

2-3 Years: The Preschool Question

A practical guide from Hulya Mehmet, Consultant Speech & Language Therapist

Let's Address Your Biggest Fear

Your child is nearly three and still not talking. Everyone's asking about nursery. You're lying awake wondering: Will preschool help them talk? Or will it make everything worse?

I've guided hundreds of families through this decision. Let me share what actually matters - not what the milestone charts say.

Communication at 2-3 Years

Where Your Child Might Be:

- **No words yet** (but understanding growing)
- **Single words** (used inconsistently)
- **Echolalia** (repeating what they hear)
- **Own language** (consistent sounds for things)
- **Gesture-based** communication
- **Beginning AAC** use

What They Need:

- Consistent routine language
 - Visual supports everywhere
 - Sensory regulation tools
 - Patient communication partners
 - Multiple ways to express needs
 - Time to process and respond
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Preschool Readiness Indicators

Traditional "Readiness" (Often Not Applicable)

- Speaking in sentences
- Toilet trained
- Following group instructions
- Playing with peers

What Actually Matters:

- Can separate from you (even with tears)
 - Understands "no" and "stop"
 - Has ANY way to show they need the toilet/are hurt
 - Can be calmed by an adult
 - Shows interest in other children (even just watching)
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Finding the Right Nursery

Questions I Tell Parents to Ask:

First Phone Call: "My child is 2 and not talking yet. They communicate through gestures and sounds. Have you supported children like this before?"

(Their first response tells you everything)

During Your Visit:

- "Can you show me where my child could go if overwhelmed?"
- "How do you help children who can't ask for the toilet?"
- "What happens if a child can't join circle time?"
- "How would you include my child in activities?"
- "Can I stay for settling-in sessions?"

The Critical Question: "If my child doesn't speak by the end of the year, how would you feel about that?"

(The answer reveals their true expectations)

What You Want to Hear:

- "We have three children who use different ways to communicate"

- "Let me show you our visual schedule and quiet corner"
- "We'd love to work with your child's speech therapist"
- "Every child develops at their own pace"
- "Would you like to bring some photos to help us?"

Run Away If They Say:

- "Oh, they'll be talking within weeks here"
 - "We treat all children the same" (means no accommodations)
 - "They need to be toilet trained first"
 - "We don't really do visual supports"
 - "They'll have to join in like everyone else"
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Preparing Your Child (Start 3 Months Before)

Month 1: Familiarity Building

- Drive past the nursery daily: "There's your nursery!"
- Take photos of the building, playground, door
- Make a simple book: "My New Nursery"
- Look at it every night at bedtime
- Keep language simple: "Your nursery. Nice teachers. Fun toys."

Month 2: Gentle Exposure

- Visit the playground after hours
- Meet one key person several times
- Stay for 10 minutes during quiet time
- Take photos of the classroom, toilets, coat pegs
- Add these to your book

Month 3: Practice and Confidence

- Practice the morning routine at home
 - "Nursery practice" - sit for snack, wait for turns
 - Use nursery words: "Line up," "Tidy time," "Story time"
 - Make their communication cards together
 - Choose their special nursery comfort item
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The First Weeks (Be Realistic)

Week 1: Just Surviving

- Start with 1 hour maximum
- You stay in the building
- Same teacher greets them
- Don't expect participation
- Tears are normal (yours too)

Week 2-3: Building Trust

- Increase by 30 minutes when ready
- Move to the corridor, then reception
- Keep goodbyes short and consistent
- "Mummy go. Mummy come back."
- Pick up EXACTLY when promised

By Week 4:

- Maybe staying for snack time
- Maybe joining one activity
- Maybe not crying at drop-off
- Maybe. No pressure.

Daily Survival Kit:

- Same wake time (even if they're tired)
- Favourite breakfast (not the day for new foods)
- Comfort item that smells like home
- Simple goodbye ritual (kiss, hug, wave)
- Quiet afternoon at home (they're exhausted)

Working with Nursery Staff

Your One-Page Guide for Staff

I help parents create this simple sheet:

[Child's Name] - Getting to Know Me

How I communicate: Points, pulls your hand, makes sounds *I understand:* Everything (just can't say it yet) *When I'm happy:* I flap my hands/jump/squeal *When I'm upset:* I cover my ears/hide/lie down *What helps:* Quiet space, my teddy, time *Please know:* I'm trying my best

Daily Communication

Forget lengthy reports. Use a simple notebook:

You write: "Didn't sleep well. Bit fragile today."

They write: "Good morning. Enjoyed water play. Ate snack."

That's enough. You're both busy.

Building Partnership

- Thank them specifically: "Thank you for noticing he likes trains"
- Share successes: "He pointed to his cup at home!"
- Ask for their insights: "What calms him at nursery?"
- Respect their expertise with groups
- Remember they want your child to succeed too

Real Nursery Challenges (And Real Solutions)

Circle Time = Torture Time

Your child won't sit in a circle singing "Wheels on the Bus." That's okay.

