

Spring 2009 Fourth Grade Parent Meeting
Dr. Allan Gold, District Psychologist
April 20, 2008

Questions, Issues, Concerns in Parenting our 4th Graders as they Approach 5th Grade

There have been lots of changes in 4th grade year; our children are really not little kids anymore.

Some issues of concern:

Limits, independence, responsibility—what’s OK for them to be doing independently at this age?

- The kids are more capable at this point. Homework should be more or less under control at this point.
- Kids will start to push limits now and it won’t let up for years to come, so the parameters parents set up now will carry you through adolescence. They are still young but not quite little kids. They look to the older kids for what to do, how to act, what they can get away with. It is tough to figure out how to give them freedom but also recognize that a big part of this depends on the individual child and their ability to handle the freedom. It will be different for each child.
- What’s appropriate for them to do and what responsibilities should they have? What’s appropriate will depend on the kids. Parameters to set up: they go where they say they are going to go, tell you when they get there, don’t go anywhere else, come home on time. Look at how they handle other responsibilities—chores, homework, computer (do they get off when they are supposed to, can they handle time limits, do they tell you if something inappropriate comes up), safety (bike helmets, etc.) plus go with your own sense of “do you trust your kid”. Don’t assume they will get everything perfect because they are still pretty young and they will make some bad decisions over time, because difficult situations come up in spite of where we live. If they “blow” a situation and make a bad judgment or decision, it’s ok to pull back for a little while and then let them try again in a month or two.
- Link to CA legal info on leaving a child alone:
<http://www.calbar.ca.gov/calbar/pdfs/cbj/2007-Kids-Law-English.pdf>
- Cell phones? Once they start being independent and not in your immediate supervision, they could have a cell phone with a limited amount of numbers phone. They shouldn’t have unlimited calling and text-messaging. That will come soon enough. At this point, the phone is for safety purposes.
- Limits are really appropriate. Setting limits depends on your own family values and what is really important to you. Safety is key, although don’t want to go too far and be too restrictive. Important to determine if it’s a true safety issue or a panic/fear reaction on your part.
- Limits around disrespect are extremely important because this is when it starts. If don’t cut that off now, you will live with it for the next several years.

- When a kid is disrespectful, what do you do about it? A little humor with a chance to make it good often works. Taking away toys/electronics can also work. Limit where you take them and when. Limit what you buy them when they want something.
- When they are being respectful and responsible, acknowledge them. The way we respond to them is very important.
- It is not right for parents to be ruled by kids. It's their job to push, and our job not to make it easy. We don't have to be their friends; in fact, we shouldn't be their friend.
- A big issue about setting limits goes to the kids' need to save face in front of their friends. If you're confident that not everyone else is getting to do or have something, then it's easier to impose limits on the kids. That's why it's so important to check with other parents about what they're allowing. We can guarantee that there's at least one other parent that is right where you are on freedoms and restrictions. Don't hesitate to communicate with each other.

What is the TOUCH Program and what content is covered? What questions might arise about sex that we have to deal with at home?

- Reason to do it at this age is because students are able to handle the information and have enough exposure and awareness through the media that it is important to talk about this topic. There are 2 sessions: The first is to talk about good, bad, confusing touch, and how to handle or avoid situations that might come up with strangers. Most parents by this time have talked somewhat about "stranger danger" but it never hurts to review. During the second session we talk about various kinds of abuse—physical, verbal, sexual (unwanted touching of private parts), neglect. The kids are interested and engaged. They know something about abuse and are not completely naïve. They may use the information to help a friend someday. The two week sessions will start the week of April 27th and May 4th and will be done by mid-May. The sessions are conducted with each class separately. Parents are absolutely encouraged to discuss this information with their children, who should be bringing home some written notes.
- Talk about safety with them, as they move into independence, make sure that they go places with friends.
- The discussion of verbal abuse leads into friendship issues. The concept of abuse is extended to teasing and harassment among kids. We use this as an opportunity to show that meanness, exclusion, bullying, is a kind of verbal abuse.
- At this age, there is curiosity about sex. Probably enough at this point to just give biological information—anatomy and physiology. Depends on the child and what they are ready for. If they aren't ready, they probably won't be interested. At the end of fifth grade we have "family life" program where there is formal instruction about puberty.
- When they start to ask questions, it is important to find out what they know because their questions may actually be very limited. There are several books in the library on various topics within this area—some focused on parents and some focused on kids.

- There is a current series on Oprah on talking to your kids about sex in an age-appropriate way.

Communication

- Parents may start getting more information about their child from other children. This is a plus side of gossip.
- Parents may start needing to talk to each other about what's going on about our kids. How do you communicate uncomfortable situations to other parents? Realize that there are 2 sides to every story. Use the school as back-up or the bad guy if necessary. Find ways to communicate with other parents in a non-attacking way. All parents want to know if their kids are doing something really unsafe or inappropriate; they just may not want to hear it. In their guilt and/or anxiety they may attack the messenger, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't communicate the information.
- It can be a difficult line to draw sometimes about getting involved with kids' problems at this age, because it is really important to let the kids figure things out and fight their own battles.
- Particularly with social interactions it is important to recognize the shift in our job from manager (or sometimes even micro-manager) to consultant. Consultant listens, asks good questions, gets the "client" to brainstorm ideas, choose a path of action, and helps them evaluate how well it worked.

Gossip and Social Interaction at this Age

- There are different levels of sensitivity among children. Some kids are better at creating a protective shell and others are more vulnerable. They know how to push parents' buttons, and know how to push each others buttons too.
- Kids need to hear from you that gossip is hurtful and certainly may not be true. If they don't want to be gossiped about, then they can choose not to spread rumors themselves.
- Their job at this age is to figure out who makes a good friend. They begin to figure out who is "popular". This has different meanings at different ages and grades. They need to determine who they feel good around and parents can get them to reflect about that.
- Floating from group to group is fine. They need to have "permission" to not hang out with someone they don't want to be with, or don't like. It takes a certain amount of courage and integrity that many kids this age don't have to extricate themselves from negative social situations. Although, they probably have more at this age than in middle school.
- It is fine to limit time they spend with a kid who seems to have a negative influence or negative behaviors, particularly when your child comes home with an attitude or is misbehaving. You won't have that kind of control for much longer.

Boy-Girl relationships

- It is not unusual for girls' interest to start now but they are just beginning to figure it out. There is more in 5th and 6th grades, but there is also a huge range of development so interest may begin now. Some girls are even beginning to hit puberty. Much of their lives in the next few years will depend on their physical development. In general, it is harder for the later developers. There is a big range of maturity among Del Mar kids. What happens is that their interests change and friendships change as a result.
- Last year, kissing was an issue in the spring among 5th graders. Be careful of calling it cute—what's cute now is not cute as they develop and early sexual activity can develop.

Video games

- Boys tend to use electronics as social media.
- Commonsensemedia.com is a great resource to help you evaluate media that your children might be interested in (video games, computer games, movies)
- It is very important to have limits around computer use; make sure you know what your kids are looking at on the internet. Keep the computer in a visible place in your home.
- Set up these parameters now.

Kids realize that more responsibility is on the horizon. At this age, kids may be wary or even fearful of growing up. They may even revert to acting younger. They all feel pressure to grow up, and may be embarrassed if their interests are still dolls and toys. Parents need to reassure them that whatever they are in their interests is ok and not to make choices just because others are embarrassing them or making them feel bad.