

Kindergarten research insights

Professional reading resource



Setting high expectations for 3-year-olds in Kindergarten

As early childhood educators, we have a significant opportunity to support the unique development of every child in kindergarten, which can include three-year-old children. This stage of early learning is a time of immense growth, where children begin to build foundational skills for future success, and educators act as a base for social and emotional development (Buyse et al., 2011). High expectations are not about pushing children beyond their capabilities, but about showing belief in their potential and creating environments where they can thrive.

The eight principles of the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* (QKLG) underpin the professional practice of kindergarten teachers and educators. They guide us to approach three-year-old learners with a mindset that honours their individuality and fosters their growth. Individual growth and learning are championed in the principle: high expectations, equity and respect for diversity (QCAA, 2024).

By holding high expectations for every child, we lay the groundwork for their future success. These expectations, coupled with intentional teaching and strong relationships, ensure that three-year-olds in kindergarten feel supported, valued, and capable.

The power of high expectations

Research consistently shows that children's self-belief, motivation, and academic progress are shaped by the expectations of the adults around them (Cash et al., 2018; Morales, 2010). Early childhood educators know that every three-year-old child learns differently, so the aim is to create flexible learning environments that help children explore and grow at their own pace. Through strengths-based, differentiated approaches, we can help every child experience success.

At the heart of high expectations lies the **teacher–child relationship** built on a foundation of understanding and mutual respect (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017). Strong, supportive relationships are not just a foundation for children's social and emotional wellbeing; they are essential for their learning and development. Evidence shows that high-quality teacher-child connections can significantly boost a child's confidence, resilience, and academic progress (Ansari et al., 2020; Cash et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2023).

High expectations also challenge us to examine and address biases — whether linked to culture, gender, or socioeconomic factors — that may inadvertently lower our expectations for some children. Relationships that are grounded in respect and understanding can shape environments where every child feels valued, safe, and capable of achieving (Neilsen-Hewett et al., 2018).

Practical insights from the QKLG

The QKLG Principles and Practices provide a strong framework for creating high-quality learning environments that nurture three-year-old learners. These principles and practices encourage:

- **relational pedagogy** — building meaningful, respectful relationships with children and families
 - *How might teachers and educators interact, communicate and collaborate with children and families in ways that suit them as individuals and show they have valuable contributions to make?*
- **sustained shared thinking** — engaging children in deep, meaningful conversations that extend their learning
 - *How can teachers and educators create opportunities for meaningful conversations that challenge children's thinking and encourage them to explore their ideas more deeply?*
- **reflective practice** — continuously adapting teaching strategies based on the unique needs and interests of each child
 - *What strategies can teachers and educators use to tailor their teaching approaches to meet the individual needs and interests of each child?*
- **community connections** — collaborating with families and the broader community to enrich children's experiences
 - *What can teachers and educators do to enable collaboration with diverse family and community partners to enhance children's learning experiences?*

The QKLG's continua of learning and development offers essential guidance when planning and assessing educational experiences for three-year-olds. The continua emphasises that learning is a unique experience for each child that reflects their individual growth and needs. The intent of the continua is to support 'point in time' assessment and planning decision-making that will support and promote the learning of individuals in both meaningful and relevant ways. For instance, following a series of story-time sessions and experiences exploring feelings, an educator might notice that a child is beginning to recognise and name their emotions in familiar situations, and with explicit support is consolidating and applying those skills in more unfamiliar situations. Attentive observation and genuine appreciation of children's learning moments foster trust and enable more personalised educational support.

High expectations build bright futures

By holding high expectations for every child, we lay the groundwork for their future success. These expectations, coupled with intentional teaching and strong relationships, ensure that three-year-olds in kindergarten feel supported, valued, and capable. As we reflect on our practices, the QKLG principles guide us to create inclusive, high-quality environments where every child can flourish.

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