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Eight Year Olds

"Mothers for miles around worried about Zuckerman's swing. They feared some child would fall off. But no child ever did. Children almost always hang onto things tighter than their parents think they will."

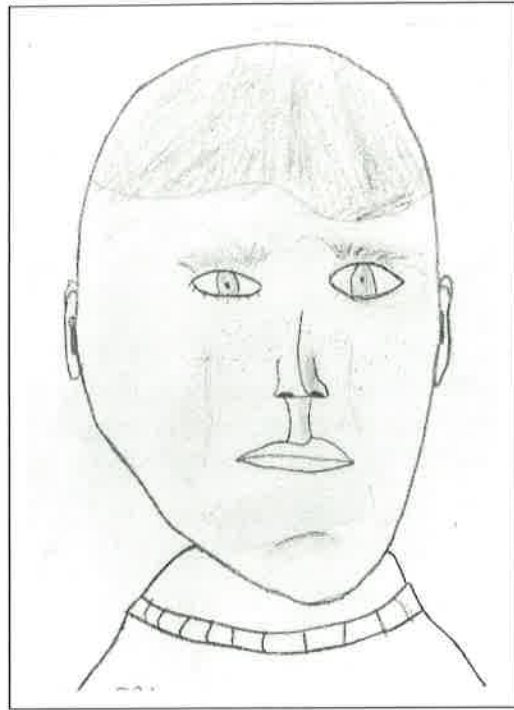
Charlotte's Web
by E.B. White

"Teacher, we have a great idea!"

Watch out! Here come the eight year olds — full of energy, imagination and little sense of their own limits.

"We have this great idea to do a play about Rosa Parks and we have all the clothes at home and we're going to bring them in tomorrow and we can use your desk for the bus, and we can make tickets and charge admission and we'll put it on tomorrow . . . OK?"

There's no thought of a script, assigning parts, rehearsal schedules, the hard work of learning lines, practice, costumes, set, and finally production. It's all a blur of enthusiasm tempered by only a vague understanding of how things get done.



The job of the second or third grade teacher is to harness that energy and give it some direction and focus. Teachers need to help children cut work down to bite-size pieces throughout the year. This includes homework assignments, which should never be longer than a half-hour in duration and should be limited in scope and expectations. Children at this age need to experience “incremental success” in their school work — success in gradually increasing quantities and levels of complexity — so they will continue to be motivated and excited.

Eight year olds tend to gravitate toward their own gender when making choices about working and playing with others. On the playground, the waves of boys chasing girls or girls

chasing boys at recess are often eight year olds. Boys especially tend to be fascinated by the world of “smutty” jokes at this age, but both boys and girls enjoy virtually any kind of humor, including riddles, limericks, and knock-knock jokes.

A key developmental struggle is gaining competence over the tools of their trade. At school, this means industrious efforts in such areas as handwriting, handcrafts, computer skills, drawing and sketching, and simple geometry. But when accomplishments don't come easily or quickly, there is a strong sense of inferiority. Patience is not common in eight year olds. Again, assignments in handwriting or spelling, for instance, need to be short and to the point. Drafts of children's work as well as beautiful, finished work should be liberally displayed in the classroom so that children can see the range of effort required to make progress toward mastery in a certain area. Children also benefit by graphing or charting their progress in certain areas so that the teacher can combat that feeling of “I'll never get this . . . I'll never be able to do this.”

“I'm bored!” is a common complaint of the eight year old. Adult translation: This is too hard! Look beyond these words to what they are showing you in their work. Redirection and encouragement go a long way; criticism can be devastating.

Often, parents and teachers lament about an eight year old, “He could do it if he only tried. He's lazy and unmotivated. He never sticks to any one thing for more than a day.” The eight year old is actually exploring his potential. He is struggling with feelings of inferiority as he tries out one new area after another in an expanding awareness of the broader world. This uncertainty will hit a peak at nine.

