

Spring Fifth Grade Level Parent Meeting
Dr. Allan Gold, District Psychologist
May 7, 2013

This meeting provided parents an opportunity to address questions, issues, and concerns in parenting their fifth graders as they transition to middle school

Some general observations:

All of the developmental areas, social, physical, cognitive, emotional and moral, are or soon will be in flux and will be an exciting, but potentially difficult time for both kids and parents.

Physical changes are happening – growth spurts, girls having their periods. The times that those happen can lead to both social and emotional changes.

Cognitively they are moving into the exciting time where they are beginning to think abstractly and the conversations with them become more interesting.

Questions about recent incident:

The parents asked Dr. Gold to discuss the recent issue of the child that was threatening to him/herself. Some children talked to their parents and others didn't tell. Dr. Gold went into the class of the child that had the incident and had an assembly for the rest of 5th grade. He linked this incident to the fourth grade Touch Program where they discuss abuse. He strongly gave the message to all of the students that if someone is hurting someone or being hurt then they have to tell an adult. That also applies if someone is hurting themselves. They need to tell if someone is hurting themselves; this is not tattling. These are very adult problems that children are not used to or able to solve by themselves. Even if they tell a friend (which is better than nothing), they need to involve a trusted adult.

Dr. Gold had asked the kids why they didn't tell right away. One thought they could cheer the child up, one thought the child was teasing, and one thought they would get in trouble. Dr. Gold conveyed that it's important to take these type of comments seriously – they could save someone's life. And they will NEVER get in trouble for informing a teacher or parent.

Dr. Gold told them that middle school kids will come to him that concerned about their friends about cutting, depression, eating problems, even early sexual activity. These are adult problems and adults have problems solving them so don't think you can solve it.

He also talked about why someone would want to hurt themselves. The kids were very intuitive and said that sometimes they don't have a good home life, or don't

have friends, or are bullied. He talked about cyberbullying and how some young people have committed suicide over it.

The kids responded very maturely and Dr. Gold made himself available to anyone who needed to talk. There were 8 kids that knew the child well and wanted to tell more about what they had heard. There seems to be a lot of support for the child.

How do you break the cycle of the influence that the kids have on each other at this age?

It is important to keep the lines of communication open because this is a time where the peer group becomes very powerful and prominent. The most pressure for conformity is from the middle of 5th grade to the middle of 7th grade. By 8th grade you see more personal acceptance of individual differences, and the ability of kids to stand up for themselves and each other.

From the middle of 5th grade on for at least a few years, parents become increasingly embarrassing to kids and they will try to push you away. But, the good thing is that information is rarely truly hidden or secret. There is very little that goes on without the rumor mill going first. Anything that happens at middle school is pretty well known within a very short period of time. Also, even though it seems sometimes like your children don't want to have anything to do with you, they still rely on you and listen to what you have to say. It is important at this age for kids to have other trusted adults, whether people at school, relatives, friends' parents, to whom they can share information, even if they don't tell you themselves. Keeping up your own parent network and communicating with each other is often the way to find out what your own child is up to.

For example, it is very important to know what the communication is on social media (Instagram, Facebook, etc.). Kids will post things that they wouldn't normally say face to face. One parent was concerned about the language that some of these kids are using on social media. How do you deal with it? Do you talk to the other parents? It certainly helps if you know the other parents.

It's important to let your children know that you're aware of what they're writing and receiving, but this is not ok. This is not how we talk. And you can implement consequences, including taking computers and phones away and blocking social media sites.

The impetus is to keep the kids sheltered and protected as long as you can and the whole cyber world makes parenting kids in this age a billion times more difficult than it was even ten years ago. You have to be strong and tell the kids, "I don't care if you're mad – this is not appropriate."

Another problem is violent video games. These games are a real problem, both in terms of the violent content, which Dr. Gold is strongly against, and because of the

addictive quality of videogames, in general. A united front between parents is important in dealing with this issue. Sometimes male parents grew up with all this and may feel like if it was ok for them, it is ok for their sons. But the truth is that there is enough violence in this world and don't need more.

What about posting photos on Instagram without having permission to them?

You need to teach your kids to respect others' privacy and just because you have the tool doesn't mean you can take someone else's picture. And the kids need to stand up and say you can't take my picture.

What are the explicit consequences at school for these behaviors? Although this doesn't happen so much at school, because students are warned, if students are caught at school doing anything inappropriate on the laptops or cell phones (which MUST be turned off at school), then either will be confiscated and parents informed.

It's important to know what are the consequences because sometimes the kids won't be inclined to tell on the other kids because they don't want to be the one to get them into trouble.

What's really important is when you catch your kids doing something wrong, you need to be clear what your values are, and clear about why you have those values, and what the consequences are. What these kids don't have is the ability to tell what the long range consequences are. The frontal lobe of the brain, which is the seat of making good choices and good judgment, isn't fully developed until age 28 and age 30 for men. That's why even people in their 20's make rash decisions while not considering the consequences. That's why we have to continue to be guides for good judgment for a while.

