

Growing Up in Stages

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THREE- AND FOUR-YEAR-OLDS



Susan A. Miller, EdD

Copyright ©2017 Susan A. Miller

Published by Gryphon House, Inc.

P. O. Box 10, Lewisville, NC 27023

800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 (fax)

Visit us on the web at www.gryphonhouse.com.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or technical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior written permission of the publisher. Printed in the United States. Every effort has been made to locate copyright and permission information.

Cover image used under license from iStock.com. Interior images used under license from Shutterstock.com.

Bulk Purchase

Gryphon House books are available for special premiums and sales promotions as well as for fund-raising use. Special editions or book excerpts also can be created to specifications. For details, call 800.638.0928.

Disclaimer

Gryphon House, Inc., cannot be held responsible for damage, mishap, or injury incurred during the use of or because of activities in this book. Appropriate and reasonable caution and adult supervision of children involved in activities and corresponding to the age and capability of each child involved are recommended at all times. Do not leave children unattended at any time. Observe safety and caution at all times.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is registered with the Library of Congress for ISBN 978-0-87659-723-1.

DEDICATION

For Owen—my amazing, playful, and creative grandson, who provided so many of the delightful scenarios in these pages.



PRAISE FOR SUSAN A. MILLER'S BOOKS IN THE GROWING UP IN STAGES SERIES

SHARON MACDONALD,
author and educator

Susan has been a personal friend and a resource for me since my classroom days teaching four-year-olds in San Antonio, Texas, and on through my years on the road speaking to teachers about the ages and stages of early childhood development. I always sought out her opinions and insights. Now I do not have to call her: I have her books!

Her understanding of social, cognitive, and emotional development in young children is unrivaled. She explains ages and stages in her unique way—clean, simple, honest. She is a gifted writer with real empathy and understanding for her subjects—children.

Susan Miller's books belong in the personal library of any early childhood teacher. Buy them.

DEBBIE VERA
PhD, associate professor and chair of the Department of Educator and Leadership Preparation, Texas A&M University

While reading the scenarios, I could easily see how all three domains in this series—emotional, social, and cognitive development—are interdependent. This series provides a holistic view of the child and really helps the reader to understand the overlap of development into each domain.

The writing style is personal and engaging for teachers.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi
Introduction	1
1. Developing Kindness and Empathy	5
2. Gaining Independence	12
3. Dealing with Shyness	17
4. Building Confidence	22
5. Testing Limits and Taking Risks	27
6. Dealing with Anger and Frustration	32
7. Coping with Fears and Anxieties	38
8. Developing a Sense of Humor	45
9. Learning to Resolve Conflicts	50
10. Coping with Separation and Loss	56
11. Milestones in Emotional Development	63
Index	66

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My family—Peter, Gregg, Owen, and Adam—for their support and patience.

My typist of many years, Karen Epting, for her professionalism and sense of humor.

Librarian Julie Daigle, for her invaluable assistance with researching children's books.

Diane Ohanesian, for encouraging me to write this series.

Gryphon House staff members Stephanie Roselli, for answering my many questions; Terrey Hatcher, for her thorough and very thoughtful editing; and Anna Wilmoth, for her assistance with details and publicity.

INTRODUCTION

For the past thirty-some years, my very special creative thinking spot has been my tiny writing cottage in Vermont overlooking Lake Dunmore. Each summer, as soon as I walk down to the edge of the lake and look out over the tranquil water, then smell the fresh leafy and piney scents oozing from the Green Mountains, I feel the stress of the past year slowly leaving my body. Emotionally, I feel I have become completely relaxed. Feeling so pleasantly renewed, it is easy to focus and turn my thoughts to writing about young children. I am reminded how preschoolers' moods and emotions are also influenced by their senses and surroundings.

It is not very difficult to know exactly how preschoolers are feeling. They truly wear their emotions for all to see! What a huge range of emotions they display—including big smiles, scowling frowns, and exaggerated pouts.

Preschoolers' emotions quickly shift from one moment to the next. A four-year-old can be laughing loudly while telling a joke. At the same time, a three-year-old, who is not always able to control his feelings, might become angry and kick the jokester because he is upset that his friend insulted him and hurt his feelings. Their emotions are all about a particular instant in time and the specific situation. In just a few minutes everything can change, and the preschoolers are all smiles as together they race their toy trucks down the sand pile.

