

# Fourth Grade — Suddenly, a Whole New World

## New Abilities = New Challenges = Need to Plan

### **Important things to know about — Your Child in Fourth Grade**

- How to help your child overcome normal nine-year-old worries.
- How to teach problem-solving skills that mean success at home and in school.
- Reading well now = school success; poor reading now = school troubles tomorrow.

### **What's different about nine-year-olds?**

A lot! Nine-year-olds have matured — physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Sometime in their ninth year, it's as if they found a tall ladder next to the backyard fence, climbed it, looked over, and — **there's the whole big world.** Wow! It's interesting, beautiful, exciting, and yes ... a little scary. Their growing powers and larger worldview turn easy-going eight-year-olds into “dedicated worrywarts.” But not to worry, by age 10 they will have grown into their new thoughts and feelings, and they will move into the “golden age of childhood.” For now, however, adults need to be understanding, loving, and **constantly** reassuring.

### **The “normal” nine-year-old and how adults can help**

So what's “normal” for this age? Remember, each child is an individual and doesn't follow a set script. Different growth rates, personalities, and family experiences mean that children mature at different rates. In addition, children develop and respond differently if they are “onlies,” the first, or the middle or the “baby of the family.”

Despite differences, specialists can still predict which years are going to be easier and which years more difficult. From age 2 to age 16, there's a pattern of alternation — one year will be a time of balance and

good adjustment, and the next will be a time of growth and being “out of balance.” Some years children are easily upset and seem to brood a lot. The next year they are happier and excited by life.

The chart below lists normal changes in moods and emotional well being for eight- and nine-year-olds.

Age	Characteristics
8	Energetic, imaginative, carefree; outward-focused; testing many new cognitive abilities so they seem scattered; no sense of limits (for example, how much time something will take); cooperative, work well in groups.
9	Exploring new mental powers but uncertain about their new abilities; seeing and hearing much more but not able to process all the new information; less confident; inner focus; worried about almost everything; learn best on their own or with one partner; dislike groups; developing a sense of ethics; terribly concerned about what's fair and unfair.

Based on *Your Ten- to Fourteen-Year-Old* by Louis Bates Ames, Ph.D., et al., Gesell Institute of Human Development, New York, 1988, and *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4 – 14* by Chip Woods, NE Foundation for Children, Turner Falls, MA, rev. ed. 2004.

As you can see, nine-year-olds have a lot to contend with. If the child who was sunny and happy-go-lucky as an eight-year-old is now looking fretful and care-laden and thinks “Everything is ‘Unfair’!” ... that's totally normal. Families and teachers need to be aware of the super-sensitive nature of the nine-year-old and provide as much love and support as possible. Here are some of the ways you can help:

**1. Use the power of positive talk.** Social scientist John Gottman predicted successful marriages by listening to the couples' conversations. He found that in a successful relationship, conversations have about five times as many positive comments as negative ones. That five-to-one rule is a good rule to follow

when you talk with your kids, too, *especially* at this age.

Because nine-year-olds are learning new ways of looking at the world, but can't yet process all the new information, they tend to make mistakes, feel insecure, and are likely to be very hard on themselves. Adults need to remember that nine-year-olds take negative comments very, very seriously. Critical words can literally ruin their day. Remember — 5:1 Rules!

### **2. Listen to their concerns and take them seriously.**

Don't make fun by saying "don't be silly, you're worrying about something that would never happen." Listen to their feelings. Repeat things back to let them know that you heard and understood.

For example, one dad asked his daughter what she was afraid of. She answered, "strangers who take children. Very big fear." The dad wisely listened and repeated "I can tell you are really scared about being kidnapped." Then he added information to counter obsessive TV coverage: That there are really very few actual child kidnappings in this country a year—only about 150, not thousands or millions. He gave her facts and reassurance, reviewed their household rules about not opening the door to strangers so that she would feel more confident and more in control. ***And, he turned off the TV, knowing that television news and programming focuses on murder and disasters — not good for kids!***

### **3. Help them practice solving problems.**

Fourth grade is a great time to teach your child to look at a problem, think it through, and plan out steps to fix it. Why now? Because their brains are developing new powers, and they need to practice how to use them. And, this practice will help them cope with the challenges coming up in more intense schoolwork and assessment testing.

Here are some steps you can follow:

- Listen to your child's feelings and concerns.
- Repeat what your child said to show that you understand his or her point of view.
- Give a "reality check" plus additional useful information about the problem situation.

- Invite the child to think up several ways that might make the problem better. Write down *all* those ideas without making any judgments.
- Help the child choose which solution to use by asking which idea will work best.
- Help the child think about a step-by-step list of things to do and help follow their progress.

Adapted from *How to Talk So Kids Can Learn at Home and in School* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, Fireside, New York, 1995.

## **The power of parents to improve reading**

What else can parents do to help their 4<sup>th</sup> graders? ***Read! Read, read, read to them, at least 30 minutes a day.*** Read with them, have them read to you while you make dinner, doing the dishes, folding laundry, or are cuddling with them in a favorite chair. ***Nine-year-olds need the cuddling and they need to be reading at grade-level to succeed in school from here through college. Poor reading now often means school failure in the future. If they need help reading at 4<sup>th</sup>-grade level, ask your school or library for help. Don't, don't let them fall behind.***

Good reading skills and good planning skills can help 4<sup>th</sup> graders master new course content and prepare for assessments. For example, many 4<sup>th</sup> graders become very anxious and upset about the WASL tests — feelings that will not help them earn their highest scores! If they learn and practice the problem-solving process now, they can turn their worries into plans of action and be ready on test day.

But the most important thing is this: Stay close to your 4<sup>th</sup> graders both physically and emotionally. Give them lots of hugs, listening time, and encouragement. Build in family playtime and lots and lots of reading time. Their worries will be lessened and they'll soon grow into a happy, confident 5<sup>th</sup> grader.

### **Ask your child —**

Did I hug you enough today?

What was fun today? What worried you?

Have I read to you today? Are you all ready for school tomorrow?