

11 Is the Old Age of Childhood

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By Laura Hudgens



Oh, the wonder of four!

Can there be a more adorable, a more precious age? At the same time they're becoming "big boys" and "big girls," these little ones still say and do the most delightful things.

They wear cowboy hats and fairy wings to birthday parties and play in the backyard wearing just their underwear and a superhero cape. They find bugs and oceans and refrigerator magnets utterly fascinating. And they delight in their parents attention.

It's a magical, enchanting, and bittersweet age. When my babies were four, I remember being acutely aware that this was the old age of littleness. This was the beginning of the end of these precious days – the beginning of the end of such heartbreaking sweetness. Sure five and six and seven are still little and cute, but at four, I began to realize that our days of footie pajamas, sticky kisses, tiny toes, and playing dress-up were numbered.

It's been seven years since I had a four-year-old. My last child is 11. And for me, 11 is the new four.

That might sound strange to some. What about a goofy, smelly, obnoxious 11-year-old is magical or enchanting? My answer: Everything.

Eleven is goofy because 11 is not self-conscious. Soon the day will come when I will pick my son up from school, and he will not half-run, half-gallop to the car dragging his hoodie and grinning from ear to ear because the school day is over or because I've brought the dog or he's going to get a snack or a cute girl talked to him or his "team" won the football game at recess.

Sometime around 12 or 13 or 14, I can't say exactly when, but soon, he will not run to me at the end of the school day. He won't chatter all the way home. He won't have a backpack full of things he wants me to see.

Soon he will start trying to be cool. And after three other children, I know that when he starts trying to be cool, a lot of things (like running to your mom) become increasingly uncool.

Sure, 11-year-olds smell sometimes, but that's just part of their charm. Eleven-year-olds are still little enough to hate baths. They still like to play outside – games like chase and cops and robbers. They ride bikes for fun and skate and climb trees and turn over rocks looking for bugs.

Eleven smells like dirt and sweat and fresh air and childhood.

Eleven-year-olds can certainly be obnoxious but usually in a funny and playful way. Their jokes are corny, and their stories are long and rambling. They take great delight in being loud – singing, shouting, burping, and just making noise. And they find all forms of bathroom humor wildly hilarious.

Of course, I don't expect the world at large to find these behaviors charming. So I teach my son to know when and where and with whom he can cut up. But I find the humor and rambunctiousness, even the obnoxiousness, of this age delightful because it comes from a place of fun, liveliness, and joy. It comes from a place of childhood.

But like four, 11 is a bittersweet age. It is the old age of childhood. Perhaps the most heartbreaking thing about 11 is that, on some level, my son knows this, too. I'm not the only one who realizes that very soon things will change.

At 11 he still stands firmly on the soil of childhood, but now and then I can see him peeking over the fence to the big world of adolescence. Like every kid at every age, he can't wait to be bigger.

But sometimes I also notice a vague sadness in him – in the just-below-the-surface knowledge that soon his childhood will be over. *How much longer will it be fun to build forts? How much longer will it be okay to get tucked in? How much longer can I cuddle with Mama while we watch a movie?*

These questions are on both of our minds. Unlike a four-year-old who thinks nothing of the future, 11-year-olds have a sense of what is coming. We don't talk about it, but in the last few months, we've hung out more – reading together, going for walks, throwing rocks in the creek,

snuggling in front of the TV. We're both making the most of these days.

I know that the adolescent years will be rough at times. He'll be testing his boundaries. I'll be trying to strike the balance between hanging on and letting go. But for now, he's 11. He's sweet and adorable, and he's still a little boy – just for a little while longer.