WHAT YOU WILL NOTICE

With their increasing language skills, three- and four-year-olds are learning to use applicable words, such as *happy*, *mad*, or *sad*, to explain how they and others are feeling about a situation.

Not terribly empathetic, a three-year-old understands how she feels when she wants a toy and her friend refuses to give it to her. Because she is still egocentric, she doesn't understand how her friend is feeling. She may even respond with physical actions, such as hitting and pushing. A four-year-old, however, is more tuned into her friend's emotions, and she is able to react more kindly as she experiments with various ways to resolve conflicts, such as sharing or compromise.

Still working on becoming independent, three-year-olds have poor impulse control and often rely on help from adults. Four-year-olds, however, ooze confidence as they enjoy showing off how powerful they are. They love to challenge themselves by taking risks and testing limits in a bid for independence and being the center of attention.

Another common challenge among preschoolers is handling conflicts over possessions. When they get upset over these types of conflicts and a perceived lack of attention, they may react with anger. Three-year-olds tend to be self-centered and react without thinking about their peers. In these situations, they might respond physically or ignore the problem. More verbal, four-year-olds are apt to resort to name-calling or berating themselves.

As preschoolers develop emotional skills, they show fear in many ways, depending on their temperaments. They might withdraw from a situation, show fake bravery, or tell the teacher why they are afraid. Some common fears are monsters, and thunder and lightning. They are learning to distinguish between fantasy and reality. As a result of being anxious and fearful, some preschoolers may exhibit shy behaviors.

It is entertaining to observe preschoolers as they develop their sense of humor. They find ridiculous things incredibly amusing and love to twist words all around to sound silly. Commonly expressing their emotions in the extreme, they might yell and have huge temper tantrums when they are angry, yet their unabashed joy over a joke or potty humor may make them and their buddies laugh hysterically for what seems like forever.

Separation and loss are emotional events that cause preschoolers to struggle with their feelings. They find it difficult to deal with situations that they seem to have little or no control over. How they manage depends on their needs, their experiences, and your assistance.

This book is designed to help you understand the emotional reactions of preschoolers in your care and learn useful strategies for encouraging developmentally appropriate behaviors among children who are three and four.

As You Read This Book

As you start each chapter, you will find a definition for the chapter's theme. As you read on, you may wish to think about and add your own definitions on sticky notes.

Next are some highlights of developmental milestones of three- and four-year-olds. These will help you understand the stage of emotional development that a preschooler is functioning in during a specific time.

Then I will share some scenarios related to the chapter topic. These snapshot views are taken from events that happened with the children in my various classrooms (names changed, of course), from observations that I have been fortunate enough to make in preschool programs around the United States and abroad, and from special memories of my grandsons at particular three- and four-year-old stages. Related to the different scenarios are explanations of the stages to help you understand why a behavior or action is or is not occurring at that specific time. As we are all aware, individual preschool children may develop at different rates—some a little slowly, and others more rapidly.

Although I would like very much to have a face-to-face conversation with each reader, that of course is not possible. So what I have tried to do, as the author and a teacher, is to write in a conversational tone discussing the stages that young children go through. Rather than burdening you with heavy research and theoretical references, I have attempted to keep the flow of observation and application light and practical.

Next you will discover guidance specifically for you, the teacher or caregiver. The section called What You Can Do is designed to serve as a springboard by providing exciting curriculum activities or helpful teaching strategies for you to try with the children in your care. Feel free to build on these ideas and write on sticky notes to make this section your own.

The Other Aspects to Consider—Alerts section deals with some of the types of circumstances you might have questions about, such as recognizing when children are not quite in step with the emotional-development milestones for their age. This may indicate that you or a child's parents should consider seeking professional assistance for answers.

The ideas in the Activities for Parents to Try at Home portion are fun, easy-to-accomplish adventures appropriate for parents to explore with their children. You may wish to share these ideas with parents during conferences, online, in your newsletter, or by posting on a bulletin board. If you like, ask parents to share their own ideas on the topic and to provide photos of the activities for everyone to enjoy afterward.

Finally, a special section suggests fascinating books to read with children. All of the literature is related to the chapter topic and just begs you and the children to look at the enticing pictures, talk about the words, and enter into a dialogue about what is happening on the pages. Research shows that reading to young children is the most important way to stimulate their desire to become readers.

As you read this book, I hope you enjoy your adventures observing young children and learning how various emotional-development milestones affect the different stages of the lives of three- and four-year-olds.

