

Notes from Dr. Gold's Kindergarten Parent Meeting
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Handout: Advice from Parents of the Eighth Grade Class of 2009 to Reed School Parents

QUESTIONS, ISSUES, CONCERNS IN PARENTING OUR KINDERGARTENERS
APPROACHING 1ST GRADE:

- 1) Boy/girl differences – what to expect
- 2) Competitiveness – how to modulate; what's healthy and what's not
- 3) Communication – how to find out what's going on
- 4) What about sensitive kids?

1) SOCIAL CONCERNS: WHAT CAN WE EXPECT WILL HAPPEN SOCIALLY IN FIRST GRADE?

The child's job is to acquire social skills. Some children will pick this up by osmosis, but some will need to be taught. Social skills get more subtle as children get older. Little kids tend to be rigid in their thinking (e.g. "Those are the rules. They need to be followed.") This leads some children to be intolerant of others who don't follow rules.

The task of all children is to figure out what makes a good friend and who is a good friend for them. As situations come up that challenge their friendships, it is good to get them to start thinking about who they like to be with and why. Some things to discuss with your child: Whom do I like? Whom do I get along with? Who is nice? How do I feel when I'm with ___?

By 1st grade, children are beginning to become more aware of others' skill levels (who is good at something, and who is not). Children begin to develop likes and dislikes, and start to follow their preferences.

Mean behavior: You will begin to see more attitude and exclusion among children at this age. Meanness tends to be more common among girls than boys, and is happening at younger ages these days. Children pick up the sarcasm, eye rolling, and other rude behavior from family members (older siblings, even parents, sometimes) and others (especially TV). Parents need to consider how their own behavior serves as a model to their children. Young children simply do not understand how disrespectful this rude behavior is, and may need to have it explained to them. Dr. Gold recommends not letting this behavior pass. Rudeness and meanness need to be addressed with your child. Children at this age are still impressionable and want to please you; they just don't know how to get what they want gracefully.

At this stage of development, you may see an increase in hurt feelings. As the children get older, you may see more intense friendships (especially in girls). Over the next couple of years, kids need to learn how to be flexible (e.g. learn how to play with others beside the “best friend”, and accept without feeling rejected that the “best friend” may want to play with others). Boys tend to play in groups, and these issues tend to be less intense for them.

As parents, how much should we get involved? Dr. Gold recommends letting the children work out their differences the majority of the time. Parents should get involved if:

- a) There is a problem that lasts an extended period of time
- b) If you’ve checked it out with a teacher or other parents and feel that your child is being unfairly scapegoated
- c) If you find that there is a significant value difference between your family and another family, such that your child is coming home from playdates with more disrespectful or unacceptable behaviors or requests for activities or things that you feel that are not consistent with what you want for them.

For assistance in dealing with these and other social issues, you can contact your child’s teacher, Lexie Sifford, or Dr. Gold. They will give you some guidance as to how to proceed.

The most important social skills your child will need to learn are:

- a) Initiation – Can your child ask another child to play? Can your child join a group in play?
- b) Giving compliments – Does your child say things like “Good try,” or “Nice play” to others?
- c) Manage problems – Can your child compromise, share, manage his/her frustrations and loss? Is he/she a “good sport”?
- d) Impulse control – Can your child control his/her impulses? Can he/she avoid having temper tantrums?
- e) Non-verbal communication – Can your child read others’ non-verbal communication? It is extremely important to be able to read others’ emotions.

Creative play is very important for children. The PTA sponsored a presentation on this subject on April 30, and the notes are posted on this website. Unfortunately, there is less and less creative play at home these days. In 1st grade, children still need unstructured play dates to foster creative and fantasy play. Dr. Gold reminds us parents that the computer is not a babysitter, and that it is important not to over-schedule or over-structure our kids. They need down time. He also recommends no competitive organized sports until kids are around age 8, and cautions that often the peer pressure to “succeed” or “be the best” is greater among parents than among the children. We need to watch what these messages say to our children.

2) BOY/GIRL DIFFERENCES: WHAT CAN WE EXPECT TO SEE NEXT YEAR?

In Kindergarten, boys and girls interact pretty well (even though, as Dr. Gold says, they are “different species”!). In time the boy/girl dynamic will change somewhat.

School in general requires a lot of self-discipline. Some kids (especially boys) just aren't 100% ready for this. By the 2nd grade, children usually have developed the impulse control and discipline that is necessary.

