

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Ancient Greeks Childhood and Education



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Birth and Infancy

When a baby was born it was presented to the father who would decide its fate. Children were abandoned and left to die if they were disabled and baby girls were also often rejected. Wealthier families would then hire a poor neighbour or slave as a nurse. Seven days after the birth the family held a celebration where they made sacrifices to the gods and invited relatives who brought gifts. The baby was named at this celebration during a ceremony called the *amphidromia*. At the age of three a boy's passing from infancy into childhood was marked at a festival called the *Anthesteria* and the boy was presented with a small jug called a *chous*. Childhood in Ancient Greece was dangerous as disease was rife and children were particularly vulnerable to illness.

**A chous, Case 4, Object 9,
Museum number: GR.P8.1952**

Education

Education in the modern sense of the word, was reserved exclusively for boys and young men. A girl's education was based at home where her mother taught her how to run a household and how to weave. Richer families sometimes employed a tutor to teach their daughter other skills such as reading but this was rare.

School was not compulsory and was arranged and paid for by parents. Rich families often hired a slave called a *paidagogos* who acted as a tutor supervising their son's education, attending lessons with him and walking him to and from school. Schools were run from private houses or in rooms adjoining training grounds (*palaistra*). Boys usually started school at about seven years old and carried on until military training began at eighteen.

**"Tanagra" figure of a boy, Case 10, Object 47
Museum number: GR. 128-1876(1)**

These figures are named after the Greek town of Tanagra in Boetia, north-west of Athens, where many have been found. Like those of the adults, this figure, along with others of children nearby, give a vivid impression of what real children may have looked like.



Teaching was concentrated around three main areas: literacy and basic arithmetic, music and physical education. Literacy was taught by the *grammatistes* and was an important skill as so much of the running of the democracy was dependent on a basic grasp of reading and writing. Writing was practised on a wax tablet with a *stylos* which had a sharp end for writing and a flat end for erasing. As the pupil became more advanced he might write on papyrus with a soot-based ink, although this was expensive so *potsherds*, the ancient equivalent of scrap paper might be used for practise. Mathematic teaching included basic numeracy and geometry, which was considered the highest of the mathematical sciences. Calculations were made on an *abacus* which could be a simple grid drawn in the sand and marked with stones or the more familiar use of rods and beads. The Greeks used hundreds, tens and units, as we do. They also encouraged the use of the fingers as a computational tool. Numbers 1 to 9 were represented by different positions of the middle, ring and little finger of the left hand whilst the thumb and forefinger showed tens. Hundreds and thousands were counted on the right hand.



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In music, boys were taught to sing and to play the *aulos* or lyre by a teacher called a *kithistes*.

They also learnt to recite poems. Instruction in physical training was carried out by the *paidotribes*, who taught running, long jump, throwing the discus, boxing and wrestling, and took place in the *palaistra* or public gymnasium (for more details see Athletics Fact Sheet).

Wine Jar (Amphora): A Music Lesson, Case 4, Object 32

Museum number: GR.8.1955

The teacher sits playing the pipes to accompany the song of the boy. On the other side of the vase an older man leans on his staff to listen.