1

DEVELOPING KINDNESS AND EMPATHY

Kindness—showing concern for others, being helpful to someone, being considerate

Empathy—understanding and sharing others' feelings

Let's look at a snapshot of what you might observe as three- and four-year-olds grow emotionally. Although not all children develop at the same rate or achieve specific milestones at the same time, here is what you can probably expect to see as preschoolers develop their ability to show kindness and empathy.

- Three-year-olds may appear unkind.
- Three-year-olds don't like to apologize.
- Three-year-olds have limited empathetic resources.
- Four-year-olds may exhibit sympathy.
- Four-year-olds like to help friends.
- Four-year-olds are learning about reciprocity.

Now, let's think about some scenarios that might be happening in your classroom as preschoolers develop their empathy and interact with one another in kind and unkind ways.

Hailey, a four-year-old, is decorating the last piece of special, folded, sparkly paper. A small group of girls are making get-well cards for Chloe, a friend in the hospital. By the time Ivana joins the others, all of the paper is gone. Upset, she pouts and exclaims, "What can I use? Chloe will think I don't like her!" Sensing Ivana's utter distress, Hailey hands her a big envelope and says, "Ivana, don't be sad. We need a really good drawer. You can draw a picture and make this envelope for the cards look beautiful!" Ivana smiles as Hailey tells her, "Don't forget, an artist always signs her work. Then Chloe will know it's from you."

Children are born with an amazing capacity for empathy. However, it is also possible for them to learn to be empathetic over time and with practice. Empathy needs to be a natural action and something spontaneous that comes from the young child, such as Hailey's kind offer of a way to include Ivana when she perceived how miserable Ivana was feeling. With well-developed verbal skills, Hailey suggested a wonderful strategy to not only make Ivana feel better but also solve her problem. By the time preschoolers are four, they are less egocentric and their executive-functioning skills foster their ability to take on another child's perspective.

If preschoolers know each other or are good friends, like the children in Hailey's group, they are more apt to respond to a troubling situation with kindness. They want to please their friends. For instance, Ivana was worried that her friend Chloe's feelings might be hurt if she thought Ivana didn't care enough to send a card to her. However, preschoolers may not be as spontaneous or caring with children they do not know as well.

In another part of the classroom, three-year-old Michael is building with table blocks. As he continues building, his sprawling space city begins to seriously encroach on Carlton's farm. When the blocks touch, Carlton pushes Michael's blocks away, and this topples a portion of Michael's city. Surprised and angry, Michael yells, "Carlton, you are bad!" Ms. Wynn arrives and assesses the situation. She states, "Carlton, look at the mess. Michael is unhappy. If you want to continue to play, you must apologize to Michael and help him rebuild his city."

For a three-year-old like Carlton, it is very difficult cognitively to understand the things the teacher is telling him. At this age, it is hard for him to perceive another child's feelings when he is not feeling the same way at the moment. Emotionally, he is not able to exhibit empathy and may even appear unkind. First of all, when the teacher gives him a moral directive, such as apologizing to another child to show he cares and is sorry for his actions, he probably doesn't understand why because he is the one who is upset by Michael's tactic.

He is frustrated to hear that maybe he can't stay at the block table when, after all, it was his space that was being invaded. Besides, Carlton really wasn't concerned with Michael's project, as he was absorbed in his own activity.



Outside, Bethany trips on the playground and falls down, cutting her knee. Three-year-old Andrea just stands and watches wide-eyed as the blood stains Bethany's torn pants. Still very egocentric, Andrea does not exhibit any kind behaviors, such as consoling Bethany physically

with a hug or helping her up. It is difficult for Andrea to overcome her own anxiety caused by the situation of the fall and seeing the blood. Using her limited empathetic resources, another three-year-old demonstrates a compassionate behavior in physical and nonverbal ways by patting Bethany gently as the child's mommy does to her. Even though Erik, a three-year-old, doesn't help Bethany, he runs to tell the teacher so she can provide assistance.

During sociodramatic play, opportunities frequently present themselves that encourage acts of kindness. As preschoolers begin to interact with each other in make-believe play, using themes involving conflicts, rescue, and sudden threats can encourage kindness and enable children to practice caring roles as they develop their prosocial skills. For example, when Jonathan yells, "Fire!" the boys put on their helmets and rush to get out the ladders. After they act out rescuing a frightened baby from a burning building, they perform CPR before handing the baby to her happy mom.

