

Spring 2016 Fourth Grade Level Parent Meeting
June 1, 2016
Dr. Allan Gold, Psychologist

The purpose of the spring grade level meeting is to address parents' questions, issues, and concerns as their children move from fourth to fifth grade,

Fourth grade has been a crucial time for maturation; children enter fourth grade with many characteristics of young children, but as they 10, all of a sudden they realize that what they say and do have consequences, especially with boys. They learn to monitor their words and actions. You can begin to have intellectual discussions with them. They will want more independence. As they enter fifth grade, pre-adolescence is around the corner, so a lot of new issues will arise

What should the role of parents be with children this age?

There is a transition from parent as "boss" or "administrator" to parent as "consultant," in some situations. When children are younger they can tell their children what to do. As children get older some situations lend themselves to parents acting as consultants. A good consultant asks good questions, is a good listener, helps clients brainstorm solutions, choose a plan of action and evaluate the choice or plan. Social situations or academic situations, where parents are not directly involved are good examples of when parents can act as consultants. This role also helps parents support openness and good communication with their children, by not being judgmental.

How much technology should children have at this age? What about privacy?

The issue of technology use becomes increasingly significant and potentially problematic as children move to fifth grade. Even this past year a few fifth graders have texted inappropriate pictures and even accessed pornography. There is more pressure to join social networking sites and get smart phones. Electronics isn't going away, but children need to learn how to exercise self-discipline so they don't get addicted to games, texting, social media, etc. Because the judgment centers of their brains are by no means developed and won't be for another 18 to 20 years, they need the supervision and monitoring of parents. Dr. Gold presented some handouts on electronic guidelines and research on addiction. Several main points were made:

- Children should not be granted privacy when they use social media and cell phones; parents need to have access to passwords and make regular checks to see that their children are using the electronics appropriately
- Children do not need smart phones until later (at least middle school, if not high school); when they begin to be independent and go places, if parents want them to have contact, then a flip phone is sufficient.
- All electronics should be removed from bedrooms. A major negative effect of electronics is sleep deprivation.

- Use of electronics is a good test of maturity, responsibility, trust, and tendency towards addiction. If kids have a set time limit and can respect that without argument and extending time by more than a few minutes, then they demonstrate that they can handle this privilege. If the child argues, fights for more time, can't pull themselves away from the device, then addiction is a possibility, and there should be a "no use" rule (at least on school nights).
- Now is the time to establish rules for use, so that students know you are serious about their developing self-discipline, and establishing a reasonable balance between electronic time and spending face-to-face social time, and having time for other activities.
- Remember that electronic use is a privilege and not a right.

Are there choices, like electives at school? What about extracurricular activities? Can children this age manage their time?

While there are no major changes in choices of activities at school, children this age often want to try many new activities. While Dr. Gold worries about children who have no interests, he is also concerned about students who are so overscheduled that they have no down time and are increasingly stressed.

Fifth grade presents more homework, desire for more social interaction, more complex social interactions, and, therefore, less time for extracurricular activities. They still need down time, that's not just electronics, but play.

Time management is one of the important "executive functions." Executive functioning, the management system is located in frontal lobes of the brain, and that part of the brain is not complete until 30 years in males and 28 years in females. Executive functions include self-regulation, memory, attention, setting priorities, organization of materials, and time management. Kids are in the relatively early stage of that development. What can be expected for a 9 or 10 year old in terms of executive functioning? They should manage their homework – bringing home assignments and materials, beginning to set their homework schedule, and schedule of other activities. They are not yet good at estimating how long homework would take them, planning for longer projects, or juggling time commitments to get everything done. They still need parent support and guidance for these situations. That is why they may need limits set on how much time they spend on extracurricular and social activities. Remember that family time is still very important.

How do children build their trust? What are appropriate independent activities for children this age?

Trust becomes increasingly important, as children get older. They need opportunities to prove that they can be trusted. The areas of their responsibility are school, home, friends, and relationship with parents. At school they need to show responsibility about their homework. At home they need to do their chores without complaining and with reasonable quality (not perfect). They need to show some

good judgment about choice of friends. Finally, they need to have some communication with their parents and respond to parents in a respectful way. As mentioned above, disciplined use of technology also builds trust. Will they always be perfect? No – but they need to show growth and be generally responsible in order to earn parents’ trust – and then to earn more privileges.