There is agreement that accountability is important at their age. If they write something wrong and have to stand up and read it to everyone, they have to be accountable and their peers are so important and they get embarrassed easily.

What's a right and what's a privilege? What are the parameters of privacy?

It's hard to avoid the issue and it's not necessarily black and white. This prompted a discussion: what is private for your kids?

One parent stated that their child's journal is private – nothing electronic is private, though. The question is then raised, what if you're worried about your child hurting themselves, sexual activity, drugs, etc. The parent felt that you could get that information in other ways.

Again, it is important that if the child can't talk to you, then you can use the parent network, to get information. While it may be a little uncomfortable to share difficult

information with another parent, if you establish an agreement with each other to do so, it can be very beneficial in the long run over then next several years

Physical privacy is appropriate as your children enter adolescence.

The question arose as to whether it is discussed in class that what kids put on the internet stays there forever and could affect them for long-term (applying to college, careers, etc.)? These are discussed in middle school. Dr. Gold will confirm with the tech teacher at Bel Aire that these issues are discussed here, but it is also extremely important for parents to discuss these topics with their children. Even though they only have a tenuous concept of long-term consequences, they need to be taught and reminded of the consequences of posting inappropriate pictures and comments on the internet..

That is why we have to be their frontal lobe and monitor what they do. This can be frustrating because sometimes they can have a deep meaningful conversation and then make the silliest mistakes – that is their frontal lobe.

Kids do listen to us more than they think we do. When they hear the message reinforced in school or elsewhere, it reinforces what we say.

There was a poll as to who has what social media site. Instagram seems to be the most popular although many didn't have. One parent asked if most 3rd graders have phones and the consensus was "no." A phone may be appropriate when they are a little independent and may need to communicate but that doesn't mean a smart phone.

Values Issues:

Two of the conflicting values that are core to this whole discussion: popularity, being liked on the one hand, and sticking your values and beliefs on appropriate social communications on the other. No one wants to have their child excluded but if that means you compromise your values, that's a problem. We need to be clear on our values and ask ourselves what is wrong with a particular activity so that we can convey our concerns and our values correctly. Also, sometimes we are too restrictive – it's a challenge to know when to let them loose and when to reign them in. They need to be given the opportunity to build trust – you can have this tool but you need to use it appropriately and that will build trust. If you cut it out altogether, they will go hog-wild with it. They need some exposure with limits so that they can build trust.

There is a program, "Being Adept" that started a couple years ago that is presented at middle school to teach the science of drug and alcohol abuse and alternative ways to feel good. They are doing this program at Del Mar now. You never know what will get to each kid, but sometimes images, talking to others, etc. will help. You also have to address the invulnerability that kids naturally feel.

The kids do hear our values. They will disagree in person but they are pretty clear as to what you think. They also pick up values based on what we do. The kids will internalize them, though they may not follow them due to peer influences.

Getting back to the original question, how do we keep them appropriate? It's our values and trust. We establish it and they will challenge it. And then we create the consequences and the praise, and increased privileges, when they show good judgment

What can be expected in middle school academically?

Entering middle school, organization is 80% of the battle. The 6th grade teachers are really adept at integrating the kids and gradually ramping up the work. The organization is key – keeping track of their materials and their assignments.

At Bel Aire, we try to get parents to let the kids do their own work and back off a little and then at Del Mar, parents and students have Power School available where parents can be tempted to micromanage their work – each assignment in each class. Parents should probably look at it every week without micromanaging.

Some kids do get pretty stressed because this is the first time they are getting grades and they will see each grade. It's important to keep it in balance. We want them to try hard and learn over the three years of middle school to advocate for themselves. If they don't understand something or have a complaint about a grade, we want them to be able to go up to a teacher and ask the teacher respectfully for help, clarification, question a grade, ask what they can do to improve or ask a friend for help, etc.

What can be expected for work load? Probably about an hour and a half a night. That is one of the struggles – fitting in taking care of multiple kids, afterschool activities, good dinner, etc. This is where you want to set limits for them. They want to do everything, but you may have to state that too many activities put too much stress on them and on you and eliminate something. Remember, they have activities, more school work, an often intense social life; it's a lot to juggle for an 11 to 14 year old. You want them to enjoy things but they need to get adequate sleep, too.

One parent was voicing concerns about fitting it all in. Two parents said that at this age, they let the kids stay home an hour or so while they take other kids activities.

We're moving to common core math and common core language arts. The 5th graders have already been preparing in this way and so shouldn't have issues in 6th grade. Dr. Gold believes that our teachers have been on the forefront of this and therefore the kids are getting very well prepared. It's a work in progress.