

Spring 2016 Third Grade Level Parent Meeting  
May 25, 2016  
Dr. Allan Gold, Psychologist

Questions, Issues, Concerns in Parenting Our Third to Fourth Graders:

**What developmental changes should we expect to see?**

This is a relatively quiet developmental time relative (i.e. pre-adolescence), but nonetheless there will be significant maturing over the next year.

- there is more push for more independence
- cognitive and social maturity:
  - children learn to think before they speak or act (especially boys) as they turn 10. Children begin to be able to control their impulsivity better and recognize the consequences of their actions and words.
  - Dr. Gold does a program in spring of fourth grade, the "Touch Program," which discusses good and bad touch and child abuse. The discussion is about a difficult topic and children this age are surprisingly sophisticated and knowledgeable in a way that they are not as third graders.
  - boy-girl interests begins at this age, not with everyone, but some children start to "like" someone. The downside of this can be gossip and even some peer pressure to like someone.
  - peer interest increases significantly; there is more pressure to have friends. A good development is that children now recognize that they can have more than one or a group of friends, so the intense jealousy seen earlier subsides somewhat. Nevertheless, the drama can increase as children try to move into and out of friendships.
  - children now begin to recognize that parents are fallible, make mistakes and don't always know everything. Children may "throw the parents out with the bathwater," and develop attitude and even disrespect. Parents need to figure out what family values are most important, and respect should be one of them. If parents are disrespected, they can identify their underlying feelings (not just anger, but hurt, confusion, disappointment) and express them in an "I-statement." Then remove themselves from the situation until the child calms down and rephrases their complaint in a respectful way. Parents do much for their children; they are not their slaves and don't have to tolerate disrespect. If a consequence is imposed, then stick to it, or establish a way for the child to earn back a privilege, but don't make it so easy that they ignore the impact of their words.
  - Children are at an age when they want to try new activities and have a lot of energy to do so. However, try to avoid overscheduling and overstructuring. 4<sup>th</sup> graders still need playtime/downtime. In addition, as homework increases over the next few years and their social interests increase, as well, they will need to learn to set limits on their extra-curricular activities, so that they don't get overstressed. Often parents have to set those limits for their children (and to reduce their own stress from having to take kids different places).

Children this age are at the early stages of the development of “executive functions.” (see next section\_

### **Executive functioning: what is it and what is reasonable to expect at this age?**

Executive functions are centered in the frontal lobes of the brain, which are not fully developed until the late 20’s or even 30. Executive functions include self-regulation, memory, organization, setting priorities, time management, management of materials – basically the chief executive officer of the brain. It takes many years to fully develop these skills, but by fourth grade progress should be made (but by no means completed) in the following areas:

- organization of materials
- acknowledging and following a routine, e.g. regular homework time
- recording progress/achievements – scores on assignments, sports games
- estimating how long a homework assignment may take and then prioritizing accordingly
- managing emotions / self-discipline
- focusing attention and working for 20 minutes or so

### **What is the role of parents in their children’s lives at this age?**

One way to think about the role of parents is as manager or boss and consultant. At this age, children are not little any more and don’t need every aspect of their life managed. Of course, they still need direction and guidance and limits set in many areas, but when their children are 9 or 10, parents can begin to transition to the role of consultant. A consultant helps clients to make good decisions by being a good listener, asking questions, identifying a problem and aspects of it, helping brainstorm solutions, and helping the client evaluate their choices. The social area is an excellent area for parents to try out being a consultant, because the problems don’t affect them directly.

For example, in helping our children work through a social conflict, we can help them identify the problem and what they want to do about it, but even more important is helping them identify what makes a good friend, promote consistency and trust among friends, teach them how to extricate themselves from a relationship in a kind way, teach them how to handle gossip, encourage them not to share secrets or information they don’t want spread around.

Keep in mind that it can be helpful to have Dr. Gold or other adult at school intervene early to mitigate verbal abuse and other mean behavior (i.e. where teasing becomes abusive), even with a proactive program that is presented in the classroom (e.g. Girls Leadership program – mentioned by one parent). Dr. Gold does conduct classroom discussions of friendship, respect, etc. at teachers’ requests, but he is considering making discussions of friendship, teasing, problem solving a standard presentation early in third grade next year.

## **What about self-esteem?**

Children's self esteem at this age can be very fragile. They are quite adept at comparing themselves to other children, and as is human nature, often compare themselves with someone they perceive as more skilled, athletic, smarter, richer, etc. than they perceive themselves. Granted, we have produced a generation of young people who were raised with too much praise, who were commended for everything they did, and many of these young adults can't deal with disappointment or failure. So, we want to create a balance of recognizing that we can't be the best at everything, we can all get better with effort, and when we meet frustration or disappointment, we can be resilient.