Instead of always focusing on materials and possessions, four-year-olds are beginning to enjoy helping their friends. Best friends Theo and Bryan are designing helicopters using wooden construction toys. When they realize there are only a few connectors left, they have a lively talk. Theo tells his buddy, "Okay. You can use them to finish your rotor. But don't forget, I let you have them to help you out!" Maybe Theo hopes this act of kindness will pay off later on when he needs to call in a favor. Both boys are learning about the process of reciprocity.



Although preschoolers are well aware that everyone has feelings, it is important for children to know that some reactions to feelings may not be all right. Unkind responses may hurt others' feelings. Perception is an essential part of empathy. Often, young children laugh at a situation because others are laughing, such as when a child puts his shirt on backward, or they are happy an incident didn't happen to them, such as accidentally wetting their pants. Quite curious, preschoolers might comment on

something in a way that may appear inappropriate or unkind. For example, Lorraine says loudly to her teacher, "What's wrong with George? Doesn't he know you aren't supposed to put a button [his hearing aid] in your ear?" It is important for teachers to help young children discuss and understand their emotional and cognitive concerns so they can learn to be kind.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Involve children in "Oh, no! What can we do?" stories.** Periodically, make up short stories for the children to finish. Ask them to tell how they might help the character. For instance, "Rosa is squeezing glue on her collage paper. The top comes off, and glue goes all over her colored construction-paper shapes and the table. Upset, Rosa starts crying. Oh, no! What can we do?" Encourage the children to offer kind and empathetic suggestions. They might suggest hugging Rosa, giving her a paper towel to wipe up the glue, or getting her new paper and more colored shapes.
- **Mentor caring behavior.** Help young children become aware of when others need assistance. You might ask, "Why do you think Maggie is frowning? How can you help her?" After children are aware of the situation, analyze and try solutions with them.
- **Set up cooperative group projects.** Offer activities with materials that children need to share or work on together to complete, such as puzzles with a number of pieces. A train set or a city built with Lego bricks and many other parts can encourage children to negotiate and

be empathetic to the various designers' construction needs.

- **Display posters that promote a climate of kindness.** Take photos of children in the classroom involved in kind acts—giving a friend a doll to hold or tying another child's shoelaces. Blow up the pictures and prominently display them as an inspiration to be kind.
- **Develop a kindness list.** Brainstorm and list ways to make your classroom environment



kinder. When a kind act is performed, check off the item and write down the names of the empathetic children and their fortunate recipients. Add happy-face stickers!

- **Participate in an altruistic project.** Encourage the children to think how they might bring happiness into others' lives. For example, provide art supplies for the children to decorate tray favors for a hospital or nursing home to cheer up patients during holiday time.

OTHER ASPECTS TO CONSIDER—ALERTS

- **Recognize that saying sorry is an ineffective strategy.** You need to focus on a young child's personal feelings first as a jumping-off place for relating to others' feelings. If a child is forced to say "I'm sorry" to another child but doesn't understand why, the request may backfire. The insincerity of this coerced request may send a message to a preschooler that his feelings don't really matter at all.
- **Be aware of don'ts.** To foster a kind environment, put a positive spin on your requests. If you find yourself saying "Don't hit" to the preschoolers, change your negative wording to let the children know what you want them to do instead. For instance, you might say, "Use your words. Tell Jared what you want. Say, 'I want the ball now!'"
- **Involve young children in the affective process.** Instead of dictating solutions that you think are best, assist preschoolers in exploring how others are feeling and what they could do to make them feel better. Ask open-ended questions such as "Why do you think Martin

looks angry?" or "How might we work together to fix the broken toy?" This helps preschoolers learn to be empathetic and practice responding with kindness.

- **Be aware of serious unkind acts.** If a young child continuously performs unkind acts (physically hurting others, overzealously teasing, or destroying equipment), you should meet with his parents or a school counselor to ascertain if there might be emotional or cognitive reasons for his behavior that need special attention.

ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS TO TRY AT HOME

- **Model kindness.** Throughout the day, talk about kind acts with your child as they naturally occur. For example, "Look at Janice's face. She's feeling sad. She has scraped her knee. Let's put a Band-Aid on her boo-boo. Now she feels better."
- **Make your home a warm, friendly place.** Provide a caring environment. For times when your child might feel lonely or sad, offer a soft quilt to wrap up in and fluffy, soft animals to hug. Supply puppets so your child can act out her angry or hurt feelings. A rocking chair is a wonderful spot to unwind in and sing happy songs together.
- **Volunteer with your child.** Be kind and help others together. Deliver lunch and brighten up a senior citizen's day with a program such as Meals on Wheels. Weed a sick neighbor's garden to show you care about her.



