

Spring Third Grade Level Parent Meeting
Dr. Allan Gold, District Psychologist
April 23, 2013

Dr. Gold invited parents to ask questions, or bring up issues of concern in parenting their children now transitioning to fourth grade.

Parent Questions:

1. How do we help develop our children's executive functioning?

What is executive functioning? It is like the conductor of the orchestra in our brains. It is the manager in our brain that does things like set priorities, manage time, understand how we think and learn, apply memory techniques, organize, managed emotions, and use good judgment. These skills are located in the frontal lobe of the brain, which isn't fully developed until late 20s. That's why we see young people even in their early, mid-20s doing silly things.

In school there are increasing expectations for the kids to manage their projects, time and emotions. Planning and organization are two of the big pieces.

In 4th grade, you can expect that your children will have more work. Most teachers stop doing the weekly homework packet and it becomes more nightly homework and more projects that are spread out throughout the year. Most of it is scaffolded, and the tasks are broken down in the classes.

Executive skills required are keeping track of assignments, materials, planning and timing when to do the homework, remembering to turn it in, etc. Some kids are already very responsible in 3rd grade and can do this but most will remember what they are interested in and may still need support and encouragement to remember school requirements.

How do we find a way that kids can buy into that will work for them? It's good to know that the most that any adult can remember to do is 6-7 things. Kids can use the computer, planners, iCal. We each have our own way to remember how to do what we need to do. The parents can be very helpful in showing kids how to do this.

They're at an age where they are going to need more help to plan things out. It would be good to teach them a method for organization and time management. They may resist but normally at this age, they are still very teachable and shouldn't resist too much. It's important to start now and don't assume that developing these skills will happen on its own.

Time management is another really important piece of this. Kids this age don't have a good sense of time and they have a ton of activities after school. It's going to be more important to figure out their schedule given the amount of homework they

will have in 4th grade, after school activities, playdates, etc. It's good for kids to figure out what homework they will do first – easiest first or hardest first. There is no right answer, but it's good to have a method or plan.

Another good thing is to try to figure out first, how long do they think a task is going to take? Break it down piece by piece and so it becomes more manageable. If they say 20 min, ok. If they say 5 min or 3 hours, that is probably not realistic and that gives you a window into their perspective. Then they can do it and compare that to their estimate to help them improve. It's hard to plan things out if you don't know how long something is going to take.

The good news is that by 4th grade, most kids generally have homework figured out.

2. About what time do kids this age go to sleep?

Most parents responded between 8:30 and 9pm. Dr. Gold agreed that that was probably right, but parent's need to judge from the child's behavior and mood in the morning. Some kids need more rest than others, and are cranky, slow, and difficult to get ready in the morning, if they haven't had enough sleep.

3. How much freedom is appropriate at this age?

Freedom is very intimately connected to both responsibility and trust. Children this age are working on mastery of skills and they want to feel grown up. When do we let loose the apron strings and when do we pull them back? Part of this is setting up a sense of responsibility. If they have chores and they do them without complaining and follow-through, that gives them an opportunity to demonstrate responsibility and develop trust. Trust is key.

It's very important to have the kids do chores. Kids need to learn that they are part of a family and have home responsibilities. Whatever the tasks are: feeding the animals, setting the table, taking the trash out, clearing the table, certainly cleaning their own room, etc. – all contribute to the smooth working of the household. It's important to start when kids are young (really this is the last chance, when they're this age), because if you wait too long they will push back and it's harder to get them to cooperate. You can switch chores around or do a chore chart. While most chores can be expected, it's ok to pay a few dollars for some extra tasks, like mowing the lawn, washing the car, etc. The principle here is that they have a responsibility to the family and need to contribute and when they do, they need to be appreciated for it. They get disciplined and therefore should be appreciated when they do something good.

What about having an allowance? It's good for them to have an allowance because they need to learn how to manage money – another executive function. Dr. Gold thinks of breaking an allowance into three parts: Spend, save, and charity. Again, this helps them learn to build responsibility, not only to themselves, but to others.

What then is the relationship with freedom. Dr. Gold asked the parents if they let their 3rd grader do anything on their own?

One parent lets the child go to neighborhood homes on his own. Another parent lets her son walk the dog with a neighbor boy. Another occasionally leaves the son home alone while running errands. As a parent you have to set up these opportunities for a child to succeed or fail. Build in small tests of responsibility as the child develops. If they can handle the responsibility, then they can earn more freedom. If they're not ready, then specify what they need to do and give them another chance in a month or two.

