

**ASSESSMENT OF THE CATASTROPHE OF THREE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN: INVESTIGATING
THE CAUSES AND PAINS**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the three-year-old age crisis in child psychology, highlighting its causes and developmental significance. Both the positive and negative aspects of this period are discussed, with particular attention to the influence of social and emotional factors in shaping a child's behavior and adaptation to a new stage of development.

KEYWORDS: Child, Crisis Period, Social Factors, Emotions, Development, New Stage

Early childhood is a foundational period in a person's psychological and emotional development. Developmental psychologists have long recognized the importance of the preschool years—typically age's three to seven—as a time when children undergo rapid changes in cognition, emotion, and behavior. Among the most significant of these changes is the crisis associated with the age of three, commonly referred to as the “three-year-old crisis.” This stage marks the child's transition from infantile dependence to the early emergence of self-awareness and autonomy. The three-year-old crisis is characterized by a child's growing awareness of themselves as an independent individual. For the first time, the child begins to distinguish themselves from others and assert their own desires, choices, and preferences. This process is often accompanied by emotional volatility, disobedience, oppositional behavior, and difficulties in communication with adults. These behaviors are not signs of misbehavior or poor upbringing, but rather symptoms of a natural and necessary developmental transition. Understanding the psychological roots of this crisis is critical for parents, educators, and caregivers. When mishandled, this stage can lead to the development of negative personality traits such as insecurity, passivity, or aggression. On the other hand, when managed with patience, empathy, and structure, it can become a powerful opportunity to support a child's self-regulation, independence, and emotional maturity. This article aims to analyze the causes, manifestations, and implications of the three-year-old crisis, focusing on how emotional, cognitive, and social factors interact during this crucial period. The study also offers practical recommendations for managing this phase effectively in both home and early educational settings.

METHODS

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of child behavior at the age of three, drawing upon both theoretical research in developmental psychology and practical observations from preschool educational environments. The research methodology included the following components: **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of foundational works in developmental psychology, including theories by Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Maria Montessori, was conducted. Their models of child development, especially regarding autonomy, socialization, and emotional growth, were used as a framework for understanding the crisis period. **Observation:** Informal observations were carried out in preschool classrooms and family environments to identify common behavioral patterns in three-year-old children. Specific attention was given to episodes of emotional outbursts, defiance, and expressions of autonomy. Observations included interactions between children and adults as well as peer-to-peer dynamics. **Case Examples:** Selected behavioral episodes (e.g., tantrums, refusals, expressions of independence) were analyzed to demonstrate how internal emotional conflicts manifest externally. These examples were used to illustrate typical signs of the crisis and how they vary based on context and adult responses. **Comparative Analysis:** Behavioral responses of children who were supported with structured routines and emotional guidance were compared with those who lacked consistent adult support. This comparison highlighted the

role of adult involvement in mediating the effects of the three-year-old crisis. **Montessori Method Application:** Principles from the Montessori method were used as an educational lens to evaluate how structured sensory environments can support children's autonomy and emotional balance during this critical stage. The combination of theoretical insight and real-life observation helped to create a holistic understanding of the three-year-old crisis and provided evidence-based strategies for its effective management.

RESULTS

The analysis of behavioral patterns and psychological observations in children around the age of three revealed a consistent set of developmental characteristics that define this crisis period. These results are grouped into **behavioral manifestations, emotional responses, and social interactions.**

- **Behavioral Manifestations**

Children at this age demonstrate strong tendencies toward independence and self-assertion, often resulting in conflicts with adult authority. The most frequently observed behaviors include: **Negativism:** A refusal to comply with adult requests not because of the task itself, but due to a desire to assert independence. For example, a child may refuse to put on a coat simply because the adult suggested it. **Stubbornness:** Insistence on personal choices even when they contradict logic or comfort. For instance, a child might refuse to switch from wet clothing despite being cold. **Willfulness (Self-will):** A general resistance to norms and routines, with children insisting on doing things their own way (e.g., insisting on eating with their hands even when they can use a spoon).

