

# YARDSTICKS

Children <sup>IN</sup> THE  
Classroom  
Ages 4-14

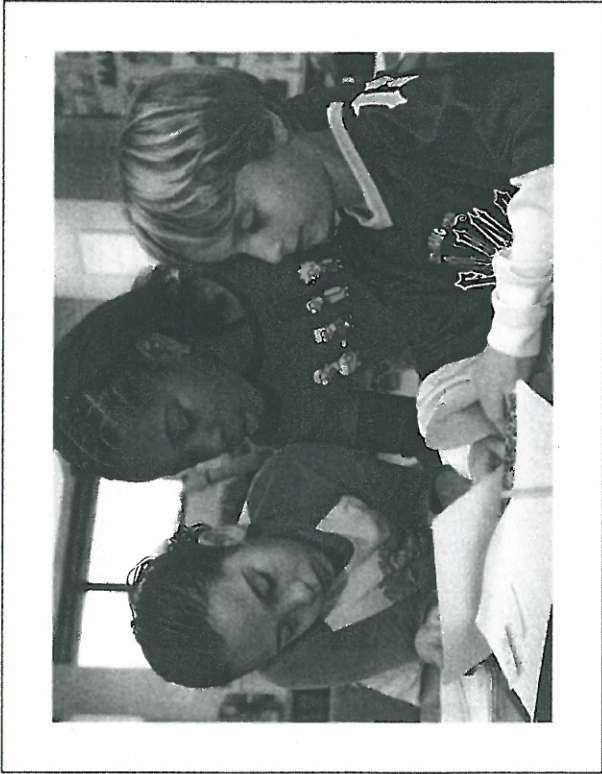
*3rd Edition*

**CHIP WOOD**



*Foreword by William Crain*

NORTHEAST FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN, INC.



# Nine-Year-Olds

*"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

I hate living in Greenfield! It is so boring! It isn't a city town. It isn't a country town either. It isn't a suburb town and it isn't the kind of town you'd visit your Aunt Mabel in. It is a medium sized town with a few country back roads, a few corner stores, a few movie theaters, some restaurants and many houses. It doesn't sound too bad you say? It is. The trouble is there's nothing to do! The most exciting thing that's ever happened to me in Greenfield was a train derailment. And it turned out o.k. You see, if you go to Boston you have the swan boats, you go to California, you have the beach, you go to Greenfield you have ... um-um ... see what I mean. That's why I wish Greenfield were better."

I've never forgotten this essay from Kate Arsenault, now an adult.

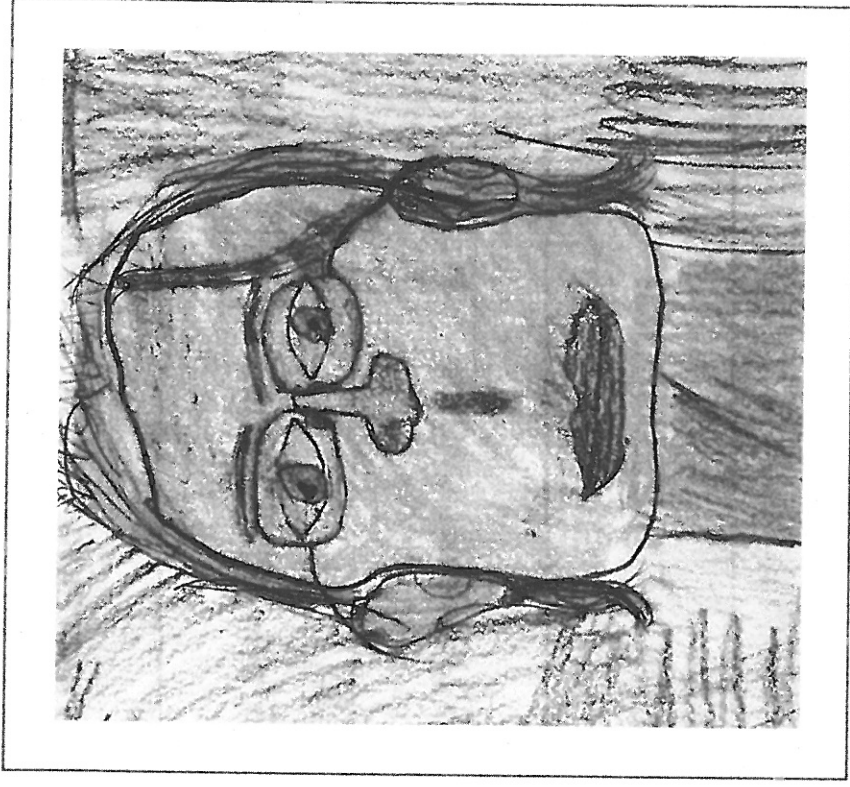
With its exclamation marks and sardonic humor, it's a perfect expression of the often confused and troubled age of nine. The enthusiasm of eight often turns into dark brooding and worrying at nine—worrying about world events, about the health of parents, about moving away, about losing best friends, about changing schools. Teachers notice these thinly veiled themes again and again

