

Spring 2016 Fifth Grade Level Parent Meeting
May 19, 2016
Dr. Allan Gold, District Psychologist

This is a big transition time for all families: Students will be moving to middle school, they will be entering adolescence, and in school Family Life Education is coming up. So lots of growth and changes will be happening that both children and parents will need to deal with.

Technology:

Probably the biggest challenge to parenting these days is making decisions about children's use of technology and effectively monitoring their use, both in terms of time and content. Dr. Gold handed out part of a Common Sense Media article about Technology Addiction (google Technology Addiction: Concern, Controversy, and Finding Balance) and another article on healthy technology practices.

Issues that even a few years ago applied to 7th and 8th graders we are now seeing with 5th graders and even younger. Children are using social media sites, Snapchat, Instagram, texting much more than never before. They are posting and sending messages that are inappropriate because the comments are cyberbullying, and because some content is sexual. Even some 5th graders have accessed pornography and shared graphic pictures in chain texts. It is important that parents not be naïve about what their children can gain access to. Children are very clever in being able to get around blocks, as well. No parent wants to think "I have to talk about THIS with my child, now! S/he is only 10 or 11." But 10 or 11 today is like 15 a number of years ago.

If parents find out that their children are accessing inappropriate sites or sending inappropriate texts or pictures, they should be prepared to have adult discussions about what is wrong with this.

Should children this age have smart phones?

While more and younger children are given smart phones, Dr. Gold believes that they are not necessary. Parents certainly want to be able to be in contact with their children, especially as they get older and are more likely to go places independently, but they do not need access to all websites and phone games all the time. Flip phones are certainly adequate for the needs of children this age. They can be a solution for "communication," both with parents and friends, but avoid inappropriate access to internet and over-use/isolation that comes with gaming.

Kids these days spend more time texting rather than learning how to speak face-to-face and communicate about complex social situations. At least at school they have to communicate with each other directly

Be prepared to have discussions about pornography because either your child or a friend will discover it soon. You will need to have adult conversations explaining your views of what is the matter with kids viewing this. If you have thought through your own reasons prior to having to deal with it with your children, it's a somewhat easier discussion. Here are some thoughts to consider:

- Kids are curious about bodies and sex and that's normal, so don't demonize what they've done – however:
- Some may say it's objectifying women
- It's not a real perspective of relationships or sex between adults; relationships entail much more than physical intimacy
- Everyone does not look like the actors in these videos – children can get very skewed expectations of what they or partners should look like
- This industry is about making money and using people for that purpose
- Keep the positive message about the adult “celebration” of intimacy between people who love each other

Do children have a right to privacy on their phone?

Privacy is a very complex and important issue arising at this time. Children will want more and more privacy and are increasingly entitled to some. For example, you probably shouldn't barge in to their bedroom without knocking now. However, because of the potential misuse and abuse of electronics, you do have a right to monitor them. In general their prefrontal cortex, the judgment part of the brain, has a long way to go to be fully developed (about 18 to 20 years more). For that reason kids do not always use good judgment and will make mistakes. More and more we're seeing inappropriate or mean text messages, communication that can easily be misunderstood, postings on social media sites, and sharing of questionable pictures and information.

Parents need to inform kids that they will have access to their passwords and will check their phone communication from time to time. This is a major challenge for parents these days, but the dialogue must be kept up and parents cannot assume that their children are using phones and electronics appropriately. Let them know you will be monitoring because you want to know they are using it appropriately and that you care that they are safe. Net Nanny and other software packages can be purchased to monitor kids' usage.

Make sure that they do not have access to the phone at night. Phones should be charged in your room. It is crucial that children have 9 – 10 hours of sleep and parents have caught their kids texting late at night.

Ironically, the privacy issue may be less critical these days because of all of the postings on social media. That is another issue that must be dealt with – that once information is posted, it doesn't go away and children must be educated about the dangers of putting too much private information out in the cyber world.

We believe that over 50% of middle schoolers have phones, though they are certainly not allowed to use them at school. That percent is a rough estimate; we don't know for sure.

How can parents get more clued into the drama going on when children aren't communicating it?

It is extremely important and the channels of communication between children and parents and between parents and parents be kept open. Part of this is to learn to listen to your kids without judgment, so that they won't be afraid to share information. One nice thing about middle school is that there really aren't any secrets. Sometimes information takes a while to emerge, but kids are very much still gossips. Even if your own child doesn't tell you something, another child will have open communication with his/her parent. So it is really important for parents to work together to be able to share information with each other. It is also possible to form a lot of relationships with your children's friends who may communicate with you, rather than their own parents (and your children might do the same).

Parents of children this age move from parents as administrators and managers to parents as consultants. That is, they move from being bosses to helping their children problem solve their own issues. This is especially useful with social issues, which usually don't involve parents directly. Parents can be useful consultants by:

- Listening without judgment – remember there are always two sides to a story
- Ask good questions
- Brainstorm ideas with them
- Help them to develop and decide on a plan on how to resolve the issue

Remember that you want them to develop the skills and use other people, including yourselves, to talk about their social issues

Parents needs to stay off their phones and open that time for dialogue, The next three years are really good practice for communication between parents. Don't be afraid to call other parents and find out what is going on with your kids.

How can parents find out about their child's academics at Del Mar?

