

# Childhood Years

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## Childhood Years: Ages Six through Twelve

*When they start school, children enter "middle childhood" and remain there until they reach adolescence. This publication will help parents and other adults look at the general characteristics of children ages 6 through 12, consider special concerns of parents and caregivers, and give practical tips.*

### Overview

Between the ages of 6 and 12, the child's world expands outward from the family as relationships are formed with friends, teachers, coaches, caregivers, and others. Because their experiences are expanding, many factors can alter children's actions and impact how they learn to get along. Some situations can create stress and affect self-esteem. The middle childhood period is a time to prepare for adolescence.

Children develop at various rates. Some children in middle childhood seem very mature while others seem very immature. During this stage, behavior may depend on the child's mood, his or her experience with various types of people, or even what happened that day.

### Parental concerns

Parents with children in middle childhood may begin to re-evaluate what kind of parent they have been up to this point. With children entering school, parents may be wondering if their child has what it takes to "make it" and succeed. Up to this point, children have always looked up to parents as *the source* of information, but now children judge parents more and label their actions differently.

Parents struggle with how to support their children's independence while understanding the child's new connections with others (friends and teachers). With children's natural curiosity and expanding knowledge, parents often find children question them more, and they are asked to respond in greater detail to larger issues, such as why they must work overtime, why some people act unfairly, or even why there is war. Children continually struggle to understand new information that is difficult to understand.

In middle childhood, children typically spend less time with their families and parents, and families spend less time in caretaking, reading, talking, teaching, and playing. Less monitoring and fewer verbal cues are needed, particularly for routine tasks (such as baths or brushing teeth).

As children get older, behavior can be managed with verbal reasoning, deprivation of privileges, appeals to child's sense of humor, or reminders of the consequences of his or her actions.

In addition to typical development, daily life challenges are normal. For example, most children will attend school. With school comes many transitions. Being afraid of new situations or feeling peer pressure are predictable stressors. Other stressors are

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## Television

A few cautions about TV: Too little physical activity can affect weight in children. Too many aggressive acts on TV can affect mood and actions, and children can begin to think that what they see on TV is the "norm." Limiting the amount of television watched and monitoring what is watched can help parents assure that the TV that is seen relates to their family's values.

## Self-care

There is no magic age at which a child is ready to be left alone. Parents should consider carefully the child's willingness to be left alone, the child's day to day responsibility, the child's ability to anticipate and avoid unsafe situations.

not as predictable. Any disruption of what is considered normal for the child causes stress. Cooperative Extension has additional materials on this topic to help parents and children in making a decision to be in self-care. To read more on stress, refer to the North Carolina Extension publication FCS-457, *Helping Children Cope with Stress*.

## Developmental Aspects of Middle Childhood

### Social and emotional development

- There are signs of growing independence. Children are becoming so "worldly" that they typically test their growing knowledge with back talk and rebellion.
- Common fears include the unknown, failure, death, family problems, and rejection.
- Friends may live in the same neighborhood and are most commonly the same sex.
- Children average five best friends and at least one "enemy," who often changes from day to day.
- Children act nurturing and commanding with younger children but follow and depend on older children.
- Children are beginning to see the point of view of others more clearly.
- Children define themselves in terms of their appearance, possessions, and activities.
- There are fewer angry outbursts and more ability to endure frustration while accepting delays in getting things they "want."
- Children often resolve conflict through peer judges who accept or reject their actions.
- Children are self-conscious and feel as if everyone notices even small differences (new haircut, facial hair, a hug in public from a parent).
- Tattling is a common way to attract adult attention in the early years of middle childhood.
- Inner control is being formed and practiced each time decisions are made.
- Around age 6-8, children may still be afraid of monsters and the dark. These are replaced later by fears of school or

disaster and confusion over social relationships.

- To win, lead, or to be first is valued. Children try to be the boss and are unhappy if they lose.
- Children often are attached to adults (teacher, club leader, caregiver) other than their parents and will quote their new "hero" or try to please him or her to gain attention.
- Early in middle childhood, "good" and "bad" days are defined as what is approved or disapproved by the family.
- Children's feelings get hurt easily. There are mood swings, and children often don't know how to deal with failure.

### Physical Development

- Growth is slower than in preschool years, but steady. Eating may fluctuate with activity level. Some children have growth spurts in the later stages of middle childhood.
- In the later stages of middle childhood, body changes (hips widen, breasts bud, pubic hair appears, testes develop) indicate approaching puberty.
- Children recognize that there are differences between boys and girls.
- Children find difficulty balancing high energy activities and quiet activities.
- Intense activity may bring tiredness. Children need around 10 hours of sleep each night.
- Muscle coordination and control are uneven and incomplete in the early stages, but children become almost as coordinated as adults by the end of middle childhood.
- Small muscles develop rapidly, making playing musical instruments, hammering, or building things more enjoyable.
- Baby teeth will come out and permanent ones will come in.
- Permanent teeth may come in before the mouth has fully grown, causing dental crowding.
- Eyes reach maturity in both size and function.
- The added strain of school work (smaller print, computers, intense writing) often creates eye-tension and leads some children to request eye examinations.