in children's fiction writing. Sometimes the deep seriousness of these social concerns can bring a twinkle to the adult eye. One nine-year-old worked diligently on her protest poster on a Saturday morning: "Save the Elephants—Ban Ivory Soap."

Fourth grade now tends to be a "benchmark" grade for state tests in at least two subject areas. But test-taking is a difficult task for nine-year-olds; in fact, it can be a disaster. It's easy to see how the well-known dip in fourth grade test scores could relate to the anxiousness of nines. The best test takers in the world are the risk takers; nines are anything but good risk takers. Teachers at this level see children finish their tests early simply because they put down any answer, rather than think through what they know. Others get only halfway through because they get stuck trying to figure out one right answer, refusing to be wrong. Nines need many opportunities to practice test-taking before it's time for the real thing. Modeling and role-playing can defuse the anxiety that tests create.

Compared with younger and older schoolmates, nines tend to learn better on their own as they gain mastery of basic skills. They're gaining a more solid understanding of key cognitive concepts such as multiplication, spelling patterns, and the scientific process. Younger children enjoy experimenting with these processes, but nines now take care with the final product. They will work hard on a science report on butterflies and study for weekly spelling tests or a chapter test in math.

★ Nothing is fair to the nine-year-old, who is struggling with the cognitive task of understanding ethical behavior at a new level. Why do children die? Why is there AIDS? Why are there poor people? How come a few people have all the money? Nines often feel they are singled out for unfair treatment by a teacher, parent, or sports coach. Sometimes these complaints are a way for nines to express a growing sense of peer importance and group solidarity: "You're never fair to us ... we never get to do anything." This growing peer solidarity of nines can be channeled into wonderful



club activities. Children enjoy gathering to play chess or to share their collections of rocks or stamps.

Nines complain about their aches and pains, their cuts and bruises, and their hurt feelings. Nail biting, hair twisting, and other outlets for tension are common. Teachers of nine-year-olds in third and fourth grade need a sense of humor and a determined lightness to challenge the sometimes deadly seriousness of the age. Positive language is also essential for children's growth. An ounce of negative criticism is greatly magnified by the nine-year-old. So is an ounce of encouragement.

# Nine-Year-Olds: Growth Patterns

## PHYSICAL

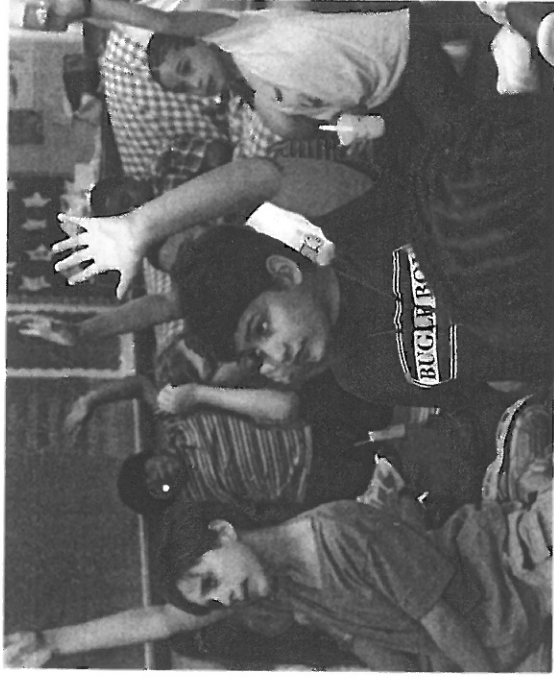
- Better coordinated
- Like to push their physical limits; tire easily
- Complain about aches, pains, injuries, and hurt feelings
- May twist hair, bite nails, or purse lips to relieve tension

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

- More individualistic
- Often feel worried or anxious
- Impatient
- Often complain about fairness issues
- Critical of self and others (including adults)
- Can be sullen, moody, aloof, and negative; often say "I hate it," "It's boring," etc.