Two strategies for developing resilience:

- Have children state and recognize things they like about themselves. Kids this age when asked what they like about themselves usually mention skills – good at baseball, good reader, etc. That's fine, but help them begin to recognize their positive personal characteristics, as well – good friend, funny, helpful. Then when someone does something better than they do or, even worse, makes fun of them, they can use their inner "supply" of positive traits and skills to balance the negative (both internal and external).
- Help them build a "history bank." They are old enough now to remember their own life experiences, particularly when they were scared, worried, unsure of themselves – and they managed to get through whatever situation that was causing their concern or anxiety. Increasingly, they'll be able to use those memories to remind themselves, "I didn't think I could do that, but I did..." and then build their confidence to face a new situation.

## **How much independence should kids have and how can we help them develop that?**

It is also important at this age to gradually encourage independence. Independence builds self-confidence and self-esteem. Children do need to move out of their "comfort zone," (as do parents), but they must demonstrate trustworthiness and maturity with home and school responsibilities before they should be given small opportunities to be independent.

What are good ideas for independence-proving tasks/challenges at this age?

- Visit a local friend
- Take a short bike ride
- Buy something in a store (solo)
- Have a sleepover

There are great differences in maturity among children this age, so parents do need to “go with their gut,” and if they feel independence would jeopardize their child’s basic safety, then wait.

### **What is the normal range of shyness – extroversion?**

Children come with all different personalities, and by this time they can be fairly well defined. However, that doesn’t mean that they can’t overcome fears, try new things, and build new skills. It is not necessary for children to have many friends, but we don’t want them to be isolated at lunch and recess. Some are quite content to read quietly, but others do want to have more friends and are afraid of rejection or lack the skills to ask to join a group. Most kids know how to ask an individual to play, but the skill of reading nonverbal cues in a group and taking the risk to ask to join can be more difficult and even daunting. This is another example of encouraging them to get out of their comfort zone. It helps to have playdates at home to see how your shy child handles one-to-one play and if some skills need to be taught (saying what you want to do, sharing, compromising, etc.). Parents or parents and siblings can role-play joining a group. We have friendship, social skills groups at school to help kids overcome some shyness. We also try to pair children who need more friends in classes from the following year based on their interests, hoping that new friendships can be made.

### **How do academic expectations differ for a 4<sup>th</sup> grader vs. 3<sup>rd</sup> grader?**

Fourth grade does present a jump in academic expectations:

- there is daily homework (instead of weekly packet)
- students rotate some between classes (different teacher for different subjects)
- kids are more serious about their work
- there is more writing
- students study California history (including the overnight Gold Rush trip in the late spring – also an opportunity for independence).

### **What role should technology play?**

Technology is the most challenging aspect of modern parenting. Parents have the increasingly difficult job of teaching appropriate and safe use of technology, monitoring their child’s use, watching out for addictive tendencies, resisting peer and parent pressure to get the latest device.

Common Sense Media is an excellent organization/website for advice on managing technology. Dr. Gold provided a handout on technology addiction from Common Sense Media and one with some rules about technology use.

Technology is not going away, but it is a very tempting tool for children who do not have the self-discipline to regulate themselves.

Dr. Gold feels that children this age do not need smart phones and may not even need a flip phone yet. However, once they do become more independent and go somewhere by themselves, parents do like to be able to contact them, so a simple phone is appropriate. In middle school (and even now) some to quite a few students do have smart phones, but parents need to be aware of the possibility of getting on inappropriate websites and using social media for making mean comments (cyberbullying). This is one area that children shouldn't have privacy. Once kids are connected, parents should have access to passwords and make periodic random checks on their history and communication.

Parents also need to determine how much time to allow their children on electronic devices – television, computer, iPad, phone. Their ability to follow rules is an excellent way for them to demonstrate responsibility and maturity, as well as respect. If they are allowed a half hour of game time, have a five minute warning, and get off within a couple of minutes, that's a good sign. If five minutes turns into fifteen and thirty and there are arguments, battles, and disrespect, then that's a sign of potential addiction, and inability to self-regulate. In that case, it's probably better to make a "no electronics on a school night" rule. It's also very important that children use their electronics in a public place (even if they're using the device for homework, which will happen increasingly). Especially important is that devices be removed at nighttime, as children will play games and text when they should be asleep. Sleep deprivation is a significant negative effect of electronics.

Role modeling by parents is crucial. Time should be set aside where everyone in the family is unconnected. Making time for sharing, listening, and communicating face to face will be increasingly important as children get older. Now they tend to share information at bedtime, the dinner table, or in the car, so make sure that you're not connected – phone, email, etc. – when you need to be right there available for when your child has something to share with you. The open channels of communication that you build now will serve you very well as your children move up the grades.