**Fall 2011 Fourth Grade Level Parent Meeting**

**Dr. Allan Gold, District Psychologist**

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**INTRODUCTION:** The purposes of these grade level parents meetings are to:

* Paint a developmental profile of children at each age/grade level
* Encourage parents to network and to discuss typical challenges and questions relating to your child’s age and grade.
* Discuss values and value conflicts underlying parental responses to issues and situations that arise.

**What are children like at this age?** Parents answered the question: What changes have you noticed in your children since last year? (parent responses below):

* More independent
* More opinionated
* More rebellious
* Thinking they’re pretty cool/pretty happy with themselves.
* More aware of their social environment
* They care more about clothes
* Less affectionate
* More judgmental of adults
* Able to better see consequences of actions.
* Much more engaged and capable in school
* More aware of the world

Dr Gold: Fourth graders are indeed very different than 3rd graders. Their characteristics will be discussed in each of five areas below (physical, cognitive, social, emotional, moral). They are in general on the cusp of early adolescence.

**Physical:** Most children will not reach puberty this year, but some will begin to. They’re very capable of doing a lot of things physically. In response to a question, most parents indicated that their children have home responsibilities, and this is encouraged, and is an advantage of increased physical capability. Puberty hits boys 2 years later than girls, usually with an onset of between 10-12. Early onset of puberty, sometimes as early as late fourth grade can be difficult for girls who get embarrassed about their developing bodies. Tall more developed boys generally have an easier time with increased athletic prowess and accompanying social status. All kids need to learn that everyone is different and grow at different rates and times.

**Cognitive:** Fourth grade is when children can begin to be treated more like adults. News should be filtered by parents, but children are capable of understanding more about the world. At the end of this year, Dr. Gold will run the Touch Program, which discusses good and bad touch, and suggests that the children are aware of a lot of what he discusses. Cognitively, it is an exciting time for kids. A challenge is what to expose them to in the way of information about the world, news, etc. They still do not have a good sense of probability and distance, so that if they hear or see about some even far away or catastrophic, they may get scared and not yet understand that the likelihood of this happening here is small. They are more able to be reasoned with and are much better at articulating their desires and arguments, which can make for interesting family discussions. However, just because the express a wish, doesn’t mean they get it. Watch out for entitlement.

**Social:** This is a time of significant social change for children. Children begin to be more aware of popularity. Children (girls in particular) are also beginning to understand that friendships can be flexible, and that they can be friends with more than one child at a time. The role of parents in friendship is to help children reflect on what makes a good friend. Be a good listener, and try to help guide them about how they might want to handle any difficult situations.

**Emotional:** This is an area of fairly gradual change; there is actually a lot of stability here. Kids are now pretty good at managing emotions, attention and frustration. They can sometimes be better at this now than they will be in two or three years.

**Moral:** Moral development doesn’t make a big jump until adolescence. Now, they are motivated by fear of or desire to avoid punishment, mostly. However, children are not egocentric any more and should demonstrate remorse, compassion, and empathy.

**Questions and Concerns:**

* **Q:** What does it mean to have a girlfriend or boyfriend in 4th grade? Can boys/girls be friends right now**? A:** It’s not abnormal for them to begin to be interested in the opposite sex. What it means to have a girlfriend/partner is usually pretty innocent right now. In the past sometimes kids will be caught (or rumored to) kiss each other on the playground. Of course, if they’re caught, we stop that. It is important, however, not to encourage dating or couples; what may seem very cute at this age, is not so cute in two or three years. Kids with older siblings may be more precocious than eldest kids. Girls tend to develop interest in boys before boys do in girls, but girls are not particularly adept in how they show their interest. They may chase, hit, and be otherwise annoying, when they like a boy, which doesn’t really work. It’s all a normal process that takes years to develop.

It is certainly fine and desirable for kids of opposite genders to just be friends.

* **Q:** How do you handle a child’s actual learning difference without making them feel different in a negative way? **A:** This is a time when children are recognizing individual differences more. You can discuss with your child that all children/people have strengths and weaknesses. They are better able at this age to have a differentiate view of themselves and others, i.e. that no one is all bad or all good at things. They can see that they and others may be skilled at some things and other things are difficult for them. Emphasize that effort has tremendous power in the world, and that if they put forth effort they can get better at what they want to. You can discuss resilience with them and talk about how it is an important quality to develop. And you can model resilient behavior for them when you as parents encounter challenges as well.
* **Q:** How do you handle it if a child is allowed to play at another’s house and they let them watch R rated movies, play games you forbid, etc. **A:** This challenge will increase, as your child gets older. Discuss the parameters with your child, call the parents, and possibly consider having the play occur at your house or even redirecting your child to another family. It’s not a great idea to ask the child to advocate for himself on this front; you should be involved. These situations bring up tough values issues: is your value around type of entertainment (e.g. violent video games) more important than the perceived risk or fear that your child might be excluded or not be seen as “cool” if they aren’t exposed to what other kids are playing. The more you are clear with your children about what is important to you, the better able you’ll be to establish and hold to your limits.
* **Q:** How do you explain how your child is physically different from others, in this time of physical disparity (some have recently grown a lot, others have not). **A:** Again this is an example of parents’ job of helping kids accept themselves. While it may be disappointing or temporarily troubling to kids that they are smaller, larger, thinner, more weighty, has to wear glasses, etc. than other kids, the message is that they are who they are, everyone develops differently, and some things they can’t change. Help them focus on the qualities that they can control (e.g. how they treat others, what they are interested in, how well they do in school), and what they like about themselves (not to mention what they are grateful for). You may have to help them develop appropriate retorts for negative comments that others make, but reassure them that when other kids make negative comments about physical appearance, then that is a hurting child and not to internalize the comments.
* **Q:** Are personal cell phones and email accounts a good idea? **Q:** About half of the parents present said that their children have cell phones, but only for safety. Until kids start going out on their own cell phones that do any more than make calls (that is, iphones with texting and internet access) are not necessary. By the time kids get to Del Mar, then cell phones may be more appropriate, but they should still be monitored by parents. Personal emails are not recommended at this age, though again by next year or the year after they may be acceptable. Again, parents need to monitor all computer usage by having kids use the computer in a public place, and parents should have access to passwords and have a lot of discussions about internet and email safety.