

Developmental Milestones

Three to Four Years

by Natalie J. Dahl, M.S., CCC-SLP



In a child's fourth year of life, speech and language skills are continuing to grow at a rapid rate. The child understands colors, shapes, pronouns, family members, and negation. He or she also begins rhyming, asking more questions, using appropriate grammatical structures, and is understood 70-80% of the time. Social skills are continuing to develop as the child interacts more with peers and adults.

The following list shows behaviors that a child will probably exhibit throughout his or her fourth year of life. Every child is unique, and this list should be used as a general guide. If a child is not meeting the developmental milestones below, consider consulting with a speech-language pathologist to determine further action.

Three to Four Years: Receptive Language (Hearing/Understanding)

- Understands approximately 1,200 words
- Responds when you call his or her name from another room
- Understands words for colors, such as green, blue, and red
- Understands words for some shapes, such as square and circle
- Understands positional words, such as in front, behind, up, down, top, bottom
- Understands words for family members, such as sister, uncle, and grandma
- Understands pronouns, such as his/her, he/she, we/they
- Understands negation (i.e. "Which one isn't on the table?")
- Follows a simple plot in a children's storybook

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Three to Four Years: Expressive Speech and Language (Speaking)

- Uses approximately 800 words
- Speech is understood approximately 70-80% of the time
- Puts 4 words together; may make some mistakes (i.e. “I runned to the park.”)
- Uses about 4 sentences at a time
- Talks about what happened during the day
- Uses pronouns, such as I, you, me, we, and they
- Asks many questions, sometimes the same question several times within a few minutes
- Begins to ask questions that start with is
- Says rhyming words, like hat-cat
- Starts to use /s/ on present tense verbs (i.e. “He walks.”)
- Uses contractions won’t and can’t
- Uses and
- Uses plural words (i.e. cars, dolls)

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- Uses are, or contracted form, with plural nouns (i.e. “Kids’re playing outside.”)
- Can look at pictures in a book and tell you a story in a simple way
- “Stutters” less frequently
- Pronounces the beginning, middle, and ending sounds in words (except for consonant blends, such as “bl,” “fr,” “cr”)
- Uses /k/ and /g/ sounds correctly, but /s/ may still “lispy”
- /r/ and /l/ may be distorted
- /v/, “sh,” “ch,” “j,” and “th” may still not be used correctly

Three to Four Years: Social Language

- Uses eye contact more consistently during conversations
- Initiates conversations
- Makes comments or observations to specific people
- Sits and attends to an activity for 10-15 minutes
- Engages most often in motor-based play and building (i.e. going down the slide, building towers), but also will participate and copy what other kids are doing

Resources: