



The 3, 4 and 5-Year-Old Child: Changes in Thinking

The preschool years are exciting times for children. Each day preschoolers discover more and more about themselves and their world. During these years, children gain new skills, abilities and knowledge. This fact sheet will help you understand preschool children. It's important to remember that the information in this factsheet is only a guide. Children grow and develop at their own rates.

One interesting traits of preschoolers is how they think about their world. A preschooler's thoughts aren't like those of her nine-year-old brother, teenage sister, parent or guardian. Preschoolers think differently than older children and adults.



Preschoolers can't separate fantasy from the real world. If you have a nightmare, you wake up, shake your head, and get a drink of water. You say to yourself, "Boy, I'm glad that was just a nightmare." Then you go back to sleep. If your child has a nightmare though, she thinks the dream actually happened. She can't separate the fantasy from the reality.

Children also believe in "magic." Mommy turns a knob and water flows from a faucet. Daddy flips a switch and the lights go on. Big brother pushes buttons on the phone and Grandma says "hello." Young children don't understand the principles of science. They think these actions happen because of magic, especially through the magical powers of adults!

Children believe that everything in the world is alive. If an object moves, because someone pushes, pulls or carries it, or because it moves by itself, it's alive! For example, you may hear your three-year-old talking to your car. It moves, so it's alive! Or, your child may be afraid the curtains that flutter by the open window are going to hurt her.

Try not to shame your child about her beliefs. Don't say, "You're so silly, the curtains can't hurt you." Gently say, "The curtains aren't alive. They can't hurt you." Don't expect her to believe you, though!

Egocentrism

Children are egocentric. They believe they're the center of the world. For example, you give your child a bath every day before his lunch at noon. One day you need to bathe him at ten in the morning. He'll expect lunch to follow. He won't understand when you explain that lunch is served at noon and not because he gets a bath.

Conservation

Have you ever tried to give two preschoolers the same amount of milk, for example, one cup? You pour one cup into a short, wide glass and the other cup into a tall, thin glass. Suddenly, the child with the short glass begins to shout, “He got more than I did!” You explain that it’s the same amount of milk. The shouts and cries don’t stop, however. Finally, you pour the milk into another tall, thin glass. The crying stops. You ask yourself, “What happened here?!”

What happened? Your preschooler paid attention to the height of the milk in the glass. You didn’t add any milk to the glass. Still, the milk was higher in the tall thin glass than in the short wide glass. Your preschooler doesn’t understand the concept of conservation. That is, the amount of a substance remains the same, although it may change shape. When she’s 7 or 8 years of age, she’ll understand the concept of conservation much better.

Relationships

Preschool children have trouble understanding relationships. For instance, you ask your preschooler to put three or more toy cars in order from smallest to largest. He probably won’t be able to solve the problem. He’ll put his cars in some haphazard order. Also, he has trouble understanding family relationships. He can’t understand that her Uncle Joe is Daddy’s brother!

Classification

Preschoolers don’t have the thinking ability to classify items. It’s hard for them to put objects into groups or classes. For example, a preschooler is unable to put a mixture of red, blue and green circles, squares and triangles into groups or categories. She may start to make a pile of red, blue and green triangles. Then, she’ll add a blue square and a red circle to the pile. She can tell the difference among the various shape and colors. She has trouble, however, paying attention to a single trait, for instance, all squares or all “reds.” Also, children don’t understand what the words “all” and “some” mean. This understanding is needed to classify correctly.



How do children move beyond the reasoning of the preschool years? Children’s thinking changes through growth and through play with materials, toys, children and adults. With time and experience, a preschooler realizes that a certain amount of play dough remains the same, no matter what shape it takes. Through play, the preschooler learns if he wants friends, he must think of the feelings of others. Through growth and play, children begin to reason more as a school age child.

Sources:

Papalia, D.E. & Wendkos Olds, S. (1996) *A Child’s World: Infancy Through Adolescence*. McGraw Hill Inc.
Strengthen Your Family, Cooperative Extension Service, The Pennsylvania State University.

Additional Resources:

For other publications on child growth and development, or information on the parenting education program, *Family Focus: Parenting the Young Child*, call your county UNH Cooperative Extension office.

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