

The Child of Four - source unknown

The conforming, delightful three-year-old seems to erupt as he moves into his next year, according to observations made by Ilg and Ames. The four-year-old is often described as “out of bounds,” and is so in almost every direction – motorwise, emotionally, verbally, imaginatively, and in his interpersonal relationships. He needs this new surge of activity in order to grow up, but a great deal of firmness and understanding are needed in dealing with the child of four. (Ilg and Ames, *Child Behavior*, p. 30).

His Physical Self

Four has been described as the age of speed, of new expansions and new incentives. The four-year-old seems to be going through a noisier and stormier period. He hits, kicks, stamps his feet, and runs away. He loves to throw stones and break things. His activity spreads out in all directions. (Ilg and Ames, ad hoc.)

He is becoming more skilled in all his motor activities—skipping, running, jumping, balancing. All of these things he does in high gear—racing, chasing, challenging others with, “I bet you can’t do it!” (Gesell, *The First Five Years of Life*, p. 47; *The Infant and Child in the Culture of Today*, p. 225)

He enjoys doing things requiring fine muscle coordination, such as throwing a ball, cutting on a straight line, sawing, lacing shoes. He can build more complicated structures, handle crayons with greater skill, give concentrated attention to isolated details when he is drawing.

His Emotional Self

Emotionally the child of four is better able to accept the frustrations which he meets. He may appear to be overly secure and confident in his own abilities. He is not too concerned about the feelings of others. He is not sensitive to praise or blame, but will often praise himself by bragging. He is less eager to please and conform and likes to do things his own way. While he needs firmness, he also needs freedom to try himself out, to explore the world about him, to find a balance. Fears which may develop at this age can have a lasting effect on his later life. (Gesell, *The First Five Years of Life*, pp. 50, 52; *The Infant and Child in the Culture of Today*, p. 225; Ilg and Ames, *Child Behavior*, p. 31)

His Intellectual Self

The child of four has an inquiring mind and is constantly asking questions. Even though he is a virtual question-maker, he is interested chiefly in the way the answers fit his own thoughts. (Gesell, *The First Five Years of Life*, p. 49)

The four-year-old’s imagination is limitless. He tells stories and mixes truth and fiction until he is apt to believe in his own creations. He enjoys his imaginary playmates. The line between fact and fictions for the four-year-old is quite vague, but he is beginning to differentiate truth from fiction. A popular question is, “Is it real?” (Ilg and Ames, op. cit., pp. 30-32)

He would rather go from one activity to another than to repeat. He loves to dramatize his play and life’s everyday experiences.

The intellectual processes of a four-year-old are not yet well-developed. He has meager comprehension of past and future. His thinking is so literal that analogies confuse him. He loves simple stories, especially those which give him information about things in the world. He is capable of listening to stories in larger groups and is also responsive to group singing. Some fours can sing songs, even carrying the tune.

His Interpersonal Relationships

The child of four seems to be as much “out of bounds” in his interpersonal relationships as in the other areas of his life. He seems to enjoy being defiant, trying hard to go beyond parental authority. His vocabulary can bristle with “No, I won’t!” This tendency probably indicates his need of asserting independence, trying to grow up. (Ilg and Ames, op. cit., p. 30)

He is beginning to sense himself as only one among many. He has a definite consciousness of being like other children of his kind. The four-year-old is truly a social being. He likes to be with several children and is willing to share possessions. He enjoys excursions and conversing on the telephone. He may however resort to silly behavior, calling people names, becoming very bossy and boastful, to evoke social reaction. This reflects his struggle to try out his own powers in a group situation. (Gesell, op. cit., p. 50) Although the four-year-old still plays by himself a great deal, he is also eager to establish himself in groups at nursery school or on the playground. (Russell, *Children’s Thinking*, p. 138)

He is developing a strong sense of family and home. Mother and father are oft-quoted authorities.

Implications for Christian Education

While the overly aggressive, assertive behavior of the four-year-old may make him harder to live with, these characteristics present many potentialities for Christian education.

This great “why” age and its consequent curiosity provide an ever-ready stage for presenting religious concepts within the realm of understanding of the four-year-old.

Studies conducted by Dr. Frances Ilg and her associates indicate that the four-year-old is able to understand the concept of God to a degree and wants to know more about him. He is likely to regard God very personally, even as a member of the family. (Ilg and Ames, op. cit., pp. 303-304) His idea of God is closely related to his concept of his parents. This connection places the child, whose relationship with his parents is an unhappy

one, in a dilemma. He will experience difficulty in formulating satisfactory concepts of God. Such a situation presents a specific problem with which adults should deal sympathetically discreetly.

The social growth of the child of four is such that he may be profitably taught in a group. The church school should capitalize on this developmental stage of a four-year-old and plan a program which will help him experience Christian growth.

His development of speech makes possible a grasp of stories and his own retelling of them. The tendency of a four-year-old to mix reality and imagination, however, presents a challenge to the church-school teacher. He must be helped to distinguish truth from fiction and to associate the Bible stories he hears with reality.

His broadening vocabulary helps to make prayer a more significant experience for the four-year-old.