- **Show your pet with kindness.** If you see that your dog is scratching because he is being annoyed by pesky fleas, help your child give him a bath or use a handheld shower spray.
- **Discuss messages on TV; watch programs together.** Identify when characters perform kind or unkind actions. Ask your child how he might act in the same situation.
- **Act out scenarios.** Use props to dramatize your child's favorite stories. For instance, encourage her to try out kind and unkind roles from a book such as *Cinderella*. Ask how these contrasting roles make her feel.

RELATED BOOKS TO READ WITH CHILDREN

Freeman, Don. 1968. *Corduroy*. New York: Viking Press.

Henkes, Kevin. 2008. *Chrysanthemum*. New York: Mulberry Books.

Hinds, Patricia Mignon. 1996. *My Best Friend*. New York: Golden Books.

Hoose, Phillip, and Hannah Hoose. 1998. *Hey, Little Ant*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

Minarik, Else Holmelund. 1957. *Little Bear*. New York: Harper & Bros.

2

GAINING INDEPENDENCE

Independence—freedom of control or freedom from the influence of others

As three- and four-year-olds develop independence, you are likely to see the following types of behaviors:

- Three-year-olds are enthusiastic about trying out new things, but they will rely on adults to assist them in mastering various skills.
- Three-year-olds feel comfortable asking friends for help as they strive for independence.
- Three-year-olds gain confidence and feel successful when they perform independently.
- Four-year-olds use their thinking skills to solve problems independently as they arise during play or other interactions.
- Four-year-olds still want to please adults and may feel slightly guilty if they feel they have disappointed them.
- Four-year-olds may wish to ignore the rules if they feel an adult is trying to restrict their newfound independence.

The following anecdotes will help you understand the types of interactions that might be happening in the classroom as preschoolers explore their independence.

Three-year-old Abigail picks up a *kalimba*, an African musical instrument, from the shelf in the music center. Excited, she says, "I love how this sounds. I can make this play music!" Abigail tries strumming the metal "keys." Then she gently pounds them with her fist. Baffled when she cannot create the desired sounds, she calls for the teacher to help her make the kalimba play music. Meanwhile, four-year-old Roberto intervenes and shows Abigail how to press down and release each metal strip with the fingers to create delightful, melodic sounds. All smiles, Abigail says, "Thanks." Feeling good about his accomplishment, Roberto tells her and their teacher, "I fooled around with this thing yesterday."



With a clearer sense of self now that she is no longer a toddler, Abigail is enthusiastic about trying out new things by herself. Even though she has heard the kalimba and observed from the sidelines as her teacher played it, Abigail still relies on her teacher in a type of *instrumental dependency* to assist her in mastering various skills. Three-year-olds, like Abigail, feel quite comfortable asking adults and friends for guidance as they strive for independence.

In a form of *emotional dependency*, three-year-olds often enjoy sitting right next to their teachers for physical support and verbal suggestions. After a little assistance from Roberto and the teacher, Abigail becomes excited as she practices actually playing the kalimba with the appropriate finger movements. Feeling successful, she quickly gains confidence as she performs independently of others.

Confident four-year-olds, like Roberto, love to jump right in and experiment with things. They use their thinking skills to solve problems independently while they mess around. With persistence and his better-developed fine motor skills, he figured out how to master plucking the kalimba's metal strips. Proudly, he shares his newly developed skills.

Although adult approval is not mandatory for four-year-olds as they work toward independence, they still want to please their teachers and parents and may feel a little guilty if they feel they have disappointed them. For example, when a cup of sand that Emily has just poured for herself spills all over the rug as she trips while trying to carry it, she becomes frustrated. Wishing to be self-reliant, she does not want to accept any adult help in cleaning up the spill.

Preschoolers may assert their rights or flex their muscles with great pride or confidence as they act quite independently. Sometimes they make a decision to tackle a project their

own way, even if this means excluding a friend or not sharing a special piece of equipment. For example, because Werner brought in his dad's old toy steam shovel to show the class after the teacher read the book *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* by Virginia Lee Burton, he feels he should be the only one to dig a foundation in the dirt pit on the playground, even though his best friend wants to join in.