What works:

- Sitting by the door
- Standing at the back
- Lying on their tummy
- Holding something
- Leaving after one song
- Not joining at all (really, it's fine)

Snack Time Struggles

Waiting is hard. Sharing is harder. Sitting is hardest.

Survival strategies:

- Same seat every day

- Their special cup from home
- First or last to be served (predictable)
- Standing to eat if needed
- Silent pointing accepted

Nobody to Play With

Your child plays alone. The staff say "encourage interaction." You worry.

The truth:

- Parallel play is still play
- Watching IS participating
- One friend is enough
- Alone isn't lonely
- Social skills come later

Transition Troubles

Tidy up time = meltdown time.

What actually helps:

- Same warning song every time
 - "Two more minutes" with visual
 - Carrying something to next activity
 - Being the door holder (job = purpose)
 - Going first or last (not in middle chaos)
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When to Worry (And What to Do)

Red Flags That Need Action:

In my experience, these signs mean something needs to change:

- Your happy child becomes withdrawn
- Skills they had disappear
- Sunday night anxiety starts Thursday
- They're hurting themselves or others
- You dread pickup because they're so dysregulated
- The light goes out of their eyes

Your Options (You Have More Than You Think):

Option 1: Adjust Current Placement

- Drop to 2 days a week
- Mornings only
- Different key person
- More support in place

Option 2: Find Better Fit

- Smaller nursery
- Childminder setting
- Specialist provision
- Forest school approach

Option 3: Press Pause

- It's okay to stop
- Try again in 6 months
- Home is fine for now
- Your child, your choice

Remember: In the UK, school isn't legally required until the term after they turn 5. You have time.

Alternative Paths That Work

If Traditional Nursery Doesn't Fit:

Gentler Options I've Seen Work:

Childminder Settings

- Smaller group (max 6 children)
- Home environment
- Same caregiver daily
- More flexible approach
- Often better for sensitive children

Parent & Toddler Groups

- You stay with them
- 1-2 hours maximum
- Choose quiet sessions
- Leave when needed
- No separation pressure

Specialist Playgroups

- Speech therapy groups
- Portage playgroups
- NHS development groups
- Charity-run sessions
- Autism-specific groups

Local Activities (No Pressure)

- Library rhyme time (sit at back)
- Soft play (quiet times)
- Swimming (calming for many)
- Park at same time daily (might see same children)

When You Need More Support: Ask your health visitor about:

- Local specialist nurseries
- Enhanced funding for 1:1 support
- Portage home visiting service
- Early years inclusion teams

If You Choose to Stay Home

You're Not "Missing Out"

Many families keep children home until Reception. Your child still learns through:

Daily Life = Best Classroom

- Making toast together: "Butter on. Spread, spread."
- Sorting washing: "Daddy's sock. Mummy's sock."
- Water play in the bath: "Pour! Splash! All gone!"
- Looking at books: "Dog! Woof woof!"
- Dancing to music: Following actions

Building Nursery Skills at Home:

- Snack at table (not wandering)
 - Simple tidy-up song
 - Taking turns with siblings/toys
 - Sitting for 5-minute story
 - Following "first this, then that"
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What Success Really Looks Like

Let me tell you about real 2-3 year olds I've worked with:

Amelia: Pointed for the first time at nursery snack (after 3 months)

Hassan: Let a teacher comfort him (week 6)

Lily: Stayed for 2 hours without crying (term 2)

Marcus: Joined water play alongside another child (after Easter)

This is success. Not speaking. Not making friends. Just... progress.

Your child's success might be:

- Walking in without clinging
- Eating snack at nursery
- Watching other children play
- Not hiding under tables
- Letting teacher help with coat

Celebrate these. They're huge.

Your Preparation Checklist

3 Months Before:

- Research local options
- Visit potential settings
- Start separation practice
- Create visual supports
- Build home routines

1 Month Before:

- Meet key staff
- Share child profile
- Practice preschool skills
- Prepare communication tools
- Plan transition strategy

First Week:

- Short visits only
- Stay available
- Document responses
- Communicate with staff
- Adjust as needed

A Message From Me

I've seen hundreds of families navigate the nursery decision. Some children bloom immediately. Most take months to settle. Some need a completely different path.

All of these are normal.

Your 2-3 year old doesn't need to be "nursery ready." They need a nursery that's ready for them. Or they need to stay home a bit longer. Or they need something creative and different.

The best decision? The one that leaves your child feeling safe and you feeling peaceful.

Trust yourself. You know your child better than any professional, any book, any milestone chart.

They'll find their way. With your support, at their pace, in their time.

Hulya Mehmet

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Mother who understands the 3am worries

Remember: There's no deadline for childhood. Your child is exactly where they need to be.