

Spring 2012 Third Grade Parent Meeting
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Questions, Issues, and Concerns in Parenting Our 3rd to 4th Graders

Kids are beginning to want a lot more independence and they are pushing back. How do we handle new-found independence? What's appropriate independence for a nine year old?

A good rule of thumb is that granting of independence and privilege depends on your particular child, how responsible they are. Independence and responsibility are closely tied together, and tied to their level of maturity. Usually at this point they want to be away from you, want to go someplace. They also seek independence about wanting to do things themselves – you have to decide if they can do it themselves.

About age nine is when they discover that parents don't know everything, and their tendency is to "throw the adult out with the bathwater." That is, they think "well, if my parents don't know X, then they must not know anything. There will be some things that they actually do know more about (e.g. computers), but they still can be black and white thinkers, so they will want to do a lot more by themselves. This can be their first push into separation from you.

Hopefully everyone has kids doing something around the house that is contributing to the working of the house (chores, home responsibilities). If they want to do things by themselves, independently, then you have to be able to tolerate imperfection, though. First – what is it you want them to do, if they don't do it to your standards, teach them bit by bit. Also, let them show us things that they know how to do better like computers. Prepare to deal with less than perfect performances. This is last window of opportunity to start them on chores, by the way.

If the independence issue is going places by themselves, then it is a safety issue. Ultimately you have to answer to yourselves and if you feel in your "gut" that your child is not mature or responsible enough to be on their own yet, then don't allow it. But this push will surface over the next couple of years, for sure. How do you measure maturity and responsibility in a nine year old? The areas that you consider are: homework, home chores, being honest, owning up to things they've done. This is plenty of opportunity for them to show they're growing up. Also, you will start to be able to leave them alone at home. Maybe that's early at 9, but certainly coming at 10 or 11.

Taking responsibility vs. lying - lying has two main forms: sometimes they tell stories to impress other kids – other kids see through it very quickly. More commonly, they will lie to get out of things. Kids can tell you lies and they actually end up believing them. It is often very difficult to figure out who did what to whom because they get very convinced of their innocence. They need to tell the truth and to learn that consequences are going to be worse if they lie. If you see something, don't even argue – confront them calmly and impose the consequence. There are plenty of consequences that can be imposed for real misbehavior – disrespect, etc. It's time to realize that parents are not their servants. Children need to earn privileges. Parents deserve respect, help around the house, honesty. If you don't get that, you don't have to give them everything they want. If kids aren't taking responsibility for their own actions by age 10, we start to be concerned about it.

Kids seem to be comparing themselves with each other a lot – is that normal? How do we address this?

At this age children make lots of comparisons with each other, ranking each other and start getting very judgmental about each other. They are intellectually trying to differentiate themselves and define themselves. What you don't want to have happen is for kids to start thinking they're "less than" because they're not that good at something that somebody else is.

It's good to ask them– what are you good at, what are you proud of, what you like to be better at, what do you like to do? If you're not as good as you want to be at something then how do you get there? Recognize the value of effort. What's something that you weren't very good at that you tried hard at and got better? They need to learn to apply that to the things they're not so automatically good at. We emphasize effort a lot at school. Emphasize that everybody's different. Not all good or bad. They are intellectually capable of developing a differentiated view of themselves: I'm pretty good at X, but not as good at Y.

This can also apply to their bodies – we worry when girls are particularly overconcerned or overcritical about their bodies; This can be a route to eating disorders. Girls have terrible role model of bodies – the very thin runway model physique. Particularly very bright kids who need to have control can take control by aiming for their idea of perfection in their bodies. Ask – what makes you think that, who's saying this?

What is going on with girl dynamics and drama? How do we deal with that and what will happen in the near future?

In terms of girl dynamics – Dr. Gold spends a good bit of time refereeing and resolving conflicts with 3rd and 4th grade girls. They don't want to hurt each others feelings, but easily get jealous of each other. They are just beginning to learn that more than two kids can play together, but they often can't find something they all want to do and it's very common that somebody's pulled between two or three

others. Sometimes they even make a play schedule to be equitable (but those don't really work – nevertheless, it's important that they try to find solutions).

What is very important and what parents can help them think about are the following: what makes a good friend, how do they feel when they're with particular people, letting them know that it's ok to take a break from friends.

Talk to kids about consistency – two kids might have really nice play date at home, then come to school and ignore each other. Value of consistent friend is that they treat you well regardless of whether you're at school or outside of school.

Ask yourself (this can apply to both boys and girls): Is my child doing something or not doing something that is off putting to other kids? Are they too silly, talkative, babyish, bossy, invasive into space, copying, etc. Some kids need to be taught social skills just like they need to be taught to read, write, and do math. Consult with your child's teacher, yard duty staff, other parents, and be a good observer on play dates at home to see how your child interacts with other children. Are they saying mean things? Teach empathy – how would you feel if they said that to you? It's ok to call another parent, but guard against putting them on the defensive – “ it seems like our kids are having difficulty with each other. I know there's always two side to stories, but what are you hearing? How can we help them work this out, or do you think they need a break from each other?”

***What if our child is obsessed with things, getting more and more possessions?
How do we manage their consumerism?***

Obsession with things – it's true that we live in a very privileged and fortunate community. Kids this age need to be exposed to the other side of life. Go to a soup kitchen, see homeless people, take them to San Francisco, or San Rafael. Teach them that not everybody is fortunate enough to have what they have and not everyone is able to do what they can do.

Talk about gratitude a lot with kids. Kids can get the idea that they should be thankful for the things they have. As human beings we always look up, not down. I wish I had that vs. I'm thankful that I have that.

Allowances can be helpful in dealing with this issue. Allowances help kids understand money, if they want something they can save for it. One way of structuring an allowance is this: Determine what amount you're comfortable with them spending on their own things each week (toys, candy, etc.) . Multiply by 3 – then allocate 1/3 for savings, 1/3 for charity, 1/3 for them. Need to learn how to save and how to budget. Model delayed gratification. How do I handle my desires? Save up and buy it in a while

Another strategy is to get them to understand that other kids may feel bad because they don't have something. So with every new toy, purchase give one to a child who is less fortunate.

What do we do about finding out what our child is thinking and doing if they're not particularly communicative?

Boys tend to be less inclined to share than girls, though not always.

Ask yourself why your kids aren't sharing – do they think they going to get negative or judgmental response? Think of timing? They may not be ready to share at the end of the school day, but might before bedtime or in response to sharing about your day.

If you have dinner together, everyone can share a high and lows of day or up and down of the day. Everyone participates. When driving around with friend – you can get a window into what's going on

Build relationships with other parents – they may hear things that your kids aren't willing to tell you. As they get older they may talk to other parents who they think are “cool.”

What should be expect at this time for our kids' taking responsibility for homework?

By now, they know they have homework and have to do it, and are pretty good about doing their daily homework now. You should establish a set time and place for homework. That can be in a public place where you're around, because kids still like company. If you're still getting a lot of resistance, talk with the teacher –the work may be too difficult.

They still need help scaffolding / planning big projects, and will for the next four or five years. Teachers are very good at demarcating steps along the way for longer projects, but parents need to help kids do it as well. You might want to sit down with kids and plan out the week, and begin to teach time management. What are we going to do now, what later? This is a long learning process.

Teach good habits – projects feel overwhelming, so I'll just wait. Help them break down tasks into manageable or daily pieces. The same goes for studying for tests – take on a little at a time, not just all the night before.

Kids need to learn that there are different ways of studying for each subject., but a sure-fire way to know if they understand material is to have them teach you.