

The Five-Year Old Child

The world of the five-year-old is a fairy tale world. Imaginative play is now inspired more by archetypal characters and their adventures than by everyday events. While five-year-olds live deeply into their fantasy play, the tide of imagination often carries them quite gracefully along in ordinary life as well. They are typically more adept and less easily frustrated than during the previous year.

To understand this stage of development, it is helpful to revisit the notion of three distinct periods within the first seven years. (See the introduction to this series.) Between 4 1/2 and 5 years of age, there is a shift towards “thinking-willing.” The child’s thinking is beginning to wake up during the last third of the first seven-year cycle. This new capacity allows five-year-olds to respond not only to environmental stimuli, but also to generate their own pictures and ideas out of which to create and play.



The waking up in the head coincides with increasing control of the limbs. Five-year-olds enjoy participating in gardening, yard work, cooking, baking, sweeping, sewing, simple woodworking, laundry and dish washing. They are excited about participating, but will want to do these tasks with adults or playmates and will benefit from being guided in setting up and following through with tasks. This is, in fact, as it should be. Observing or working alongside adults helps them learn how to organize materials and create a logical process for the task, in addition to enhancing their fine and gross motor skills. They are physically participating in our thinking processes.

Active fives may enjoy the challenge of learning how to jump rope, scale a climbing wall, or ride a bicycle.

Five-year-olds are quick and eager to learn, but are not yet ready, physically and psychologically, for long periods of sitting at a desk or bookwork. They need to be active and they delight in dressing up in costumes and acting out their beloved stories. They may show signs of stress if their days are not balanced with sufficient physical learning and opportunities for creative, imaginative learning.

As they approach the age of six, children’s play tends to become more goal-oriented. In fact, they may occasionally seem to have fallen out of the imaginative stream. They may say that they are bored. They may spend their playtime talking and planning a game, but never actually playing. The purposeful activities described above can help them through

this “dry period” and also show them the possibility of using their creativity in a new way.

After such rich self-directed play, this new stage can come as quite a surprise for parents. The six-year-old will continue to struggle with how to find his or her new place in the real world, as we will see in the following article.

A major challenge for parents of the five-year-old comes from the outside world.

Five-year-olds are openhearted prey for marketers and media. What the media offers as soul nourishment to children often resembles stereotypes of humanity and human activity, rather than true archetypes. Five-year-olds are more aware of gender differences and these images can have a strong influence that may need to be countered by family values. Is the humor to which they are exposed healthy and goodnatured or is it mean-spirited and insensitive to others? Parents need to be conscious of giving their children ideals that inspire rather than limit their future sense of self and their capacity for empathy.

Five-year-olds are interested in stories about their parents when they were growing up. For both parent and child, bringing back and re-enlivening memories can be both enjoyable and an opportunity for parents to share their views of life and learning. If the tradition of parentcreated tales (see *The Three-Year-Old Child*) has continued, stories will now involve more potential danger and a spirit of adventure, and will contain life lessons, without a moralizing tone, of course.



A further challenge is related to our modern lifestyle. Do parents have sufficient time to engage in the purposeful activities that are so healthy for the will and sensory development of their children? Parents may not have time for all of the activities listed above, but being aware of their importance and choosing some to incorporate into the family rhythm can bring a creative element to life at home. Conscious care of the world of things builds habits that are applicable to future academic success and social skills.

Do parents have a passion or skill that they can share with their children? Children look with respect and admiration at expertise and creativity and are thrilled to be able to engage in an art or craft with a parent.

The gift of parenting the five-year-old is the intimate sharing of both work and play that is the basis of our life in community.

Links

[Joan Almon, "The Healing Power of Play"](#) from *Waldorf Early Childhood Education: An Introductory Reader*, S. Honigblum., ed. (WECAN 2017)

[R. Long-Breipohl, *Supporting Self-directed Play Chapters 1-3*](#) (WECAN 2010)

Books

B. Patterson and P. Bradley, eds., *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge* (Michaelmas Press, 2000)

A. Faber and E. Mazlish, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* (Scribner 2012)

F. Jaffke, *Work and Play in Early Childhood* (Floris Books 1996)

A. Kohn, *Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishment to Love and Reason* (Atria Books 2006)

[R. Long-Breipohl, *Supporting Self-directed Play*](#) (WECAN 2010)

N. Mellon, *Storytelling with Children* (Hawthorn Press 2013)

[S. Honigblum, ed., *Waldorf Early Childhood Education: An Introductory Reader*](#) (WECAN 2017)

S. Oppenheimer, *Heaven on Earth: A Handbook for Parents of Young Children* (Steiner Books 2006)

K.J. Payne, *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids* (Ballantine Books, 2010)