
The 4th grade 411: Finding a Niche

“My ninth year was certainly more exciting than any of the others. But not all of it was exactly what you would call fun.”

Danny the Champion of the World
by Roald Dahl

Children in the 4th grade are living in two worlds. In the first they are becoming advanced and independent learners and thinkers who are gaining the ability to express themselves in exciting ways. At the same time, they are also becoming dramatic worriers who can have a difficult time managing all the work that is expected of them.

As 4th graders are gaining mastery of basic skills like reading and writing, they are also beginning to find their academic and social niches. Students are more likely to either focus on things they like or areas where they have confidence in their abilities. Strong readers have a tendency to devour book after book. Nine year olds are also developing a sense of peer importance and group solidarity. Trouble understanding might not lead to asking a question for fear of looking stupid, while others might not participate for fear of looking too smart. Fairness becomes a big deal along with a competitive spirit.

On the trail:

Here are some developmental patterns among 4th graders and ways to encourage their cognitive growth while exploring River Bend.

Examples:

1. Second chances are important. They have a tendency to give up. Encourage and build up a sense of ability to accomplish tasks.

- *“That’s very close. Take another look at the leaves and then tell me what you think. There, now you’ve got the right one!”*

2. Comments tend to get magnified, negatives as well as positives. A little positive reinforcement can go a long way.
 - *"I like the way you are working so nicely as a group. Keep it up!"*
3. They are looking for explanations of facts and why things happen. It's a great age for scientific exploration. Try to get them to think about why things are the way they are.
 - *"Who can tell me why these woodland flowers come out in the spring?"*
4. Take pride in their finished work and enjoy what they've produced, although they may jump quickly between interests.
 - *Redirect them so that they can finish one thing at a time and do a nice job on it. Help them find a job that will help the group accomplish their goals.*
5. 4th graders like to be taken seriously and not treated like a little kid. They like having responsibilities.
 - *Make sure that each kid has a role or a specific job responsibility so they all feel important to the success to their group project.*
6. Nine year olds can be big worriers and require a lot of patience and understanding from their teachers.
 - *Clear language and set expectations can help offset their worries. If they need more direction a calm voice can be very useful. "I expect you to look at the characteristics of each plant carefully and identify it using your field guide. If you need help understanding the guide, let me know."*
7. They are reading to learn, rather than learning to read. Basic researching skills are being developed as well as descriptive writing abilities.
 - *If detailed questions arise, help them use a field guide to try to find the answer. If they can't find the answer while at River Bend, encourage them to write their questions down on a sheet of paper and research the answer once they get back to school or at home.*
8. Personal challenges are a big deal at this age. Increased coordination often leads to pushing themselves to their physical and academic limit. They can fatigue easily and have outlets for tension such as nail biting, lip pursing and hair twisting. Challenges can be fun for them as long as there is a lightness and humor to it so as not to add stress to their already worry-filled world.
 - *"I challenge each group to get at least 6 forest plants on their sheet (properly and thoughtfully filled out). If the challenge is complete, you will all get to participate in the spring woodland flower celebration dance!"*

Information is adapted from *Yardsticks*, by Chip Wood (available in the River Bend library) as well as from the PBS website. Created by Brenda Danner.