

Your Child's Development From 2 to 3 Years

This information lists the skills your child will likely learn between the ages of 2 and 3.

Movement and physical development

Between the ages of 2 and 3, your child may learn to:

- Walk up and down stairs with help.
- Walk backwards.
- Jump up and down.
- Climb on playground rides.
- Stand on their tiptoes.
- Run.
- Kick a ball.
- Catch a large ball from up to 2 feet (0.61 meters) away.
- Ride a tricycle (3-wheel bike).

Social-emotional and self-help skills

Between the ages of 2 and 3, your child may:

- Be shy or nervous around strangers.
- Whine.
- Enjoy spending time with different people.

- Have temper tantrums.
- Play pretend, such as feeding a doll.
- Get upset with major changes in their routine.
- Take pride in and enjoy doing things on their own.
- Not like to accept help.
- Hold a small cup in 1 hand.
- Touch fragile items carefully.
- Brush their own teeth with help.
- Use a fork.
- Button large buttons.
- Eat by themselves.
- Like to set the table for meals.
- Eat a wide range of solid foods.

Learning, thinking, and problem solving skills

Between the ages of 2 and 3, your child may:

- Point to pictures of items when they are named.
- Notice themselves in photos.
- Know the names of body parts.
- Understand daily routines.
- Play pretend.
- Match 2 of the same pictures.
- Listen to stories.
- Put a ring stack toy together.

Speech, language, and communication skills

Between the ages of 2 and 3, your child may:

- Name pictures of objects.
- Use the past tense.
- Use size words, such as “small” and “big.”
- Use plurals, such as “cars,” “dogs,” and “cats.”
- Talk in short sentences.
- Get upset if they aren’t being understood.
- Use the words “what,” “where,” and “when.”
- Have a vocabulary of 300 to 1,000 words.
- Understand opposites, like go and stop, big and little, and up and down.
- Follow 2-part directions, like “get the spoon and put it on the table.”
- Have a word for almost everything.
- Talk about things that are not in the room.
- Use 3 to 5 words to talk about and ask for things.
- Understand opposites and sizes, such as big and small.

What you can do to help your child’s development

Your child may not have a lot of energy during their treatment. But it’s still important to help them move, communicate, and play as part of their daily routine.

Here are some things you can do to help them:

- Play ball with your child so they can practice throwing, catching, and kicking.
- Take your child to the playground so they can practice climbing, running, and jumping.

- Let your child make choices.
- Get your child to play with other children in social settings, such as on the playground.
- Let your child do as much as possible without help.
- Have your child help with simple chores.
- Get your child to color and trace.
- Teach your child to take turns while playing with others.
- Let your child help pick out their outfits.
- Use short words and sentences. Speak clearly.
- Repeat what your child says and add to it. If they say “pretty flower,” you can say, “yes, that is a pretty flower. The flower is bright red. It smells good too. Do you want to smell the flower?”
- Teach your child new words. Reading is a great way to do this. Read books with short sentences on each page.
- Talk about colors and shapes.
- Practice counting. Count toes and fingers. Count steps.
- Put objects into a bucket. Let your child remove them one at a time and say its name. Repeat what they say and add to it. Help them group the objects into categories, such as clothes, food, and animals.
- Ask your child to make a choice instead of giving a “yes” or “no” answer. For example, instead of asking, “do you want milk?” ask “would you like milk or water?.” Be sure to wait for the answer and praise them for answering. You can say “thank you for telling mommy what you want.” Mommy will get you a glass of milk.”
- Sing songs, play finger games, and tell nursery rhymes. These songs and games teach your child about the rhythm and sounds of language.

When to call your child's healthcare provider

Call your child's healthcare provider if your child:

- Does not walk with ease and falls often.
- Does not use 2-word phrases, such as "drink milk."
- Does not speak in sentences.
- Does not know what to do with common objects, such as a brush, phone, or spoon.
- Does not copy other people's actions or words.
- Cannot follow simple instructions.
- Loses skills they once had.
- Drools or has very unclear speech.
- Cannot work simple toys, such as simple puzzles or peg boards.
- Does not play pretend.
- Does not want to play with other children or with toys.
- Does not make eye contact.
- Does not like to change positions.
- Does not like changes in their environment, such as changes to the noise level or lighting in the room.
- Does not feel comfortable trying to balance on different types of surfaces.

Contact information

If you have questions about your child's development, talk with their healthcare provider. You can also ask for a referral to MSK's physical, occupational, or speech therapy.

You can reach MSK's Physical and Occupational Therapy department Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. at 212-639-5384. You can reach the Speech and Hearing Rehabilitation department Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 212-639-5856.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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