

Fall 2015 Fifth Grade Level Parent Meeting
October 8, 2015
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Purpose of Grade Level Meetings:

- Learn what is developmentally normal at this age
- Discuss issues parents have
- Build connections with other parents.

Children this age are at a threshold where communication with parents is really critical. It takes a village to raise our children and we need to continue to work as teams of educators and parents. Parents need to learn that they are not alone in what they are going through in the parenting “job.”

A wide assortment of parent handouts were presented (many on the psychologist website). It was recommended that the Reed District vision be posted on the refrigerator as a reminder of where your children are headed.

Changes in your 5th grader since last year (parent observations):

- More private
- Resistant to suggestions
- More independent (wants to be)
- More physical development
- More back talk, disrespectful, more attitude.
- More reluctant to try new things
- New talk about crushes, interest in gender issues, pressure about dating,
- Mood changes
- More self directed, stronger opinions,
- More anxiety and pressure
- Caring more about what friends think.
- Cliques

To make sense of these observations, we look at what is going on developmentally in five areas: Physical, cognitive, social, emotional, cognitive, and moral. At some ages all these areas are in gradual change; at other times many or most are changing. The more areas that are changing, the more challenging for both children and parents. Fifth graders are approaching early adolescence where most of these areas are in a period of rapid change, though not all students go through these changes at the same time.

Physical changes:

There is a big range among boys and girls. Girls generally will develop physically about two years before boys do, on the average. Physical changes often have the effect of changing the social and emotional areas, as well. For example, their interests change with their development which means that friendships will also change.

Most kids this age are quite physically competent and can do chores. They want to be able to be independent and show that they can do things, so it is important to let them demonstrate that they can also contribute to the household. At this age, the concept of trust begins to be of key importance. As they want more independence and privileges, they need to prove that they can be responsible and can be trusted. Having home responsibilities can help them to build both independence and trust. It was suggested that chores not be assigned by traditional genders, but that both boys and girls can do any chore and they can be rotated. The adults in the family can also model not-doing only gender traditional chores.

Kids have to have opportunities to be given ability to be trusted. Being respectful is extremely important. Parents get confused...are they friend or parent?? There are a variety of ways children can build trust: I can trust you to do your work, to speak respectfully, to use technology appropriately.

Kids this age are quite capable of participating in competitive or team sports, but not all kids like to or need to do so. What is important is exercise and kids' learning that even if they're not as good at something as they'd like, they can better at it if they try and practice. While some kids simply aren't interested in a particular sport or physical activity, they shouldn't just stop if they reach a difficult skill, particularly if they generally do like the activity. They need to learn that they can improve.

Cognitive changes:

This is the beginning of an exciting time for kids cognitively. They can make sense of the concrete world, sort information, think more logically, and are beginning to be able to think more abstractly. They are more curious now and we can begin to have intellectual conversations with them.

However, that is a double edged sword. Kids are now exposed to much more information about the world, but they still don't have a sense of perspective. They can easily get anxious and scared about what they see or hear, e.g., the Oregon shootings, Mideast wars. The news on TV and in the newspapers can be very scary. Kids need parents to help them process this information (though it's still recommended that, if you can, filter the information, at least for a little while longer).

Ask them questions: what do you think about this? How do you feel about it?

Increased anxiety is not unusual now...for parents now, too. The goal is to reduce this anxiety, though that is a very tough emotion to control. We need to reassure our kids that they live in a very safe place and that these are rare events and often far away. That is what is meant by their developing some realistic perspective about events.

In general kids are no longer so naïve, so can begin to be great conversationalists.

Social changes:

Social interactions from now on can be quite complex. Kids realize that they can have more than one friend, but friends can still be possessive and try to exclude. Social situations are great for parents to learn to move from the role of administrator (boss, director) to the role of consultant (good listener, reflect feelings, clarify problems, brainstorm solutions, guide to selection of a solution, evaluate choices). We can propose ideas and relate stories but they no longer want to be told what to do, so that can be part of the consultant role. So, if you see your child in a difficult social situation, try to act as the consultant to help them decide what they want to do about it. We can also still be the boss, but in the social realm when the situation doesn't involve us, we can help them.

Kids now will categorize each other in many ways and the concept of "popular" appears. Popularity may mean different things to different children or in different grades, but often it's who has the best electronics, the most athletic, best looking, sometimes even the meanest. Of course, most popular should be reserved for the nicest kids, but they don't figure that out for a while. This is a time when parents can help children figure out who makes a good friend for them. They may want to be part of the popular group or choose any friend, for that matter, but they need to reflect on how they feel with that group or individual and how they are treated. Hopefully, they will realize that if they're not treated well pretty consistently, then that person is not a good friend for them right now. All of our lives we are trying to figure out who our friends are. Teach children about consistency: if you have a friend over for play date but they ignore you at school, that's not consistent. Kids actually now begin to associate a good friend with being able to trust them.

If a kid is repeatedly feeling unsafe, either physically or verbally, or if there is any kind of cyber-bullying, then they need to learn to stick up for themselves. It is not tattling to seek adult help (your's or from someone at school) if they are being repeatedly teased or harassed.

Teach kids that we are icebergs; we see the tip of an iceberg and not the 90% of who others are. Many kids are struggling, but put on a happy or cool or angry face, when someone may be sick, going through family conflict or divorce, financial problems. If they are judging and being mean, then maybe they don't feel good about themselves. Promote empathy and compassion. We can't control how others treat us, but we can control how we treat them...it pays off in the end.

