

Behavioral Expectations in the Preschool Classroom

As teachers of three-, four-, and five-year-olds, it is important to understand how development translates into behavioral expectation in the classrooms. What behaviors should be expected of three-, four-, and five-year-olds in school? Can they be expected to sit and listen for a sustained amount of time? Should they work only in small groups? Teachers' expectations of three-, four-, and five-year-olds influence the way classroom activities are planned and organized.

Anyone who has spent time with three-, four-, and five-year-olds understands that they have limited attention spans. Typically, three-year-olds have the most difficulty with activities that require sitting and listening. For three-year-olds, stories need to be engaging and finger plays can help motivate or keep children's interest in activities. In contrast, four- and five-year-olds can sit and listen to a story or watch a science demonstration that precedes a hands-on activity for about 10 to 15 minutes. Anything longer, and they are fidgeting, looking around the room, or talking to a friend. In order to keep on task and focused, four- and five-year-olds need to be actively engaged in their learning.

Three-, four-, and five-year-olds are filled with energy and need to be active and to have productive avenues to direct this energy. Keeping a steady and even pace to the activities in the classroom will help channel children's energy in the appropriate direction. Too many activities that require sustained attention will result in the children losing interest. Also, there needs to be age-appropriate transitions for one activity to the next. Using a familiar song, jingle, or physical movement to indicate transition from one activity to the next can help reduce the confusion in the classroom.

Three-year-old children can follow simple, one-step directions. Four- and five-year-olds can follow simple two-step commands with success. Mrs. Hope asks the four-year-olds in her class to clean up the center activity areas and line up to go outside. The children scurry because they are anxious to play on the playground. However, when children are given too many directions to follow, they will not be able to process all the information. Situations that request more than what a child can do result in frustration and give the appearance that children are not following directions. This is especially true when children are transitioning from one activity to another, as following directions can be difficult with the added activity in the room.

Learning to get along with other children is one of the most important milestones for three-, four-, and five-year-olds. Children need to learn how to work and cooperate with one another. Aggressive behavior can be seen in the way in which some three-, four-, and five-year-olds express their anger or frustration over a situation. However, it is not acceptable classroom behavior. At this age, children need to understand that using words instead of actions is the more effective way of communicating their feelings. Behavioral interventions such as removing the child from the situation coupled with a verbal explanation are the most effective ways to deal with aggressive behavior. As discussed previously, three-year-olds are more likely to have problems with temper tantrums and losing self-control than four- and five-year-olds. However, if children are presented with circumstances that are socially and cognitively frustrating, they can behave aggressively. It is important that classroom activities are appropriate for the developmental level of the children.

Preschoolers find comfort and security in the repetition of routines. Having a routine that the children follow helps them feel that they have control over their environment and helps them anticipate events. Mrs. Hope begins to sing the "Clean-up" song, and everyone begins to put his or her things away. "It's my turn to help with the napkins today," said Melissa. Melissa knows that after they clean up the toys, it is snack time. Routines help children understand how their day is organized.

Three-, four-, and five-year-olds can benefit from working in various groups, small groups, whole groups, or one-to-one. "The younger the children, the smaller the group" is a good rule of thumb to follow. The activity typically dictates the grouping that is most appropriate. For some circle-time activities—for example, when the teacher is demonstrating how to weigh sand—a whole group can work. When the children are weighing the amount of sand in their shoes from playing in the sandbox, a small group works better. With five children, the teacher can help

them pour the sand from their shoes onto the weighing plate and watch as the child adjusts the scale to the weight of the sand. One-to-one works best when the teacher is listening to what the child wrote in his or her journal about weighing sand. The one-to-one attention helps the child focus on what he or she has written. Varying the different group configurations helps learning work in different settings and allows the appropriate amount of teacher attention to be given according to the specific task.

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