For the next several year parents will need to find a balance between freedom/trust and supervision. It is important to very gradually loosen the apron strings, to give children some privileges and a little freedom, mainly to demonstrate that they can be trustworthy. When they “blow it” (and they will), then tighten the apron strings for a while before giving them another chance.

Some independent activities appropriate for students this age would be going to a friend’s home alone, but calling when they arrive, going to the store to buy something. Staying home alone and baby sitting are activities for children at least 11 or 12.

How can communication be promoted?

As children get older, communication with them becomes increasingly important. This is at the time when children begin to want more privacy and not tell their parents everything. The better the nonjudgmental listener parents can be, the more their children will feel comfortable communicating. Bedtime, and driving in a car (with the radio and telephones off) are good times for listening and talking with kids. Kids talking with their friends in the back seat of a car can be very informative.

It is important for children to have other trusted adults to talk with beside their parents. These may include godparents, relatives, friends’ parents, coaches, etc. Parents should also try to build comfortable relationships with their children’s friends’ parents in case they need to share information with other parents about their children that may be difficult or receive such information about their own children.

What is going on socially at this age? What can we expect?

As children move to fifth grade social relationships become more complex. Some kids will even hit puberty next year. Friendships will change as bodies and interests change, and kids will have to negotiate getting in and out of friendships. They have developed empathy and don’t want to hurt each other’s feelings, but they’re not very good at ending or toning down friendships. This is where parents can act as consultants, be good listeners, and help kids decide what to do or say.

There is not necessarily more teasing at this age, but there is often more rumors and gossip. Discussions with kids about friendship issues should include getting kids to reflect on what makes a good friend. Talk with kids about consistency – a good friend treats you consistently; they aren’t nice playmates at home and ignore you at school. They begin to understand the concept of trust. They can now state that a

good friend sticks up for you, is nice and gives compliments, helps out, includes. Sometimes kids this age will want to be friends with “popular” kids, who may not be good matches or, even worse, treat them badly. Help kids identify whom they feel comfortable and good with and who makes them not feel good. You can often tell your own friendship stories, and any confusion, or pain that you went through, and how you resolved friendship issues. Believe it or not, they’ll listen to you.

The years between the middle of 5th and middle of 7th grade is the time when kids most want to conform and not be different than other kids. As a parent you will hear that “everyone is doing this, why can’t I?” Know that you’re certainly not the only parent who doesn’t allow some privilege, but it’s good to communicate with other parents for support. It’s also another good time to be a good listener and help them figure out what they’re so afraid of if they don’t get what they think everyone else has.

It’s always very important to know your own values, so that when you don’t allow your child something s/he wants you have a reason based on your values. They are old enough to need and want a better reason than “because I’m your parent and I said so.” So ask yourself, how does this go against my value and dig deeply enough so that your explanation makes sense. For example, what is it about pornography or the website music.ly that you don’t like? For pornography – maybe the unrealistic message about relationships. For a social media website – concerns about addiction, posting unsafe or inappropriate information, vulnerability to predators, damaging one’s reputation, etc. The more a parent has a good explanation for why you’re setting limits, the easier it is to hold to those limits.

It’s important to help kids develop a positive self image to balance the negative things that they will hear, or that they will impose on themselves. Ask your children to tell you three or four things they like about themselves. These can be skills or even better, personal traits. The reason for this is that if they can balance the negative with the positive, they will develop an inner voice that will support their better judgment. They won’t make poor choices, just so they can be cool or undo the negative that they think their peers think of them. Parents won’t be there all the time to boost their self esteem so they won’t need to make bad choices. Parents, of course, should be helping to develop the positive self-image. That doesn’t mean that parents should protect their children from disappointment and failure, but promote resilience in academic and social situations. Connected with this is helping children this age become good self-advocates. That’s a gradual process, but can be encouraged around both academic issues with teachers and social issues with friends. Ask the teacher for explanations, express feelings to friends.