Along with learning to feel powerful while asserting his independence, a preschooler may respond to others with an emphatic "No!" When Randy, a three-year-old, snatches up the bucket of Lego bricks, Liam pulls them back. He tells Randy, "No! They are mine. I had them first!" With increased communication skills, three-year-olds are beginning to try to gain control with verbal assertions, rather than physical actions such as hitting or having a tantrum.

Feeling rather self-important, four-year-olds enjoy testing the limits in their quest for independence. They often ignore the rules in an effort to do something their way. For instance, Avida's teacher tells her to slow down on her swing. Having taught herself to pump her feet in order to go high in the air, Avida defiantly responds to her teacher, "No, I don't want to!" Four-year-olds, like Avida, frequently don't want to stop something if they feel an adult is trying to restrict their newfound independence.

This conflicting type of behavior can certainly be a source of irritation between the child and her teacher or parent who cares about her safety. On the other hand, demonstrating her independence can also be positive as she makes her own decisions to make friends, explore new materials, and choose ways to solve problems.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Make it easy.** Put materials in clear containers on low shelves to encourage independence. Provide paper towels and a dishpan with soapy water for children to clean up after themselves. Put away inappropriate or unsafe items that preschoolers should not have to make decisions about using, such as adult-sized sharp scissors.
- **Do not do things for children that they can do for themselves.** Give them time to zip up their own coats. Instead of selecting crayons for the art table, allow them to choose a medium they would like to use. Encourage them to wash their own hands before snack.
- **Encourage their independence.** Give them control over their environment and behavior when appropriate. Use positive reinforcement instead of commenting negatively about messy or failed attempts. Compliment them with a thumbs-up or a specific positive verbal message, such as "Way to go! You finished that difficult puzzle."

- **Allow plenty of time.** In order to complete certain tasks independently and not feel pressured by having to rush, preschoolers may need a few extra minutes. For instance, when learning to button her sweater, a young child might require some practice time before she accomplishes her task. While serving themselves some tricky-to-handle foods, such as peas or Jell-O, preschoolers should not feel hurried.
- **Showcase independent actions.** Take pictures of various children caring for their personal needs (hanging up a jacket or throwing away their juice cups) or taking care of the environment (watering a plant or washing paintbrushes). Create a photo album to highlight and discuss their wonderful independent behavior.
- **Offer food experiences to build self-esteem.** Encourage young children to work independently by washing vegetables, tossing salad ingredients, setting their own place at the table, and pouring glasses of milk. Supply sponges, a broom, and a dustpan for independent cleanup after eating.



OTHER ASPECTS TO CONSIDER—ALERTS

- **Encourage initiative.** It may seem easier and more practical to do things yourself because preschoolers can be very messy and clumsy with their still-developing fine motor skills and readily expanding cognitive abilities. However, it is extremely important to their emotional development to allow them to take the initiative and try to do things independently, rather than taking charge and doing a task yourself because it is neater or might save time.
- **Control your irritation over challenging behavior.** Sometimes, a preschooler's assertiveness and defiant behavior when she insists on doing something herself because she wants to feel like a big girl can be annoying. Remember, this is a very natural part of her development. It is your role to be respectful of her independence and to make sure she stays safe and doesn't hurt another child's feelings.
- **Be aware of cultural differences.** Be sensitive that in certain cultures a child's gender makes a huge difference in how a child is encouraged to develop his or her independence. Boys may be spurred on and offered ongoing chances to do things, yet girls may not be provided with the same motivation or opportunities.

ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS TO TRY AT HOME

- **Make routines predictable.** This helps your child know exactly what to expect and allows him to perform his daily tasks independently. You might draw a picture chart together to help your child remember what to do first, then next (eat breakfast, brush teeth, get dressed).
- **Keep it simple.** For toileting ease, provide clothes that are big enough for your child to pull on and off all by herself. Take pictures of hand-washing steps and create a poster to follow. A hand-pump liquid-soap dispenser encourages hand washing after toileting.
- **Use photos for a memory jog.** Sometimes your child may appear shy or uncomfortable because she does not remember people or their names. If you have photos of expected visitors, such as Li from library story time, look at them in advance. Identify the visitors and talk about the fun things your child did with them the last time they were together. This may make visitors seem more familiar and the experience less frightening for your shy child.
- **Offer interesting food choices.** Fabulous finger foods such as fresh strawberries dipped in low-fat cream-cheese spread are easy to manipulate and fun to eat. Let your child select his own fruit pieces to create an individual healthy fruit salad. Encourage him to explore unique ways to prepare his food (spread cheese on bread and roll it up for a cylinder sandwich, or use cookie cutters for fascinating sandwich shapes).
- **Offer your child jobs she can perform successfully.** Have her fill the dog's water bowl. Let her wash vegetables for a salad. Use a quilt so she can easily make up her own bed. She'll appreciate that you see her as being responsible.
- **Give your child a role in decision making.** Respect his feelings if he wishes to say no to your suggestions. Talk about a situation instead of challenging him. Together, decide between alternative solutions that are acceptable.



