

The middle years of childhood, between the time when your child enters school and the beginning of adolescence, are a time of significant growth and challenge for both you and your child. This guide will help you understand the developmental changes that occur during this period and guide your child as he or she moves beyond the family circle into the wider world of school and friends. Information on specific topics, such as safety, school and family problems are also available from our office. Please feel free to bring any questions you may have to your child's doctor.

**Development in the school-age child:**

**Physical Development**

The rate of physical growth slows during middle childhood, but children continue to make noticeable gains in size, strength, and coordination. Social status is often based on physical competence, especially among boys. School-age children are thus motivated to develop a positive physical sense of themselves. This may be a special challenge for children with physical disabilities.

Secondary sex characteristics can appear early, especially in girls. On average, puberty begins by 10 ½ - 11 years of age for white girls and approximately one to two years earlier for African-American girls. For boys, puberty begins around 12 years of age.

**Cognitive Development**

Neurologic activity within the brain peaks between 4 and 11 years of age. During this period children's thinking progresses from egocentric, magical thinking (the sun goes down so I can go to sleep") through more concrete reasoning about cause and effect to the ability to make generalizations and consider conflicting explanations for events. Rates of cognitive development vary from child to child.

Rapidly evolving cognitive skills, accumulated knowledge, and the challenges presented by school combine to give school-age children a sense of personal competence. They recognize that they are learning things their parents don't know and can do things without their parents' knowledge. Children often are particularly industrious during this period as they acquire and demonstrate new skills.

**Emotional/Social Development**

School-age children become increasingly sensitive to the views of others and are astute natural observers. They appreciate having rules, and at least early on, have little tolerance for moral ambiguity. They firmly internalize notions of right and wrong. Friendships and teamwork become increasingly important parts of their lives. During their middle years, children come to appreciate that there is a cycle to life, and their own future takes on new meaning. They are eager to become more independent, and they are often frustrated with the slow progress they are permitted to achieve. Children's experiences in social situations and relationships shape their self-concept. Their ability to fit in and be accepted by their peers influences their self-esteem, which previously had rested almost exclusively on experiences within their families. Their perception of others' reactions to them steadily shapes their sense of personhood.

**Moving Beyond the Family**

A major task of parents during the middle years of childhood is to allow and encourage their children to enter the new world of school and friends alone. This is often a difficult emotional transition for parents. Once children enter school, they spend less than half as much time with their parents as they did before, so you will have to learn to parent at a distance. That means you

Will need to be more efficient, more vigilant, and more involved in your child's life in order to monitor, guide, and support your child effectively. School-age children need to learn to monitor their own actions, adopt acceptable standards of good and bad behavior, be responsible, avoid undue risks, and know when to seek parental support and guidance.

It is important not to give your child too much independence too early or hurry him through childhood. School-age children need to experience gradually increasing autonomy. Involve your child in decisions that affect him a little at a time. You must learn to negotiate while remaining in control. Another important parental task is interpretation. You need to interpret your beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors to your child. You also must help your child interpret his own feelings so that he understands why he feels happy or sad, angry or joyful. Finally, you may need to help interpret the world outside the family, to explain such concepts as religion, politics, violence, charity, honesty, and hypocrisy. Interpretation is essential to your child's social adjustment.

### **Developing Social Skills**

Developing social skills is perhaps the primary task of the middle years of childhood. Problems in social development can dominate a child's day-to-day life and interfere with emotional well-being and academic achievement. If you have questions or concerns about your child's social adjustment, discuss them with her doctor. Some children need extra help in mastering social skills. Parents can often provide that help, sometimes with the aid of other adults, such as teachers or group leaders. As with all learning, children need opportunities to practice, and feedback about how they performed. Frequent positive reinforcement is a must.

### **Promoting Success in School**

Since expectations play an important role in achievement, it is important to have high, but realistic expectations of your child's school performance and communicate them to the child. You will also need to help your child develop good study habits. Involvement in your child's education, positive role modeling, and lots of encouragement all will help your child succeed in school. Repeatedly reinforcing your child's positive self-concept with praise and affection strengthens her self-esteem and emotional health, which are vital to academic and social development. Reading aloud to your child from an early age is a valuable habit that should continue into the school years. You may want to take turns with your child as her reading skills develop.

### **Major Health Concerns**

Most school-age children are physically healthy. The likeliest health concerns are dental problems, overweight, and unintentional injuries. Some preventive health behaviors, such as using seat belts, tend to decrease among school-age children. Increasing rates of homicide and suicide in this age group are also a concern. Another, often overlooked, problem is bullying. Parents of school-age children often express concern about learning problems and attention disorders, behavior, and emotional problems. The incidence of psychosomatic complaints increases abruptly between 6 and 7 years of age for both boys and girls, as does the rate of behavior problems among boys. Sometime during the fourth through sixth grades, children usually first face the decision to experiment with alcohol and tobacco, and some begin their use at this time.

***REMEMBER: WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU WITH ANY CONCERNS YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT, OR BEHAVIOR.***