## LANGUAGE

- Love descriptive language, word play, and new vocabulary
- Sometimes revert to baby talk
- Enjoy exaggeration, "dirty" jokes, and graffiti



## COGNITIVE

- Industrious and intellectually curious, but less imaginative than at eight
- Beginning to see the "bigger world," including issues of fairness and justice
- Able to manage more than one concept at a time, such as "long ago and far away"
- Have trouble understanding abstractions, such as large numbers, long periods of time, or vast areas of space

# Nine-Year-Olds in the Classroom

## VISION AND FINE MOTOR ABILITY

- With better coordination and control, show more interest in details
- Can fully master cursive handwriting, although they may need help relaxing their overly tight pencil grasp
- Benefit from practice with a variety of fine motor tools and tasks (weaving, knitting, carving, drawing, etc.)
- Able to copy from the board, recopy assignments, and produce beautiful final drafts

## GROSS MOTOR ABILITY

- Like to push their physical limits, whether challenging themselves, racing each other, or trying to beat the clock
- Still learning physical control; have trouble staying within boundaries
- Boys love to roughhouse, tumbling and wrestling like puppies
- Complain of and sometimes exaggerate physical hurts
- Restless; can't sit still for long

## COGNITIVE GROWTH

- Need homework related specifically to the next day's work; often ask the teacher, "Why do we have to do this?"

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## COGNITIVE GROWTH

- Looking hard (often anxiously) for explanations of facts, how things work, why things happen as they do; a good age for scientific exploration
- Reading to learn, instead of learning to read: If reading ability has kept pace with grade level expectations, they can read for information in books and newspapers and on websites
- Take pride in attention to detail and finished work, but may jump quickly between interests

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR

- Like to work with a partner of their choice—usually of the same gender; may begin to form cliques
- Can work in groups but may spend more time arguing about facts, rules, and directions than doing the actual activity
- Very competitive; need their teacher's sense of lightness and fun to help them relax in class and on the playground
- Like to negotiate—this is the age of "Let's make a deal"
- Generally worried and anxious; need adult patience and clarity when giving directions or setting expectations
- Very self-critical; sarcastic humor from adults can be very hurtful
- Tend to give up on tasks; encouragement to try again builds up their fragile sense of competence
- Exasperation on their teacher's part leads to more complaints, whining, or moodiness; laughing with nines is the best medicine

# Nine-Year-Olds: Curriculum

## READING

Provide opportunities for children this age to:

- Continue working in reading groups
- Tackle assignments that involve beginning research tasks and use of related reading material
- Intensively develop dictionary skills introduced at earlier ages
- Volunteer to read orally during read-aloud
- Explore poetry seriously throughout the year

## WRITING

Expect from these children:

- *Writing:* Readiness for emphasis on first draft and revision process; ability to absorb teaching about descriptive writing, character development, plot, cohesiveness and believability; frequent episodes of “writer’s block”
- *Spelling:* Improving use of dictionary; improving first-draft spelling; fewer mistakes with spelling in journals and subject writing; readiness for weekly spelling tests; mastery of basic capitalization and punctuation
- *Writing Themes:* Moving away, divorce, death, disease, and other worries; world issues; poetry about feelings and darker themes
- *Handwriting:* Increasingly fluent cursive; beginning use of cursive in day-to-day assignments and spontaneous writing; much neater writing than at eight

## THEMATIC UNITS

(Social Studies, Science, Current Events)

Favorite themes for children this age:

- Our country and the world
- Long ago and far away
- History of cultures
- Racial and ethnic diversity
- Environmental concerns in the immediate environment (for example, air or water pollution)
- Literary characters or a theme emerging from a particular book

## MATH

Provide opportunities for children this age to:

- Practice division by measuring, working with fractions, doing surveys, and graphing as well as through experimenting with standard algorithms
- Work extensively with word problems
- Compute with money and begin learning about decimals
- Practice multiplication tables

## A Final Thought on Nine-Year-Olds

The internal emotional roller coaster that some children experience when they are nine is poignantly captured in the following poem by Billy Collins.

### *On Turning Ten*

*by Billy Collins*

The whole idea of it makes me feel  
like I'm coming down with something,  
something worse than any stomach ache  
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—  
a kind of measles of the spirit,  
a mumps of the psyche,  
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,  
but that is because you have forgotten  
the perfect simplicity of being one  
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.  
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.  
At four I was an Arabian wizard.  
I could make myself invisible  
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.  
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window  
watching the late afternoon light.  
Back then it never fell so solemnly  
against the side of my tree house,  
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage  
as it does today,  
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,  
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.  
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,  
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe  
there was nothing under my skin but light.  
If you cut me I would shine.  
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,  
I skin my knees. I bleed.