much more age appropriate than asking, "What would you like for breakfast?" or "What would you like to do today?" Objects for creative or dramatic play are more essential and developmentally appropriate than puzzles or specifically designed teaching toys.



There are many media options designed for young children around the age of three. In Waldorf early childhood education, however, we recognize the continuing critical importance of three-dimensional experiences for the child up to the age of seven. The long-term benefits for future academic success of supporting the development of their imaginative capacities and strengthening their will to stay with and play out their inner "thought pictures" has been well documented in recent studies.

When is the right time to begin instructional classes or preschool? Again, play is the key. Is the class or preschool play-based? Are the instructors developmentally aware and appropriate in their approach? Too many different activities in the course of a week can leave both parent and child breathless.

Three-year olds are beginning to follow the thread of stories and can grasp the meaning of language that they would not use themselves and this can be enriching for them. The challenge with this new capacity for comprehension is that they may be frightened by

scary elements, especially if the story is not being read or told by a trusted adult.



A wonderful activity to introduce at this age is for a parent to tell the child, ideally before nap or bedtime, a story about the child's day or a specific incident from the day. This is helpful for the child's developing memory, good practice in creativity for parents, and can be a tender ending to the day. Some children like to hear about themselves in the third person, while others prefer to know already that the story is about them. Stories about simple everyday activities and excursions are just as satisfying as "adventure stories" for the three-year-old. *All of life is still an adventure.*

**This is the gift for the parents of the three-year-old: finding the spirit of adventure in everyday living.**

### Links

[R. Long-Breipohl, "Thinking and the Consciousness of the Young Child"](#) from *A Warm and Gentle Welcome* (WECAN 2008)

[J. Steegmans, "The First Three Years, Part III"](#) from *Cradle of a Healthy Life* (WECAN 2012)

### Books

[T. Atchison & M. Ris, eds., \*A Warm and Gentle Welcome: Nurturing Children from Birth to Age Three\*](#) (WECAN 2008)

[H. Britz-Crecelsius, \*Children at Play: Using Waldorf Principles to Foster Child Development\*](#) (Inner Traditions 1996)

[S. Howard, ed., \*The Developing Child: The First Seven Years\*](#) (WECAN 2004)

[S. Jenkinson, \*The Genius of Play: Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood\*](#) (Hawthorn Press 2003)

[A. Kohn, \*Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishment to Love and Reason\*](#) (Atria Books 2006)

[N. Mellon, \*Storytelling with Children\*](#) (Hawthorn Press 2013)

[J. Steegmans and G. Karnow, \*Cradle of a Healthy Life\*](#) (WECAN 2012)

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