At Del Mar Power School is available to both students and parents. It is a website where assignments and grades are posted after about the first three weeks of the trimester. It is available after, but not during the school day. This can be very useful for monitoring, but it can result in some negative effects:

- Children can increase their stress by checking their grades too often. This is the first time they will get letter grades and kids can take them too seriously.

- Parents can succumb to the temptation to micromanage and get upset with one bad grade, at just the time when we're trying to promote more independence in kids.

It is suggested that:

- You look at Powerschool once a week
- Look mostly for missing assignments because missing assignments can really impact their average
- If assignments are missing have the student make them up over the weekend so they don't get too far behind.

Some more academic things to be aware of:

- The biggest challenge for 6th graders is to learn organizational skills.
- When doing homework, have them set priorities, encourage them to estimate the time it takes them to do their homework.
- Daily homework is less of an issue after 3rd & 4th grade,; the challenge is more around longer term projects in 6th grade.
- Executive Functioning (memory, setting priorities, time management, etc.) is still developing, so don't expect they'll have all of these skills under their belts. There will be a lot of growth during the middle school years.

What about extracurricular activities and stress, in general?

Extra curricular activities may bigger challenge than academics at middle school:

- parents need to encourage downtime; research shows that it helps their creativity when they are "bored."
- Help them develop a consistent routine
- Work load increases in middle school and parents need to make sure their children are not over-stressed.
- In high school you see drinking becomes their answer to stress....
- Make sure kids know good grades have nothing to do with love
- Priority in school is to gain the knowledge
- Try not to over focus on grades, but to encourage effort (Dr. Gold recommends not saying "just do your best," because that may not have concrete meaning. Instead -
- Work with kids to be aware of their internal sense of "best effort" by asking , "What did you work really hard at and persist?" Now apply that same effort to learn what you need to learn.

What are other social developments that we can expect?

In fifth grade parents are noticing more conversation around crushes, break-ups, etc. This is normal, though these "relationships" don't last long and are not

widespread. It is normal for kids this age to begin to have these interests. There may even be internal or external pressure to have a “girl friend” or “boy friend.” By sixth grade they start to recognize that kids are at different stages with this and that realization grows with maturity. Have talks about appropriate behavior between “boyfriend and girlfriends” at this age. If they do like somebody, ask: “What do you like about them?” This is an opportunity for practice and gaining understanding of relationships.

On the other hand from about the middle of fifth grade to the middle of seventh grade is prime time for conformity. Kids do not want to be different than anyone else. By eighth grade and high school recognize and respect differences in each other.

- A big social challenge is separating nicely from friends who they have less in common with and from whom they want to branch out. Help kids learn to move away from friends without being mean and cruel. The process is often a painful one, so kids may need to be scripted to say what they want in a less aggressive or mean way.
- Help your kids understand “who’s a good friend for you now?”: Whom do you have things in common with? Who makes you feel good?
- Be prepared for them to still seek the “popular” group
- They will think they are the “only one” anything is happening to; this is adolescent narcissism.

A suggestion to help them balance the internal and external negatives they’ll hear:

- Ask them, “Tell me 3-4 things you’re good at?” Often skill-based answers, but by 7th or 8th grade, they’ automatically start to identify character traits. But they can be asked. “What are some personal characteristics that you like about yourself,” and they should be able to answer. (If they can’t, you can prompt them – Are you funny, are you a good friend – how, etc
- Social life is like a balance: Positive and negative things get said. They will need to keep the positive things about themselves in their heads to balance the negative.

Should we be worried about interaction between 6th and 8th graders?

There is really no teasing of 6th graders by 8th graders. The WEB (Where Everybody Belongs) group is all about partnering and mentoring between 8th & 6th graders. Of course, the younger students will see and hear the older students talking, but with modern social media kids are no longer very innocent at this age.

Some final thoughts and suggestions:

- The job of an adolescent is separation and independence from YOU! But you don't have to make it easy. Even though they may/will try to push you away, this is the time when they need you them most. Don't give up on them.
- The developing stress that comes from academic performance can, over time, become a trigger for depression and alcohol and drug use. This is pervasive in high school now (including meth and cocaine), so you want to make sure that you and they learn to set limits on pressure. Keep abreast through your observations and those of friends and other parents of their mental health.
- Share your own experiences. Let them know you got through them. They'll listen to you more than you think.
- Brainwash them with the concept, "It's ok to be different!"
- When they tell you about behaviors they've observed or have heard about, ask them what they think about those behaviors they observe or hear about. Open up their observations to discussions – remember they are beginning to understand that the world is not black and white. They are more able to see the gray in the world and the complexity therein, and your discussions will help them understand that they will have to make choices that represent good decisions.
- Help them develop strategies to say no to temptation.
- Younger siblings may be curious about your discussions or information that your older child has discovered. It's perfectly appropriate to answer very basic questions and let them know that when they get older you'll have those discussions with them. Continue the discussion with your older child privately.
- There is no need to panic – this period of development is a gradual process, but don't be blind-sided as things will come up that you wouldn't necessarily expect. Just be prepared to talk with other parents and use us at school to help you navigate the middle school years.
- A good book to help understand and deal with the issues of adolescence: [I'd Listen to my Parents if they'd just Shut Up](#) by Alexander Wolf.