The Eight Year Old: Growth Patterns

- Physical**
- Speedy, works in a hurry
 - Full of energy
 - Needs physical release, outdoor time
 - Somewhat awkward
 - Attention span limited
 - Vision strong in near and far
- Social**
- Gregarious, humorous
 - Likes to work cooperatively
 - Often "bites off more than can chew"; overestimates abilities
 - Resilient; bounces back quickly from mistakes
 - Prefers same gender activities
 - Trouble with limits and boundaries
 - Friendship groups often include more children than at seven

The Eight Year Old: Growth Patterns

- Language**
- Talkative
 - Listens, but so full of ideas cannot always recall what has been said
 - Exaggerates
 - Likes to explain ideas
 - Vocabulary expands rapidly
- Cognitive**
- Engrossed in activity at hand; loves to socialize at same time
 - Likes groups and group activity
 - Very industrious
 - Often works quickly
 - Concrete operations solidifying
 - Basic skills begin to be mastered
 - Begins to feel a sense of competence with skills

The Eight Year Old in the Classroom

- Vision and Fine Motor Ability**
- Acuity and control come together; appropriate time to focus on cursive handwriting — children love to practice, but product often sloppy
 - Pencil grasp should now be “adult”; if not, a “pencil grip” may still be needed to help correct habits
 - Can copy from board and handle increasingly complex (but not lengthy) assignments

- Gross Motor Ability**
- Often a “growth spurt” — restless and need lots of physical activity; short exercise breaks (even in the classroom) help concentration
 - Love group games on the playground; gravitate toward same gender activities, so teacher should lead outdoor games for whole class (tag games, etc.)
 - Play hard and often exhaust themselves in short time; several short play breaks more productive than one long one

- Cognitive Growth**
- Very industrious, but often exaggerate ability, have trouble knowing limits; teachers can shorten (rather than lengthen) assignments; success in small doses builds confidence

The Eight Year Old in the Classroom

- Cognitive Growth**
- Love to work cooperatively, most productive in groups; enjoys responsibility — though not always successful
 - Interest in process and product of school work; peers' assessment of work as important as teacher's
 - Work usually well organized, though tends to be sloppy; need teacher assistance with organizational strategies, especially on tasks such as math papers copied from textbooks
 - Growing interest in rules, logic; keen interest in how things are put together, how they work; interest in natural world and classification
 - Tire easily, may give up temporarily on hard assignments, but bounce back quickly

- Social Behavior**
- Classroom organization should feature desks in groups, or groups at tables; teacher should change groupings frequently through the year
 - Respond to class projects and traditions which build a sense of unity and cohesion
 - Gender issues become more important
 - Fairness issues, growing sense of moral responsibility beyond self; arguing
 - Respond to studies of other cultures, stories that concern fairness, justice

The Eight Year Old: Curriculum

- Reading**
- Reading groups based on trade books organized heterogeneously around interests of children within reachable skill range
 - Independent reading program introduced with simple independent assignments or projects (such as book covers, interviews, dioramas) designed to spur class interest in reading and show reading comprehension
 - Lengthier chapter books with more advanced themes introduced for read-aloud time
- Writing**
- *Writing* — Quite lengthy stories with increasingly descriptive language; interest in diverse writing genres such as poetry, newspaper articles, cartoons; the "breakfast to bed" story-line is a favorite, providing more detail than any reader (except the author) would care to know about; beginnings of draft and revision are meaningful
 - *Spelling* — Correct spelling improves; compound words taught; use of dictionary, alphabetical order; phonetic mistake patterns more noticeable and students with real difficulty in spelling easier to spot; practice with capitalization and punctuation continues

The Eight Year Old: Curriculum

- Writing**
- *Writing Themes* — Adventure and "breakfast to bed" stories; sports with friends and heroes; horses, unicorns and other mythical beasts; stories based on cartoons; "chapter" books; poetry about nature, the seasons; use of nonfiction writing like at seven continues
 - *Handwriting* — Good posture, pencil grip and fluid movement of arm and hand across page; excellent time to introduce cursive handwriting and provide lots of time for practice; children enjoy this practice and want to become competent, though easily frustrated.
- Thematic Units**
- Our neighborhood; our community (interdependence); community institutions (bank, newspaper, radio); long ago *OR* far away (but not both); themes in nature (trees, rocks, animals); cultural and racial diversity; beginning history

The Eight Year Old: Curriculum

- Mathematics** • All four operations used in problem solving
- Fractions through measurement, weighing, and some pencil and paper tasks
 - Borrowing and carrying
 - Geometric patterns constructed with pencil and paper
 - Games provide arena to practice strategy