

** Parents often approach me with questions about what is common and developmentally appropriate for their child's age, so the school counselor at St. John and I researched and compiled information about 6th graders. Be aware that children move through these stages at different rates, some sooner, some later. I hope this is helpful. - Jennifer Moyer-Taylor, St Joseph School Counselor.*

Your Sixth Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors of 6th Graders*

Classroom

- Your sixth-grader's brain is rapidly growing, especially in the prefrontal cortex area of the frontal lobes. This cognitive area - considered the central decision-maker or "CEO" of the brain - is responsible for functions like mediating conflicting emotions, making ethical decisions, inhibiting emotional and sexual urges, general intelligence and predicting future events. As it grows it is also undergoing a rewiring process, which can be disorienting for tweens and manifest itself in recklessness, poor decision-making and emotional outbursts.
- Because the prefrontal cortex is still developing, the amygdala (responsible for fight or flight, primitive emotions and responses) controls decision-making. This means that tweens are highly sensitive to rewards - now is a good time to use point systems and charts at home in regards to homework and other chores.
- Strong desire to test limits - which actually is an important developmental milestone - but may come across as resistant and rude. "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" 6th graders are often genuinely surprised to hear that adults take offense at their challenges, and they are easily hurt.
- Learns well in groups although inclusion and exclusion issues require changing social group structures often. However, if highly sensitive to embarrassment or exposure, may prefer working on projects alone or with one other partner rather than a group.
- "Saving face" is especially important; consequences and corrections ideally occur without others present. When possible, waiting awhile after the incident helps student to process.
- Easily frustrated, the 6th grader may fuss about how hard something is to the teacher while telling the parents how cool the subject is, or vice versa.
- Girls' physical growth is generally ahead of boys, with their language and fine motor skills maturing up to six years sooner.

Social/Emotional Behaviors

- Fascinated by group dynamics, hierarchy, how leaders emerge and the code of behavior required to be part of a group. At this time of shaky identity, cliques offer comfort and affirmation. Looking for "sameness" in others. During this time teenagers gravitate toward, and find security and pleasure in, people who are like them.
- Cliques peak among girls in 6th grade. According to some researchers, this cliquish behavior seems to be a way for young girls to practice forming deep attachments. Experimenting with their social power and that includes the "power" to hurt.
- Friendships among girls tend to be intimate and complex, with an emphasis on secrets and whom they can trust. Cycles of getting mad, not speaking and then making up may happen very often. Adults need to be aware of a balance between letting girls work things out themselves and facilitating mediation.
- Desire to gain approval from peers rather than adults increases. Less likely to be motivated to do well in school because they want to please their teachers or their parents.
- An increased ability to de-center and see things from various perspectives, although still very much self-absorbed.

Communication Style

- Appreciates humor
- Loves to argue; debater
- Imitates adult language

You're the best judge of your child's development and what is "normal" for him or her. Just when you think you've figured out your child, something changes. You may find strategies that once worked no longer have any impact on him or her. Don't worry, this is normal. If you would like more resources or information, please contact your pediatrician or you may contact Jennifer Moyer-Taylor School Counselor, 206-329-3260 X220 or email at jmoyerta@stjosephsea.org.

**Information compiled by Jennifer Moyer-Taylor, St. Joseph School Counselor and Denise Rousso, St. John School Counselor. References on back.*

How Much Should I Help with Homework?

By Dr. Michelle Alvarez, Consulting Educator of greatschools.com

QUESTION:

I am having trouble balancing being involved as a parent in my son's schoolwork and knowing when to back off and let him learn on his own. I know there are several parents who review their children's homework every night. I, on the other hand, take the less involved approach - I ask about school, what he is working on, if there are any tests coming up, but I never look at his binders and homework. I figure if he was doing poorly I could see it on PowerSchool (the Web-based system that many schools use to allow parents to monitor their child's progress) or somehow I would hear from school. Anyway, I know I am not alone and that this is a big dilemma for a lot of parents - learning when and how to let go of my middle-school child.

ANSWER:

Middle school is a challenging time for children and their parents. Your son is trying to become independent and you are trying to find that balance between "parenting" your son and giving him a chance to begin to feel independent. That balance will look different in every relationship between parent and child. However, it is very important to stay involved in your son's life.

Parental involvement can be defined in many different ways. Utilizing a good relationship with your son as the foundation for your parenting, your role is that of monitoring his progress as he develops into a young adult. If he is doing well in school, completing assignments on time without much assistance, it is very appropriate to ask questions about school, his assignments, and his tests. E-mail his teachers and ask them every once in awhile how is doing and if there is anything you can be doing at home to support him. If what he is telling you does not match grades on assignments and/or feedback from the school, that is when your level of monitoring could increase. This sends a message that you continue to hold him accountable for his schoolwork but will not monitor it unless he needs more support in being successful.

Another area to consider monitoring, that is just as important as his schoolwork, is the realm of social relationships. Ask questions about who his friends are at school, what they like to do, about their involvement in school activities and anything your son is willing to share with you. Accountability for where he is and what he is doing during middle school and high school are very important. Hold him to your family rules about dating, going out with friends, and other social activities.

Finally, middle school is a very important time to keep lines of communication open on topics that may cause some discomfort for you. Let your son know you are available to talk about any topic he wants to discuss. Start conversations about topics that you think he needs to know about at this stage in life. You can do this in a manner that makes it interesting for him, for example, "I read today that the average age when youth first try alcohol is 11 years for boys and 13 years for girls. Do you think this is true in your school?"

Advice from Great Schools' experts is not a substitute for professional diagnosis or treatment from a health-care provider or learning expert familiar with your unique situation. Great Schools recommends consulting a qualified professional if you have concerns about your child's condition. If you have any questions or concerns about your child, consult your pediatrician.

Your 6th Grader References:

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Thompson, Michael and Grace, Catherine O'Neill (2002). *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*. New York: Ballantine Books

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