

Raising Healthy Children: Age Three¹

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As your child turns three, she* is entering the preschool years. This is a time when children achieve many milestones. So, keep your three year-old healthy by feeding her well and ensuring that she gets plenty of opportunities to be active!

Use the information in this publication as a guide. Talk to your pediatrician if you have any questions or concerns. These are general guidelines. Each child develops at her own pace.

Nutrition

Age three is when kids often begin to develop their own opinions about what they want to eat. You can help balance your child's independence and perceptions about smart eating with proper guidance. As a caregiver, you are responsible for deciding what to feed your child, when to feed her, and where to feed her. It is then your child's responsibility to decide whether or not she wants to eat and how much to eat. This "division of responsibility" is important for teaching your child healthy eating habits and avoiding food fights.

Positive parent involvement!

Parents and other caregivers can be great role models for children. Young children are influenced by the types of foods they see others eating. When you eat healthy foods, your child may be more likely to eat them too.



At this age, your child still may not like to try new foods. When healthful foods are offered during meals and as snacks, they may be rejected at first. This can be frustrating, but it may help you to know

that it can take up to 12 attempts before a child accepts a new food. It is a good idea to introduce new foods one at a time, and at the beginning of a meal when your child is hungry. Lecturing your child won't make her excited about a new food, so be positive!

Offering an appropriate amount of food is another way you can help your little girl stay healthy. Think "child-size" portions at meals and at snack time. Offering small portions makes eating more enjoyable for your child and can help prevent her from overeating. Your child needs to know that she can ask for seconds if she is still hungry!

Kitchen helpers

Three year-olds need lots of hands-on activities. A great way to provide activity is by having your child help out in the kitchen! Children this age can help by:

- wiping off the table
- shaping dough
- mixing foods
- pouring liquids
- snapping beans
- shucking corn



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Healthy drinks

Young children need to consume fluids to keep them well hydrated. Water, milk, and 100% fruit juice are great choices for your child. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting 100% juice intake to 4–6 ounces a day. This is equal to $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ of a cup. It is a smart idea to limit your child's intake of drinks high in calories and sugar, too, like soda and fruit drinks that contain little to no fruit juice.

MyPyramid—for Your Child!



MyPyramid for Preschoolers is a great tool to help guide you on the types of foods to feed your child. For a balanced diet, children need to eat a variety of

foods from each food group. At this age, however, your child probably will not choose to eat a variety of foods every day! That's okay; aim for a balanced diet over a few days or a week. Offer an assortment of healthy foods and drinks at meals and snack times, and let your child choose from those.

MyPyramid for Preschoolers suggests the following daily intake for a three year-old that is active for 30–60 minutes a day. Your child will **not** eat exactly these amounts; they are a guide to help you know what and about how much to offer her:

- Calories: 1200–1400
- Meat and Beans: 3–4 ounces
- Grains: 4–5 ounces
- Veggies: 1½ cups
- Fruits: 1–1½ cups
- Milk: 2 cups

MyPyramid for Preschoolers is a great resource to use when planning your child's meals and snacks. Visit the website <http://www.mypyramid.gov/preschoolers/> to personalize your child's intake!



Physical Activity

Your daughter needs to be engaged in activity for much of the day to help her develop motor and social skills needed for the rest of her life. Most of her activity will be unstructured, like playing outside with bubbles or using building blocks inside. Some activity, however, will be structured, like taking a walk with you or playing catch with a friend for 20 or 30 minutes. Through physical activity, your child will develop her muscles and learn how to interact with others. Physical activity also helps to keep your child healthy.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends:

- 60 minutes of structured physical activity each day.
- 60 minutes to several hours of unstructured physical activity a day.
- Less than 60 minutes of sedentary time at one occasion, except when your child is sleeping.
- Safe indoor and outdoor play areas where she can be active.
- Non-competitive activities.



A Word about Screen Time...

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting screen time to **no more than two hours each day** to decrease possible harmful health effects, including childhood obesity.

Instead of watching TV or playing video games, spend time together as a family. This can include going to the park, arts and crafts, or riding bikes while your child rides her tricycle!

Motor skills

When your child is physically active, it is a perfect time for her to practice motor skills. Motor skills help your child develop strong muscles and bones and good balance. By the time your young one is four years old she should be able to:

- stand on one foot for five seconds.
- do a standing long jump.
- hop.
- climb stairs.
- kick a ball.
- ride a tricycle.
- throw a ball overhead.



- knowing a few colors—practice colors with fruits and veggies, as you feed your child all the colors of the rainbow with healthy food!

To get more information about your three year-old's development, contact one of the following reliable sources in your county:

- Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book.) Florida Extension offices are listed online by UF/IFAS at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu> or <http://SolutionsForYourLife.com/map>.
- WIC nutritionist at your county Health Department (also in the blue pages of your telephone book).

Developmental Milestones

This year is all about milestones! Your child will be gaining independence and new skills. Help your child improve her social and language skills, hand and finger coordination, and overall knowledge. Some examples of milestones achieved by three year olds include:

- telling stories;
- using five- or six-word sentences;
- using scissors;
- using a fork and spoon well;
- drawing circles and squares;
- counting to a few numbers—try helping your child learn her numbers by counting the carrots she washes when she helps fix meals or snacks, but don't overwhelm her by counting too high!

For a referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area, you can call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850) 386-8850, or check the yellow pages of your phone book

*Although we refer to a female child in this document, the recommendations apply to all children.

Your Three Year-Old

Your child's height

Your child's weight

You can check your child's height and weight percentiles by looking at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Growth Charts at: <http://www.cdc.gov/GrowthCharts/>. Charts are provided by gender and provide percentile curves of different body measurements such as height and weight that are used by health care professionals to track growth. Ask your pediatrician to provide an explanation about what the numbers mean for your child.

Recommended websites

MyPyramid for Preschoolers. – This website by the U.S. Department of Agriculture is devoted to basic nutrition information for your child: <http://www.mypyramid.gov/preschoolers>.

American Academy of Pediatrics – This website provides information on nutrition, physical activity, and health. It also features articles based on your child's age. <http://aap.org/parents.html>.

Recommended Reading

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2007). *What are some of the developmental milestones my child should reach by three to four years of age?* At http://www.aap.org/publiced/BK0_DevMile_3-4Yrs.htm.

Ellyn Satter Associates. (2009). *Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility in Activity*. Available at <http://ellynsatter.com/>.