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CHILDREN — HOW THEY GROW

Elementary School Children Ages — 6 to 8

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The early elementary school-age child (6 to 8 years) has moved from being a preschooler closely tied to the family to the expanded world of middle childhood.

There are three great “outward journeys” of middle childhood:

Social — out of the home and into the friend group;

Physical — into the world of games and school;

Mental — into the world of adult ideas, logic and communication.

These journeys form the basis for pre-adolescence. Gaining early success in these areas is extremely important for positive self-esteem.

Listed below are characteristics of each of the three legs of the journey the 6- to 8-year-old child must travel.

Social and emotional development

◆ Attachment to friends grows during this stage. Children want to continue to play with friends and don't like to be interrupted. Try to give them a 5- or 10-minute warning before they really have to leave.

◆ Most have a “best friend” and often an “enemy.” Much activity centers around how to stay with friends and identify who is “not wanted.”



◆ Friends are likely to be the same sex. Activities are becoming sex separated — girls don't want boys to interfere with their games and vice versa.

◆ Tattling is a common way to attract adult attention and to help learn the rules. Give your child lots of positive feedback for good behavior, and let your child help define the rules. This will not only build self-esteem, but will cut down on the negative behavior of tattling.

◆ To win, to lead or to be first is valued. Children in this age group are competitive, they try to boss and are unhappy if they lose. Encourage non-competitive games and help your child set individual goals.

◆ Children in this age group often become attached to an adult other than their parents such as a teacher, club leader, caregiver or neighborhood teenager. They may quote their new "hero," try to please him or her and compete with other children for this adult's attention.

◆ During the years from 6 to 8, children have a strong desire for the affection and attention of parents. There is much "reporting" of activities to family. Parents need to set aside time specifically to listen and talk to children with no interruptions.

◆ Good and bad are defined by what's approved or disapproved of by the family.

◆ Children in this age group release tension through physical activity. For example, children may be extremely active when tired. Adults need to encourage quiet play (board games, painting, puzzles) before bedtime or when children are overly tired.

◆ More realistic fears replace the common preschool fears of ghosts, witches and creatures in dark places. These new fears revolve around school, social relationships and disaster. Adults need to give children measured doses of realistic information to help them handle fears. Never tease or joke about ideas that frighten them.

◆ A positive self-concept continues to develop with successful experiences. Help children celebrate their positive achievements. For example, take a picture of your 7-year-old finally riding a two-wheeled bike. Have your 6-year-old call a grandparent when he or she learns to read a new book.

◆ Children in this age group are sensitive to personal criticism and do not know how to accept failure. Concentrate on your children's successes and teach them how to learn from criticism. Ask them, "Can you learn how to do it differently next time?"

◆ Experimental and exploratory behaviors are a common part of development. Children often try out a new behavior just to see how it feels to imitate a friend. If it is not dangerous, parents should ignore such behavior or comment, "That's interesting to try. What did you learn?"

◆ Inner control (conscience) is being formed. Talk with your children about why self-control is important and why they should learn to be patient, share and respect the rights of others.

Physical development

◆ Growth rate at this stage is slower than during infancy and early childhood but steady. Weight ranges from about 40 pounds to 65 pounds. The normal rate of weight increase is 3 pounds to 6 pounds per year. Children's need for food may fluctuate with activity.

◆ Childhood diseases such as measles and chicken pox are likely to occur at this time because children interact with large numbers of peers on a daily basis in school. Children who were in day care may have already had these diseases or have built up resistance. Adults need to be prepared for school absences due to illness.

- Baby teeth begin to come out, and permanent ones come in. If a child loses a permanent tooth in an accident, try to find the tooth and take it and the child to the dentist. The dentist may save the permanent tooth.

◆ Muscle coordination and control is uneven and incomplete. Large muscles (used to move the arms and legs, for example) are easier to control than small muscles (used to move fingers). Encourage your child to participate in activities using high energy. Intense activity may bring temporary exhaustion. Children of this age need 10 hours to 12 hours of sleep each night.

◆ Hand skills and eye-hand coordination needed for activities such as writing and shoe lacing continue to develop as children gain small motor skills. Projects will often appear messy as children work to polish these skills. Encourage children to work briefly with small motor tasks, and then switch to running and jumping — tasks that use their more skilled, large muscles. Building both skill areas is important for physical development.

Mental development

◆ Around age 7 or 8, children begin to think about their own behavior and about things they can easily imagine, such as sharing with a friend or going on a drive. Adults can do simple reasoning with children now. Asking “what if” or “how could we solve this” questions will help your child develop problem solving skills.

◆ Children in this age group begin to form ideas mentally, and they can group things together that belong in one category (babies, fathers and mothers are all people). The next level of mental development is sequencing and ordering, preparing the way for math skills.