## Mental Development

- Children can begin to think about their own behavior and see consequences for actions. In the early stages of concrete thinking, they can group things that belong together (for instance babies, fathers, mothers, aunts are all family members). As children near adolescence, they master sequencing and ordering, which are needed for math skills.
- Children begin to read and write early in middle childhood and should be skillful in reading and writing by the end of this stage.
- They can think through their actions and trace back events that happened to explain situations, such as why they were late to school.
- Children learn best if they are active while they are learning. For example, children will learn more effectively about traffic safety by moving cars, blocks, and toy figures rather than sitting and listening to an adult explain the rules.
- Six- to 8-year-olds can rarely sit for longer than 15-20 minutes for an activity. Attention span gets longer with age.
- Toward the beginning of middle childhood, children may begin projects but finish few. Allow them to explore new materials. Nearing adolescence, children will focus more on completion.
- Teachers set the conditions for social interactions to occur in schools. Understand that children need to experience various friendships while building esteem.
- Children can talk through problems to solve them. This requires more adult time and more sustained attention by children.
- Children can focus attention and take time to search for needed information.
- They can develop a plan to meet a goal.
- There is greater memory capability because many routines (such as brushing teeth, tying shoes, and bathing) are automatic now.
- The Child begins to build a self-image as a "worker." If encouraged, this is positive in later development of career choices.
- Many children want to find a way to earn money.

## Moral Development

Moral development is more difficult to discuss in terms of developmental milestones. Moral development occurs over time through experience. Research implies that if a child knows what is right, he or she will do what is right. Even as adults, we know that there are often gray areas when it comes to making tough decisions about right and wrong. There are a lot of "it depends" responses depending on the particular situation.

Most adults agree that they should act in a caring manner and show others they care about them. People want to come into contact with others who will reinforce them for who they are. It is no different for children. To teach responsible and caring behaviors, adults must first *model caring behaviors* with young children as they do with other adults. While modeling, focus on *talking with* children. This does not mean talking at children but discussing *with* them in an open-ended way. Work to create an air of learning and a common search for understanding, empathy, and appreciation. Dialogue can be playful, serious, imaginative, or goal oriented. It can also provide the opportunity to question *why*. This is the foundation for caring for others.

Next, *practice caring for others*. Adults need to find ways to increase the capacity to care. Adults generally spend time telling children what to do or teaching facts. There is little time to use the newly developed higher order thinking and to practice caring interactions and deeds.

The last step to complete the cycle of caring is *confirmation*. Confirmation is encouraging the best in others. A trusted adult who identifies something admirable and encourages the development of that trait can go a long way toward helping children find their place in this world. Love, caring, and positive relations play central roles in ethics and moral education.

## Chores

Children want to feel useful and have a sense that they are contributing to the family. To help children learn household responsibilities, parents might allow children to choose from a list of chores. Paid chores should be in addition to what is generally expected. For example, brushing teeth, taking a bath, and keeping a room clean may be expected. Drying dishes, putting away folded clothes, or emptying trash cans may be chores that earn allowance and contribute to the family.

Money becomes more important since children now understand how it is valued in our society. Earning an allowance is a two-way agreement; children do agreed upon work with little reminders in exchange for agreed upon money or goods. Charts with pictures to check-off chores help children remember what to do. The older children get, the more capable they are, but remember to choose age-appropriate duties.

## **Practical Advice for All Adults Working with Children in Middle Childhood**

### **Social and emotional development**

- Encourage non-competitive games, particularly toward the beginning of middle childhood, and help children set individual goals.
- Give children lots of positive attention and let them help define the rules.
- Talk about self-control and making good decisions. Talk about why it is important to be patient, share, and respect others' rights. Adults must pick battles carefully so there is limited nagging and maximized respect while children build confidence in their ability to make decisions.
- Teach them to learn from criticism. Ask "how could you do that differently next time?"
- Always be alert to the feelings associated with what children tell you.
- Give children positive feedback for successes.

### **Physical Development**

- It is important to help children feel proud of who they are and what they can do. Avoid stereotyping girls into particular activities and boys into others. Let both genders choose from a range of activities.
- Encourage children to balance their activities between high energy and quiet activity. Children release tension through play. Children may be extremely active when tired. Encourage quiet reading, painting, puzzles, or board games before bedtime.
- Regular dental and physical check-ups are an important part of monitoring a child's growth and development. This allows parents to screen for potential problems. If a child accidentally loses a permanent tooth, finding the tooth and taking it and the child to the dentist may save the permanent tooth.

### **Mental Development**

Rapid mental growth creates many of the positive as well as negative interactions between children and adults during middle childhood. Some of the ways adults can help children continue to develop their thinking skills are:

- Adults can ask "what if..." or "how could we solve this" questions to help children develop problem-solving skills.
- Reading signs, making lists, and counting prices are all exercises to practice sequencing skills.
- Asking children if you can help them think about ways to talk with other children can provide limited guidance as they negotiate social relationships.
- Picking focused times to talk — without distractions — allows adults and children to converse and listen.

### **Reflections**

Each stage in life is a time of growth. Middle childhood is a time to bridge dependence with approaching independence. The time of wonder and spontaneity is fading, replaced by feeling self-conscious and on guard. The new ways children act are ways they are exploring their future potential. Some behaviors will pass, but they must be experienced in order for the child to grow and be ready to face the stage of finding his or her identity during adolescence.

### **Resources**

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