

The Heart of Early Childhood: Working with Four- and Five-year-olds

— Lisa Gromicko

The ages of four and five are the heart of early childhood. The force of creative imagination as a new capacity is becoming free in the child, as the child separates further from the outside world. These are the peak years of creative play. Everything is possible in play, as children can now create, change, or add to the world, through their imaginative capacities.

Four-year-olds live very much in the rhythmic-feeling realm. They love repetition so much! Simple nursery rhymes and repeated stories and songs are special treats for children of this age. They are comforted by hearing things over and over, and by predictable daily rhythm. Lots of movement is very important, and they especially love the rhythmic movement in circle and eurythmy. In play, they will happily imitate what they have seen adults doing. These elements nourish their feeling life and creative fantasy.

There is an endless flow of creative play forces, as play happens for its own sake, not for achieving a goal set by the child. This stream of fantasy play can sometimes seem unruly, but it is highly creative, as play is constantly in motion and very flexible. Children are more interested in each other now and communication is possible at a greater level than it was at age three. They are learning to speak to each other and may sometimes need guidance or modeling by adults about how to enter into play, share, or take turns. Parallel play will still occur at times, and children can be dreamy, but they become more cooperative and social as they grow.

At four, play is often sparked by an object, connected to the memory of seeing something in life—for example, seeing or helping to bake cookies. Pieces of wood can easily become the “cookies” to be baked for friends. Most four-year-old children are masterful at seeing an object and transforming it through play. One moment a piece of wood is a cookie, then a telephone, then it is a loaf of bread, a baby bottle, boat, and so on. All of this is possible because of what children have actually experienced. The combination of meaningful activity and remembered experiences, coupled with

open-ended play materials, is what fuels the play at this age.

In a mixed-age kindergarten, four-year-olds are like the leavening of the bread, I find. Whatever direction the general play is going in, the four-year-olds are able to tag along or support it in playful ways. Often, the older children will have created something and will need passengers or customers, for example. Four-year-olds (and even some three-year-olds) are usually very happy to join in! Unable yet to hold the bigger picture of the imagination, however, these children will sometimes be triggered by another idea altogether and “float” away. Recently I saw a group of four-year-olds that had been sitting dutifully as passengers on a train, built by some older children. All at once, they began meowing and crawled off of the train to find their mittens. As the older children discovered, it did little good to insist that these children do what they wanted them to do. Four-year-olds can become quite contrary.

This brings us to another aspect of this age: tender feelings. Four-year-olds are experiencing development in the rhythmic-feeling life, which is new and sometimes overwhelming. Emotions can be unpredictable and filled with frustration, disappointment, and a low tolerance for the irregularities that are part of an arrhythmic lifestyle. Tantrums can reappear and parents are often caught off-guard by this developmental stage. Generally, distraction is still very helpful if a tantrum is coming. With lots of warmth, consistency, and gentle inclusion, the child can feel secure and join in again. Spending time with me in the rocking chair or at a particular task creates a special time that allows for the affection these children often have so abundantly and love to share.

At five years old, children are beginning to access their will forces. This enables them to begin to create their own inner pictures—a critical human capacity which is fundamental to all future abstract learning. Now play becomes more purposeful and the child is able to play with a goal in mind, which has been set by

the child. Instead of being sparked by a familiar outer object, as was the case at four years old, now the child can have an inner imagination of what will be played and plan for this. More than at four, five-year-olds will often want the play objects to be like the idea and will spend much more time developing the materials and structures of the play. They will be capable of staying focused on a particular play theme and are much more awake than at four. The creativity of this stage is truly monumental, as the “wheel is re-invented” and other foundational concepts are literally re-discovered over and over. Adults who can remember their play at this age often recall that it was much “larger than life.”

Five-year-old children can transform their environment through this powerful play, as their own development becomes more focused in the limb and metabolic systems. Building structures are now a beloved activity in play, as children have overflowing creative forces. These play structures provide a beautiful “self-portrait” of the child’s physical growth and will

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forces. In kindergarten, the five-year-olds become very capable of cooperative play and work. They are highly social and will communicate with each other to discuss an idea at length. They are also learning to work with their differences, although this in itself can easily occupy much of the play time!

For many children at around five-and-a-half or so, there can be a profound change in the ability to play. They may stop being able to really engage as before and become listless, troublesome or even claim to be “bored.” This stage is an important one, as the child is experiencing developmental changes that herald the six-year change. Along with this we can see a willingness to help the adults with their work, and this is so good for them! Becoming part of the “workings” of the kindergarten, through regular work tasks, allow children to bridge this stage of development. Then, play can be re-entered with new energy and ideas again.

Many changes are beginning to be felt, which can create some instability for the child. Behaviors can

arise that challenge established ways of doing things—our kindergarten ways. Some “bathroom talk” or “rascally” activities may arise. Maintaining good habits and firm, loving boundaries are a supportive help at this stage. I have also found that keeping my own inner flexibility and humor with this age is tremendously important. I love to pull out my little rhymes that begin very slowly and then become very, very fast! The children who have been speeding up the morning verse or table blessing are pleasantly surprised at this opportunity to speed things up and then have a hearty giggle. In their drawings, fingers will often be drawn now, as the will forces are waking up in the hands. I try to notice how the child grips the stick crayon at this age, to gently help nudge it toward a proper pencil grip, if needed. New capacities for dexterity and manipulation of the hands and fingers make it possible for children to learn to tie their shoes and to do hand-work, and also to help younger children to fasten or tie their shoes or play cloths. Finger-knitting will become a very useful skill, creating many desired objects for play. We will often see a whole play “structure” be tied together with finger-knitted “cross wires” as children reflect in their play the neurological changes and capacities that are unfolding, leading to the ability to connect (tie) ideas together through the will. Learning to jump rope begins to be of interest, as well.

There is an exceptional need for physical activity, to strengthen the movement capacities and to help anchor the child into his or her her body. This serves to support the developing will, which needs so much help today to develop in a healthy way. A good daily dose of running, jumping, and practical work is a real gift for children. It is still helpful for adults to work primarily out of example, and to encourage children to learn to use their own will through imitation. This is an important theme of our time: the work of helping the human being to develop a healthy will. Through the rhythm, movement, and imitation of purposeful activity in the kindergarten years, we can support the unfolding of the will in five-year-old children. ♦

Lisa Gromicko teaches kindergarten at Shining Mountain Waldorf School in Boulder, Colorado. She has been an early childhood teacher for nineteen years, and is still learning so much. She is married with two grown sons.