More and more through first grade boys will play with boys and girls will play with girls. That certainly doesn't mean that there can be opposite sex friendships, but they tend to gravitate primarily to their own gender. That lasts for about two or three years, when they “discover” each other again.

3) COMPETITIVENESS: HOW CAN WE MODULATE THIS? IS IT REALLY A BAD THING?

American culture is highly competitive. Individual success is revered and rewarded, while cooperation and communal success is not stressed as much. Children pick up on this idea of individual success (leading to competitiveness) because it is what we, as parents, and society, as a whole, emphasize. One example of this is the individual “superhero”, which lots of kids emulate in play.

When is competitiveness healthy, and when is it not? A little bit of competitiveness is healthy (especially when competing against yourself). But by mid-1st grade children will begin ranking each other on ability (who is best at math, art, soccer, etc.). And to whom do we compare ourselves? Unfortunately it usually is to those who are better than we are. Children will begin to put themselves in a pecking order, rationalizing it thus: “If I'm not doing X, I'm not as smart/talented/etc.” This is damaging to self-esteem.

Children also do not have the perspective of time, and only focus on what they perceive as their current shortcomings. It can be helpful to remind your child of how far they have come and how much they have accomplished (for example, “Remember how in August you couldn't even read that?”).

It is also good to help children to see that everything is not the disaster that they may initially perceive it to be. Try explaining, “On a scale of 1 to 10, this is really only a 3.”

As parents, we need to promote an understanding of differences between people and compassion for others. Encourage your child to focus on his/her own skills, and reinforce that all kids develop at different rates and have different skills. Stress that just because a child may be really good at something, does not mean someone else isn't better at something else. Children cannot be the best at everything, and not every one of them will be going to Stanford, Harvard or Yale.

4) COMMUNICATION

How can we find out what is going on in our child's life? A big part of the puzzle is timing. Our children's defenses are often down at certain times of the day, such as bedtime, dinnertime, or when driving in the car.

One strategy Dr. Gold suggests is playing "Ups and Downs": Ask "What good thing happened today?" and "What not-so-good thing?" Share your own high and low points, too. Some responses you get may be kind of superficial, but others may lead to very interesting discussions.

Another strategy is to ask specific questions. Instead of asking "How was school?" (leading to the common reply "Fine"), try asking him/her to "Tell me about center time/recess/etc. today."

As kids get older, you'll begin to find out more about your kids from their friends and their friends' parents. Begin to develop your network of other parents now so you can be ready for the inevitable "But everyone else has one/does it/etc.!"

When driving, listen to what is being said in the back seat and you may learn a lot about what is going on in your child's life, but don't intervene unless it is necessary.

Dr. Gold suggests that each child have 3-4 adults (other than their parents) to whom they can talk. There will come a time when they won't talk to you, so it's a good idea for them to have another adult they can turn to. Suggestions are: parent of a friend, grandparent, older sibling or half/step-sibling, aunt or uncle.

Other communication strategies include reflecting their feelings (showing understanding and empathy) and role playing (puppets can help).

5) SENSITIVE CHILDREN: HOW CAN WE HELP THEM?

Sensitive children are a mixed blessing. On the positive side, they are more empathetic, but on the negative side they can be batted about, particularly by meanness and teasing. Parents should try to gently help them to build a harder shell.

In teaching children to handle teasing and negative comments, instruct children to not "let it in". The worst that can happen is for the child to internalize it by buying into the negative message.

One strategy is for the parent to ask a child who has been insulted or teased:

- a) Do you believe it?
- b) Was that a nice thing for X to say?
- c) Is this the kind of person you want to hang around with?

If the problem persists, teach your child to ignore it or retort (e.g. “That was mean. Stop it.”). Explain that maybe the other child is having a bad day and taking it out on him/her, or having some other problem.

Empower the sensitive child. Children tend to believe things they’re not quite sure about. When they are insecure, criticisms can more easily “stick”. Reassure your child and praise them. (But be honest – kids can sense false praise. Praise their efforts.)

It is not too early to teach kids about rumors. Illustrate by using the Telephone Game. Also, tell your child about your experiences as a child (it’s okay to invent a story to apply to the situation).

Only 20% of children are involved in bullying, either as the perpetrators or the victims. The other 80% of kids are bystanders. We should encourage and empower bystanders to speak up. Kids may not want to get involved for fear of “tattling”. One way to explain the difference between tattling and justifiably “speaking up” is by using the “In or Out” analogy: Tattling is just to get others IN trouble; it’s okay to speak up to get someone OUT of trouble or discomfort. It is about defending the victim.