

** Parents often approach me with questions about what is common and developmentally appropriate for their child's age. In collaboration with the school counselor at St. John, I researched and compiled information about 8th 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 Eighth Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors of 8th Graders

Classroom

- The teenage brain is revved to learn. Only in early childhood are people as receptive to new information as they are during their adolescent years. This “use it or lose it” stage, which began in 6th grade, continues to ramp up. Neural pathways that are being used will be fortified, and others that aren’t will be dumped. This apparently helps the brain to take on and master new challenges.
- The prefrontal cortex (the impulse control and predicting future events center) continues to develop and is the last part of the brain to mature in adolescence. An 8th grader’s ability to judge risk or to make long-term plans is lagging, suggesting an increased need for guidance from trusted adults, not a decrease.
- Complains about the volume of homework but often secretly enjoys the challenge and their ability to meet teacher demands.
- May be afraid of journal writing and revealing too much; or at the opposite extreme, may pour out their hearts to the teacher.
- Does not do as well in cooperative groups as 7th graders or older teens – tends to argue and complain about fairness.
- Needs short, regular, predictable homework assignments to build good study habits.
- Thinks globally, but often can’t act locally. For example, concerned about social justice issues, but often is still mean to others.
- Can be a pain at home and a star at school, or visa versa.

Social/Emotional Behaviors

- More outwardly focused than at 12; compares and matches their “identity” with others. Attempting to discover who they are, identifying strengths, and what kinds of roles they are best suited to play in their lives.
- Continues to be 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. During this time teenagers gravitate toward, and find security and pleasure in, people who are like them.
- Girls tend to focus on close relationships; boys tend to travel in small groups and engage in a lot of horseplay and practical jokes.
- Very concerned about personal appearance but unconcerned about the neatness of their personal environment (rooms at home, lockers and desks at school).
- Nowhere on the developmental continuum is there greater physical and emotional separation between the genders than between girls and boys at thirteen.
- Feels tension between wanting grown-ups to simultaneously notice them, and yet to leave them alone. Wants to be independent and appear grown up; however, still very much depends on parents (for rides to the mall, for example!). Looking self-assured and confident might mask this inner confusion.

Communication Style

- Interested in the meaning of words; develops a broader vocabulary
- More willing to engage in group discussion
- Increasingly punctuates humor with sarcasm

**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. Information compiled by Jennifer Moyer-Taylor, St. Joseph School Counselor and Denise Rousso, St. Anne School Counselor. For permission to customize, copy and circulate, please call Jennifer Moyer-Taylor at 206-329-3260 X220 or email at jmoyerta@stjosephsea.org. Copyright 2012.*

How Can I Help My Procrastinating Tween?

By Joe Connolly, Consulting Editor of greatschools.com

My son is an eighth-grader and a very smart boy (straight A student in all pre-AP courses) and quite ambitious, too. But he always procrastinates and most of the time goes to sleep very late at night (between 12 and 2 a.m.) and sometimes gets up early (between 4 and 5:30 a.m.) if he did not finish his homework at night (due to procrastination).

I keep on reminding him to start as soon as he can and have tried everything from helping with homework, to scheduling the task or helping him write the "to do lists" and organizing, yet nothing works. Sometimes I just ask him to take a nap because it's better to see him getting the rest that he needs rather than seeing him wasting time doing nothing. Most of the time, he refuses a nap but will go anyway because he is really too exhausted and sleepy. I've even talked to his school counselor about his procrastination problem and sleeping-late habit. And she said that based on what I told her, my son is a perfectionist! She said that I should try to set the latest time that he could do his homework and that if he didn't finish he will not be allowed to wake up early and finish his homework. I did it for a while but eventually I gave up because it's too stressful to battle every day.

ANSWER:

As I read your letter two points you made struck me. The first is that you have a son who is a straight A student who shows signs of ambition and perfectionism. The second is that you have a son who would prefer not to do his homework, will put off sleeping and sometimes procrastinates. It occurs to me that most parents would love to have the first son you described; yet many parents live with the realities of the second son you described.

My first piece of advice is to be thankful for the fact that, despite the issues you and your son seem to be having with his sleep and procrastination, he is still an ambitious, straight A student in pre-AP courses. It also appears that he is able to figure out how to get his homework done and get very good grades. That tells me he is not only smart, but also resourceful. You are right to be concerned about his sleep, however. All teens need at least nine hours of sleep each night in order to function appropriately during the day. The reality is that many young people only get somewhere around six or seven hours. Some of this has to do with their incredibly busy schedules. Some of it is because of the way their brains work. There is evidence that a teen brain can get a "second wind" around 10:00 p.m. This "second wind," or "phase delay" as it is referred to in many publications, lasts for a few hours. Essentially the brain tells the teen that he is not tired between 10:00 and 12:00 p.m.

There are ways to manage this "second wind." Most of the solutions revolve around educating your son about the importance of sleep and its effect on his ability to function appropriately. Other steps to take are to help him stay away from computers and television lights late at night, and continue to urge him to take naps when necessary. You can also be aware of his schedule and be careful not to burden him with too many activities. If your son is a perfectionist, as the counselor describes, then it is possible that he has over-scheduled himself. If you feel the sleep situation is getting so bad that it is affecting his health, then you should see his pediatrician. Lastly, you can also model good sleeping habits.

It sounds as if you have done all the right things to help your son. You have suggested ways to change his behavior and you have seen the school counselor. The counselor offered you great advice. But it seems that you feel there is still a problem with the situation. My opinion is the problem may be with the way you have chosen to proceed with the expert advice given to you. Your last line was telling: "I did it for a while but eventually gave up..."

Parenting teenagers is a difficult task. Among other things it requires hard work, lots of love, knowing when and how to set boundaries and appropriate consequences when those boundaries are pushed. It also requires tenacity on the part of the parent. If we choose to look for shortcuts and easier ways to parent, we are likely to get the results one would expect from taking shortcuts. That is, less success and more failure.

Stick to your plan and follow through. It will help you to have another adult who can pick up the slack when you're feeling run down or beat up by the persistence it takes to do the right thing. Your son's father should be in step with your plan. Make sure you are both on the same page and following through with the consequences when necessary. If his father is not in the family picture, count on a friend who can offer moral support when you need it the most. Your situation is not dire by any means. Be thankful for the wonderful straight A student you have and continue to help him make good choices about sleep and procrastination. In time you'll see the success you're both striving for.

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 8th Grader References

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