

# WHAT CAN YOUR 3-YEAR-OLD DO?



## How good is a 3-year-old's language skills?

When your child finally reaches 3 years old, you'll notice that their language skills start to boom, and they can say so much more. This pamphlet will teach you what you can expect your 3-year-old to say, and what may still be a little out of reach for them.



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## MORPHOLOGY

*How well can 3 year olds structure words into different units?*

What can kids already do by 3 years old:

- plural -s
  - Ex: dogs, cats
- possessive -s
  - Ex: ours, hers
- regular past tense -ed
  - Ex: played, liked
- present progressive -ing
  - Ex: playing, eating



What new things kids start to do around 3 years old:

- Present tense marking on verb
  - Ex: he walks to the store
- Verb 'to be' appearing in different forms
  - Ex: This is important
  - Ex: I am excited
- 'to be' verb contracted in some instances
  - Ex: he's happy
  - Ex: she's going to the library
- Some irregular past tense verbs
  - Ex: He hit
  - Ex: That hurt



hit and hurt are the most common past tense verbs to be uttered at this age (Shiple et al., 1991). It's also common for kids this age to say irregular past tense verbs like they are regular, i.e., **hitted** and **hurted**.

### Tip:

Don't worry about correcting your child if they make a mistake! It is normal for children at this age to make mistakes with these aspects of their language (which are part of their 'morphology'). Research shows that when we try to correct their speech, it does not make their morphological development proceed any faster.

## PHONOLOGY (SOUNDS!)

*What speech sounds are 3 year olds able to use?*

At this point in your child's life, they have already acquired around half the sounds (that is, the 'phonemes') that the average adult knows. Here are some examples of the sounds they can produce:

- "p" as in "potato"
- "t" as in "toast"
- "a" as in "father"
- "g" as in "good"
- "m" as in "morning"
- "n" as in "new"
- "ng" as in "running"
- "f" as in "favorite"
- "v" as in "vroom"
- "s" as in "sound"



Your child will also make some (very cute) sound errors. This is a completely normal part of their development! Here are two examples:

### Consonant cluster reduction:

- This is the removal of clusters of consonants (like "pl" "st" "bl")
- spoon → poon

### Fronting:

- This is when a sound produced in the back of the mouth is accidentally produced in the front of the mouth
- goose → doose

### Tip:

There's no need to worry if your child hasn't acquired all of these sounds by age 3. It's not a race!

### Tip:

Some errors when making these sounds are common in children at this age, and are a normal part of development.



# SYNTAX

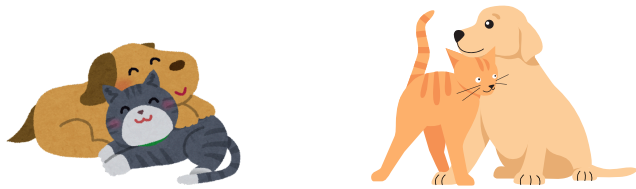
What do a 3-year-old's sentences sound like?

Your Child Can:

- Say grammatically complete (i.e., not missing parts, e.g., **articles**) **simple sentences** 80% of the time
  - "Put the toy in here."
- Say grammatically complete **complex sentences** around 70% of the time
  - "I wanna play when we go home."
- Use syntax to find out the **meaning of new words**
  - "The cat ate the kibble."
    - A child hearing this will know **kibble** is the object (the noun acted on)
- Make sentences with negation
  - "I can't wear that anymore."
- Ask questions

Try this **fun activity** to test your kid's sentence skills!

Take two pictures of Actor A doing something to Actor B. In the second picture, Actor B should act like Actor A. For example:



Then Ask:

Show me where is the dog hugging the cat!

Your 3-year-old may correctly point to the **LEFT** image, because they understand sentence structure (**syntax**)!

They understand the individual doing the action (**the agent**) comes before the verb as the subject, and the individual acted on (**the patient**) comes after the verb as the object!



# SEMANTICS

Understanding Your 3-Year-Old's Growing Word World

By age three, kids are learning new words fast and connecting them in a mental web called a **semantic network**. This helps them group and understand words.

**How Do Kids Organize Words?**

At this age, children start using two strategies to group words:

- **Children Assume Words Refer to Categories:** Your child assumes a new word applies to a group of similar things, not just one.

If they learn the word **dog**, they might first call all four-legged animals dogs!

- **Children Prefer Basic-Level Categories:** Children tend to group words at a basic level not too broad, and not too specific. These are the easiest and most familiar words they hear and produce.

They start organizing words into three levels:

1. **Superordinate Level** → **Broad Categories** (*animals, furniture, vehicles*)
2. **Basic Level** → **Everyday Words** (*dog, cat, apple*)
3. **Subordinate Level** → **Very Specific Words** (*terrier, poodle, golden retriever*)



# PRAGMATICS

Supporting your child's linguistic growth

By age three, your child has reached some significant milestones in their language development, and caregivers play a big role in that growth! Research shows that regularly engaging in daily activities like **reading, singing, and storytelling** can significantly boost their language skills.

**Reading:** helps your child understand and use more words. It also builds grammar and encourages back-and-forth conversations.

💡 **Tip:** Re-reading the same book helps your child remember new words and sentence patterns!

**Storytelling:** helps your child build strong grammar, sound skills, and stay engaged through gestures and fun voices.

💡 **Tip:** Let them watch your mouth move during stories—it helps them learn how to say sounds!

**Singing:** helps your child learn rhythm, repetition, and new words. It also helps kids remember what they hear and improves how they say words, too.

💡 **Tip:** Make up silly songs for everyday moments like brushing teeth or getting dressed!

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