Emotional changes:

We expect kids this age to have good control of their emotions; there should be no rages or temper tantrums. They should be able to handle disappointment and failure. That doesn't mean that they can't cry sometimes, but they should regain control within a few minutes. The biggest emotional challenge kids have these days are anxiety and handling disappointment. They begin to realize they are not the best in our community, but there is so much pressure in our culture to be the best. They have to learn that it is okay to make mistakes; it is okay to fail.

Talk to kids about their internal voice, those voices that interpret and give meaning to events for us. We all have good voices and bad voices. Good voices keep us healthy and safe, get us to do the right thing (e.g. not saying that mean thing that we're thinking, not engaging in dangerous, but exciting behavior). Our bad voices get in trouble or endanger our safety, but also include those that put us down. We have lots of Mr. and Ms. Perfects here, who tell us we're not good enough if we're not the best or perfect or make a mistake. There's also lots of Mr. Worry Wart – who tell us to be worried about everything. The bad voices need to be recognized, toned down, and substituted by better voices: Mr. Good Enough, Ms. Encouragement, Ms. I can Handle This.

Children (and parents) can also learn to put events in perspective so they don't have extreme reactions to relatively minor disappointments or failures. Kids this age can understand a rating scale of 1-10 for foods, activities, feelings. Then ask "what is worst thing that could happen to you or anyone you love?" Children usually answer, "they could die, be very sick, have a horrible accident, etc." These are 10s on the scale (1 would be a perfect day). Then ask what getting a bad grade on a math test, or being called a name by a friend is. Hopefully, kids can rate those events in the middle. It's ok to be frustrated or annoyed or even angry from these events, but they are not 10s; they are not catastrophes.

Negative feelings come from lack of control. WE have no control over planes crashing, and our anxiety goes up. Kids may not always get A's but they can get better!! They can be empowered to take more control of situations, and thereby help reduce their anxiety or frustration or anger. It is better to have these discussions when they have cooled off and are calm. "I hear you saying those things. Let's have a talk about those voices in your head that are not helpful."

Another helpful technique is to talk with kids about their "history bank," their memories of difficult situations they've faced and overcome. When can remind them of times that they had a difficult challenge, but they got through it, they survived. Kids need to learn that when things are really hard and they pushed themselves, they can overcome tough challenges. All of these techniques can build more confidence and more emotional control.

Moral changes:

Moral development doesn't change much until adolescence. However, children this age CAN learn about empathy and the consequences of their actions. Talk about trust and respect and honesty, responsibility.

The practice of restorative justice or restorative parenting can be very helpful in helping kids develop a strong moral sense. At school in lieu of suspensions or at home instead of just punishment, restorative justice gives kids the ability to reflect on their actions. They have made a bad choice with their behavior. "How do you think I felt when you called me a bad mom". "How would you feel if someone did this to you?" A major part of restorative justice is not just a sincere apology, but they have to change behavior also AND they need to make it right...write a letter, do something nice for the person. This doesn't mean that there isn't any consequence at all for bad behavior, but there is a process of recognition and restitution involved.

All kids lie. At this age kids lie in order to get out of trouble or to avoid doing something they don't want to do. Again, this is a crucial area for building trust. Most kids recognize that punishments are less if they tell the truth, but still they think parents won't find out. They need to know that you will find out the truth. If you've observed the action which "proves" that they're lying, Don't argue. Just impose the consequence and engage in the restorative justice process, if appropriate.

Part of their moral development is learning respect. We are not their slaves. They have the right to food, clothing, shelter, and love, but the rest are privileges – every new device, game, clothing, even play dates. No respect – no privileges.

Other issues:

Privacy and Communication:

Dr. Gold discussed Challenge Day for 8th graders at Del Mar and some of the metaphors used in that powerful experience. One is the Emotional Balloon. Kids are carrying around a lot of unexpressed feelings about a lot of often painful experiences. As kids get older they get more private. Dr. Gold recommends that all kids have at least one or two other adults besides their parents, whom kids can talk to. This can be a coach, relative, neighbor, friend, religious figure, or often the parent of a friend. Of course, it is really important to keep the lines of communication open with your children. Try not to judge what they say; be a consultant. Find those times when they are more vulnerable...dinner times, bed times when you share, highs and lows, rose/thorns. It is important for kids to see adults being real with their emotions. Be able to express your own feelings.

Because of privacy we may not find out information from our own child. We may find out information about our child from another parent. Increasingly, you may

hear or see something that you want to communicate to another parent, just as you would want to know about your child. Do not attack the other person or put them on the defensive if you want to communicate difficult information: "I think this is going on between our kids...how can we work on this together....," "I heard this and I know this is difficult, but I would want to know if this were my child. I'm not judging – I just thought you'd want to know that I saw...I heard that..."

Electronics:

The biggest challenge today in raising children, other than anxiety and pressure, is electronics. It is very hard for parents to monitor all of the electronic devices, including ipads, smart phones, not to mention TV and music. There are still studies being conducted on the effects of cell phone use, but recent studies are showing that letting kids have devices in their bedrooms at night significantly reduces the amount of sleep they get. So, make sure devices are not charging in their room. Make sure you know their passwords.

Book Suggestion:

I'd Listen to My Parents If They'd Just Shut Up, by Anthony Wolf. This describes the psychology of adolescence and how to deal with a lot of adolescent issues. It's a very readable and helpful book in preparing for the next phase of their (and your) lives.

And keep a good sense of humor!! Parents, too, tend to catastrophize!