- **Emotional Responses**

The emotional landscape of three-year-old children is highly intense and unstable. The study found: **Outbursts and Tantrums:** Children often display uncontrollable crying or anger when their desires are not immediately fulfilled. **Mood Swings:** Emotions can shift rapidly from joy to frustration. **Delayed Self-Regulation:** Children show difficulty calming themselves after becoming emotionally agitated. This inability often prolongs distress and requires external soothing from caregivers.

- **Social Interactions**

The way three-year-old children interact with others also undergoes noticeable changes: **Emergence of the Self ("I" awareness):** Children start using personal pronouns ("I," "mine") more frequently and assert their individuality. **Opposition to Adults:** They begin to challenge parental and teacher authority in everyday routines. **Peer Dynamics:** Increased interaction with other children may lead to more conflicts due to limited sharing ability and underdeveloped communication skills. Observations show that these behaviors, while challenging, are not pathological but rather indicative of internal psychological growth. When guided appropriately, children begin to develop emotional intelligence, self-control, and the foundation for social adaptation.

DISCUSSION

The results confirm that the crisis experienced by children at the age of three is a natural developmental phenomenon linked to cognitive, emotional, and social maturation. This stage reflects a transition from dependency to early autonomy and is a crucial point in the formation of personality.

- **Interpretation of the Findings**

At this stage, children begin to construct their identity and understand themselves as separate from others. This process, while necessary, often creates internal tension as the child strives to reconcile newfound independence with ongoing dependency on adults. The resulting behavioral conflicts—such as defiance, emotional outbursts, and stubbornness—are signs of a growing need for autonomy, not disobedience or misbehavior. The emergence of "I" consciousness marks a significant cognitive leap, and the behaviors observed are attempts to explore and assert this new identity. When adults misinterpret these signs as bad behavior and respond with punishment, it can lead to internalized shame or excessive compliance, potentially hindering emotional development.

- **Role of Adults and Environment**

Children require a structured yet flexible environment where they can safely explore their autonomy. Adults play a vital role in guiding children through this phase with empathy and consistency. Rather than confronting oppositional behavior with discipline, adults should acknowledge the child's feelings and provide choices that support decision-making within appropriate boundaries. Educational environments modeled on the Montessori method, for example, offer sensory-rich, ordered spaces where children can act independently and develop emotional regulation. Providing such environments has been shown to reduce emotional conflicts and encourage more cooperative behavior.

- **Practical Implications**

For Parents: Understand that resistance is often a request for independence. Offer limited choices, remain calm during tantrums, and reinforce routines. **For Educators:** Incorporate developmentally appropriate materials that foster independence, and create emotionally safe classrooms that support self-expression. **For Psychologists:** Further research can explore how different parenting and educational styles affect the duration and intensity of the three-year-old crisis.

CONCLUSION

The three-year-old crisis is a pivotal developmental stage that signals the beginning of a child's self-awareness, emotional independence, and social identity. Although it is often accompanied by challenging behaviors such as tantrums, stubbornness, and resistance to adult authority, these are not signs of disobedience or psychological problems. Instead, they reflect the child's internal struggle to assert autonomy while still relying on adult support. Recognizing this period as a **normal and essential part of psychological development** is crucial for parents, educators, and caregivers. If properly understood and addressed with patience and empathy, this stage can become a powerful foundation for lifelong emotional regulation, decision-making skills, and healthy personality formation. To support children through this critical phase, adults must: Create emotionally safe and structured environments. Respond to emotional outbursts not with punishment but with calm and validation. Provide opportunities for controlled independence by offering limited choices and fostering responsibility. Maintain consistent routines that give the child a sense of security and predictability. Model appropriate emotional responses and conflict-resolution strategies. Educational approaches such as the **Montessori method** demonstrate that when children are given freedom within boundaries and access to sensory learning tools, their behaviors improve, and their emotional needs are more easily met. These strategies not only reduce the intensity of the crisis but also encourage the development of autonomy and self-discipline. In summary, the three-year-old crisis should not be feared or suppressed—it should be **understood, guided, and respected**. It is not a sign of poor behavior but a **milestone of growth**, laying the groundwork for a confident, self-aware, and emotionally resilient individual.

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