◆ During the early part of this stage, children cannot be expected to read and write skillfully, but should be quite self-assured in these areas by the end. During this stage children form a basic understanding of numbers. Encourage these skills by letting them read signs, make lists, count or write prices of objects they buy.

◆ They can think through their own actions and situations to understand causes of events. For example, a 7-year-old generally knows why he or she was late to school.

◆ At this age, children tend to talk as they learn, and they learn best if active while learning. For example, 6- to 8-year-olds will learn traffic safety rules more easily by manipulating a landscape of blocks, toy cars and figures than by sitting and listening to an adult explain the rules.

◆ The interest span of 6- to 8-year-olds is short — about 20 minutes. Don’t expect them to spend much more than 20 minutes alone on any task.

◆ They understand the value and uses of money, they can begin to plan for their allowances and learn to use money for items they want.

◆ The process of work is more interesting to children in this age group than the resulting product. They may begin many projects, but finish few. Teach them to use new tools and materials and to enjoy exploring. Don’t be worried about completing everything.

◆ They may take on the role of an admired adult in fantasy or dramatic play.

◆ At this age, children begin to learn the value of “work.” They need regular, realistic chores at home and school. Charts with pictures to check-off chores help children remember what to do.

◆ They show some independence in the youth community (school, church and youth organizations). Adults should encourage these positive experiences in a caring community.

How does this relate to your child?

Typical behaviors of children in the years from 6 through 8 are listed on the following page. The list is by no means complete, and it is likely that many children will exhibit characteristics listed under several ages. For instance, Ricardo may be 8 years old, but he might behave like a 7-year-old in some ways and like a 9-year-old in other ways.

Study the list of characteristics shown for your child’s age, and check off the behaviors you see your own child displaying. Look forward and backward to see what characteristics of older and younger children your child exhibits. Can you more clearly see your whole child?

The six-year-old

- ❑ Highly active
- ❑ Dislikes losing
- ❑ Usually not modest
- ❑ Works in spurts
- ❑ Self-centered
- ❑ Seeks to be center of attention
- ❑ Has positive attitude toward school
- ❑ Proud of self and skills
- ❑ More ready to give than receive criticism
- ❑ Often competitive with brothers and sisters
- ❑ Sensitive about being called names, but calls others names
- ❑ Often pairs up and has best friend; tends to enjoy leaving out a third child
- ❑ Interested in games with rules and action but lacks skill
- ❑ Enjoys rough-housing but does not know when to stop and may end up hurt, upset or exhausted
- ❑ Learning to write letters and numbers, often backwards
- ❑ Has a very difficult time making choices and decisions, hesitant, indecisive

The seven-year-old

- ❑ Is active
- ❑ Likes to know rules
- ❑ Sees teacher as authority
- ❑ Worries about being liked
- ❑ Complains of unfair treatment by playmates
- ❑ Listens as well as talks at mealtime
- ❑ Enjoys activities alone as well as with others
- ❑ Relates equally to brothers and sisters but this depends on age (closer in age, more fights)

- ❑ Very sensitive to reactions of others
- ❑ Wants to do things right — erases and tries again and again
- ❑ Is beginning to enjoy reading as a pastime if there has been success learning this skill
- ❑ Begins to show politeness and consideration; less opinionated and stubborn
- ❑ Begins to be modest and concerned about “private parts” or sexual organs
- ❑ Shows friendship by sharing possessions, secrets and time together
- ❑ Begins to understand games with rules and relates rules to socially appropriate behavior

The eight-year-old

- ❑ Enjoys dramatic play
- ❑ Often demanding of parents
- ❑ Curious about nature, things and people
- ❑ Talks with adults rather than to adults
- ❑ Concerned about the reasons behind things
- ❑ Likes to help when in the mood
- ❑ Makes collections of all kinds of things
- ❑ Seeks new experiences; tries out new behaviors sometimes including swearing or challenging rules
- ❑ Attitude toward opposite sex a combination of liking and hostility
- ❑ Discovering parents are human and make mistakes
- ❑ Often more polite away from home than at home
- ❑ Begins to select friends on basis of personal qualities or for a reason, not always positive

- ❑ Keen sense of privacy: “This is my room — keep out!”
- ❑ May be very self-critical
- ❑ May show anger by sulking rather than using harsh words or fighting

As you look over this list, do you see social skills, physical skills and thinking skills your child is learning?

Sources for additional information

Books

- Collins, N. (1984). *Development During Middle Childhood*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Schaefer, C.E. and Millman, H.I. (1981). *Helping Children with Common Problems*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Elkind, D. (1989). *The Hurried Child*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

VIDEO TAPES

- Available through your local Extension Office or by calling (314) 882-3840.*
- Mirrors (self-esteem support for children)
- A Special Time (children with parents)
- Meeting Developmental Needs (the role of school age child care)
- Home Alone (preparing your children)
- Pals (dealing with peer pressure)

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