RELATED BOOKS TO READ WITH CHILDREN

- Ashley, Bernard. 1995. *Cleversticks*. New York: Crown.
- Cannon, Janell. 1993. *Stellaluna*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Carle, Eric. 1998. *Little Cloud*. New York: Philomel Books.
- Henkes, Kevin. 2006. *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. New York: Greenwillow Books.
- Piper, Watty. 1930/2012. *The Little Engine That Could*. New York: Penguin.

3

DEALING WITH SHYNESS

Shyness—a tendency to feel awkward, timid, or worried; an inclination to back off from connecting with others

When three- and four-year-olds exhibit shyness, consider the following tendencies as you seek ways to help:

- Three-year-olds may naturally display shyness in large-group settings or unfamiliar places.
- Three-year-olds may learn to back away from a certain situation if they had an unhappy prior experience.
- Three-year-olds may be less assertive than older preschoolers.
- Four-year-olds may fear criticism from others and be concerned about losing control.
- Four-year-olds need unpressured time and lots of opportunities to observe from a safe place to feel comfortable.
- Four-year-olds who exhibit shyness may have a slow-to-warm-up temperament.

Now let's look more closely and view some examples of how shyness can play out in the classroom as preschoolers develop emotionally.

Well into the second month of preschool, David, a young four-year-old, still needs to sit right next to his mom first thing every morning. She helps him put together puzzle pieces at the table in the quiet area. David continues to suck the thumb on his left hand and



hunches his shoulders self-protectively. He doesn't make eye contact with the other kids playing nearby. When David's mom finally feels comfortable leaving him at school, he moves behind the book rack and peeks out hesitantly, observing story time from a safe distance.

In conversations with David's teacher, his mom explains that she, too, is shy in new situations or when she first meets people. This is not surprising because shyness can be an inherited

behavior for many young children and is really an inborn temperament. Studies show that often if a child exhibits shy behavior, at least one parent is also prone to shyness.

Like David, many shy children are predisposed to a slow-to-warm-up temperament. Before they enter a new situation, they usually take a period of waiting and watching to see what is happening. They are less assertive by nature.

As a result of being anxious and fearful of new experiences, some preschoolers may exhibit a variety of shy behaviors. In general, three-year-olds react to visual fears. For example, Sophia hides behind her mom during different holidays, such as Easter and Halloween, if she sees people wearing masks or costumes. She clings tightly to her dad's legs when she's stressed, as when she's thinking about the possibility of a robber waiting for her in the dark! Three-year-olds might be very shy around a babysitter or teacher because they are afraid to have their parents leave them, especially at night.

Other fears and anxieties may exacerbate a shy child's behavior. If a child like David is afraid to take a risk or fears rejection from his classmates because he is not really sure where he should sit at story time, he may simply prefer to watch from the sidelines. Anticipating criticism from others and concerned about losing control, some shy children

may decide not to participate in events at all. They may be afraid of not doing things perfectly and get stressed about expected performance, such as staying in the lines while coloring or catching a ball during a game.

Putting pressure on themselves because they feel their teacher or parents might be upset by their messiness, some shy preschoolers will not even attempt an activity such as coloring. Unfamiliar things, such as a teacher's new hair color, an unexpected substitute, or a favorite trike with a replacement wheel, can set up a red flag and can panic a shy preschooler. Inexperience with a situation or not being given helpful information (the class has to go outdoors early to play because rain is expected) can create insecure feelings for the already reluctant child.

Unfortunately, unhappy past experiences may teach a shy child to back away from certain situations. For instance, Mazie no longer feels secure just watching her peers build with blocks. Previously, two four-year-old boys teased her by chanting, "Crazy Mazie hiding under the table." A shy child, like Mazie, may feel so threatened that she doesn't speak to others and is disinclined to ask a teacher or other children for help. Displaying behavior that is introverted, Mazie may feel more comfortable playing by herself.