There is the question as to whether it's ok to leave the child alone. There is no law in California. It is based on the responsibility of the child. Keep in mind they may seem mature, but they e.g. if there's an earthquake, if the phone or doorbell rings. Most kids know to call 911. But, you want to rehearse it.

You want to know – are they being trustworthy in being where they say they are going to be, back when they say they will be back, etc.

The question was raised if any of the kids now have phones? Consensus that they don't yet but this will be coming up.

Another big area of responsibility is how children handle electronics. Dr. Gold asked parents how much "freedom" their children had to use electronics on school nights or on the weekend. Most had between ½ - 1 hour of electronics on a school night, which is probably ok. But, one parent pointed out that they avoid computer time altogether because the child will push back so much when given a little time and then asked to get off the electronics. Dr. Gold said that's a sign that they are not handling it responsibly. Dr. Gold said that he has discussions with 7th and 8th grade parents that are concerned that their children are addicted to electronics and it's a real concern. If they can't seem to handle this tool responsibly, then it should definitely be limited or not allowed at all.

We should be setting the example. We are always on our computers, phones, etc. It's hard but sometimes you need to do the computer work, etc. when the kids are in bed. A significant 21st century problem is that the quality of family life is being eroded because of all of this. We need to show the same level of self-discipline that we are asking our kids to exercise. We can rationalize it as work, but we still need to try to limit it.

4. How do we handle decreased interest in school and more interest in social life?

On the one hand children this age become more serious about school and on the other hand, they start to realize that they're going to be in school for a long time.

The question is really – how do we keep kids motivated to do well in school? Kids also begin to compare themselves to other kids. They can start to differentiate – “I’m good at math but not at reading,” “I’m good at baseball but not tennis.” Once they decide they are not good at something, it becomes very difficult to get them to do it.

Everyone is not always going to be the best at everything but effort is what really matters – to do your best. If you see a lack of motivation, you want to team up with the teacher so that your child can be encouraged to keep on trying, both from home and from school.

There may also be the really bright kid that is just sloughing off, then the approach might be different. Privileges can be earned instead of just given. Also, they will begin to want more social life. The usual routine is to have the kids do their work first and then socialize. Many children are exhausted after working all day and need to relax a little first and then get to their homework, but that “chill” time needs to be discussed and limited so that it doesn’t get extended and homework doesn’t get started until too late in the evening. If you get a battle when it’s time to get back on task, then they’re not handling their time and school responsibility very well. For now for most children the afternoon/evening time needs to be structured or supervised by the parents until children can prove that they can follow the routine themselves. Many children are now beginning to be able to handle this and most will be able to sometime in fourth grade. Also, at this age, you want them to start taking more and more responsibility for their work.

5. How do we handle questions about topics brought up in the news (e.g., sexual orientation, scary current events, etc.)

Start by giving them a little information. Kids are starting to become exposed to the world – scary, sexual: wars, natural disasters, sexual issues, terrorism, etc. We want to protect them as long as we can, but we want them to get information from us instead of what’s on the playground. You need to give them a little information. They will accept what we say. For example, with questions about sexual orientation, you might say something like, “Usually men and women marry each other but sometimes a man will fall in love with a man or a woman will fall in love with a man. Some people think this is ok and some don’t.” This is where you can express your own values. Try to keep it simple, though. Gauge from the reaction of the child.

It could also be just issues of current events – and this could also be just as difficult because they create fear. Kids don’t have a very good sense of probability. For example, when there’s a plane crash, the next time you’re very nervous to fly, but we have to keep perspective to know that it is still a very rare occurrence. So, kids naturally think that when something happens, it happens all the time. We need to help them understand that it’s still a rare occurrence.

From a child's point of view, a lot that goes on in the adult world doesn't make sense. Sometimes that may be the best explanation – sometimes adults do really goofy things. When they're adolescents, they will start to figure it all out.

6. How do we deal with our child's nightmares?

Children absorb a lot of what they see and hear. Even when we explain reasons for events, that doesn't mean that the images don't impact them and settle in their unconscious minds. It's not unusual that children (of all ages) have nightmares as they process their own personal events of the day and the information that they hear or see.

An important question to ask is whether the child is experiencing so much anxiety about dreams that it is impacting them? If so, the child should be protected from negative images or information, particularly right before bed. Don't let children watch the news or be exposed to the front page of the newspaper. It might be a good idea to read a funny story before bed – so that's the last image.