However, given plenty of unpressured time and lots of opportunities to observe from a perceived safe distance, many shy children can eventually enter social situations and become active participants with the help of caring adults and kind friends. Remember, it is quite common and very natural for many young children to display shyness in large-group settings or during unfamiliar situations.

On a wonderful positive note, one day a tall college freshman stood in my office doorway and introduced himself as David, a former student. I quickly realized that this was the once shy preschooler who used to peek out from behind the book rack. After chatting a bit, David laughed and said, "I'll bet you never thought you'd see me here at college—especially without my mom!"

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Don't refer to a child's shyness.** Instead, you might explain to others, "Jane isn't quite ready to play 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm.' We'll ask her again next time." Help others be accepting of her need to wait until she's comfortable.
- **Demonstrate ways to be sociable.** Show how to greet someone by saying "hello" or offering a smile. Engage in simple conversations. Model ways for her to enter play activities by bringing a needed truck to the block corner or adding a funnel to play in the sandbox.
- **Provide nonthreatening one-on-one activities.** Offer a ball for him to play catch with a peer or a pop-up book for them to share together. Pair him with a puzzle buddy to interact with quietly in a relaxed atmosphere. Steer the child toward small-group projects such as making pudding for snack or building with Lego bricks.
- **Make the child feel included.** However, make sure she isn't overwhelmed. Even if the shy child doesn't volunteer to help with a classroom job, ask her if she'd like to assist. When you sing a song with names, be sure to include the child's name so she feels a part of the class but does not feel as if she's on center stage.
- **Create a serenity spot.** Make a special place in the classroom for children, including the shy child, to retreat to if they need some quiet, undisturbed time to calm down. Add soft pillows and huggable stuffed animals to a private, cozy little alcove created by a low divider.

OTHER ASPECTS TO CONSIDER—ALERTS

- **Be aware of labeling.** Always explaining to others that the child is shy might cause the child to feel guilty about or ashamed of her behavior. Stop and think before speaking for the child.
- **Observe relationships carefully.** Does the child have difficulty relating to people outside of his family circle? Does he have any friends at school? You may wish to speak with his parents or a therapist for nonthreatening ways to help him feel comfortable around others.
- **Provide support if a child seems unduly clingy.** Does the child physically hold on so that the parent cannot leave the child in group situations? Does the child follow the teacher everywhere? This young child may be extremely shy or have had difficult separation experiences and might benefit from a consultation with a therapist.
- **Determine the level of avoidance.** Some shy children need a little time to warm up before participating in events, whereas others may stay painfully withdrawn to the point that it hampers their development. If the shy child doesn't ever speak to others, she might have selective mutism or a hearing disorder. If this is the case, suggest that the parents seek professional assistance.

ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS TO TRY AT HOME

- **Role-play future events.** So your child will know what to expect and not be taken by surprise, talk about and practice what will happen on the first day of school or at Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma's house. Use real props such as dishes and silverware.
- **Invite other children for a play date.** Your shy child may feel more comfortable playing on his home turf. It is easier for him to play with a peer later at school if he knows this friend first from a home play date.
- **Accept your child as he is.** Respect his pacing. Try not to pressure him to be more social or outgoing. Readjust your expectations if you feel you need to change his shy behavior because you were uncomfortable with your shyness when you were young.
- **Help her become more confident.** Show your support by sitting quietly near her in new situations. Never sneak out; let her know ahead of time when you must be leaving. Try pairing her with a younger child whose actions might be a little less threatening.
- **Play peekaboo.** Encourage your child to cover her face with both hands. Then, open them to peek when she is ready. Act surprised, be silly, and laugh. Have fun! Encourage her to change up her timing. You are helping her learn to be impulsive while still controlling the situation.



RELATED BOOKS TO READ WITH CHILDREN

- Bracken, Beth. 2012. *Too Shy for Show-and-Tell*. Mankato, MN: Picture Window Books.
- Cheng, Wen-Wen. 2013. *Maya's Voice*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing.
- Morgan, Michaela. 2006. *Dear Bunny*. Frome, UK: Chicken House.
- Tafari, Nancy. 2000. *Will You Be My Friend?* New York: Scholastic.
- Udry, Janice May. 1991. *What Mary Jo Shared*. New York: Scholastic.