Education of Children

Beginning Middle School

The entrance into middle school is perhaps one of the toughest transitions children encounter in all of their years of education. It presents numerous challenges to the new sixth grader who is leaving the familiar and comfortable environment of the elementary school for the unknown world of middle school with its new responsibilities and demands. Think of the number of new "firsts" that will be experienced. There is the first time using a locker, first time changing classes, first time dealing with multiple teachers, first time responding to bells (and tardies), first time having multiple assignments from different teachers, first time doing complex homework, and first time participating in school athletics. To make matters more complicated, there is the pending threat of puberty with all of its explosions in physical growth, hormones, and emotionality. Moreover, puberty brings with it a growing interest in the peer group, and a gradual movement away from the family as the center of the child's life. What all of this means is that new middle schoolers are having to cope with the developmental demands of early adolescence at the same time that they are being required to deal with new responsibilities that demand their consistent attention and effort. It is no wonder that sixth grade can be very challenging for both children and parents.

As always, there are a number of things parents can do to help these young pre-teens successfully navigate the new terrain. Part of the process entails developing a mindset that allows for mistakes and a few fumbles along the way. Knowing exactly what the issues are helps with this task. The second aspect is more practical and involves concrete steps that can be taken to assist with the more difficult adjustments that need to be made. For our discussion, I have divided these challenges into four areas: (1) new responsibilities and organizational skills; (2) developments in the peer group; (3) changes in the parent-child relationship; and (4) the development of the parent-school relationship. Let's take a look.

NEW RESPONSIBILITIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

The new responsibilities include keeping track of all assignments, staying on top of homework for each class, organizing supplies and books, remembering to bring the right books home from the locker, being on time for each class, taking the proper athletic gear to school for P.E., establishing a study schedule, and planning ahead for school activities. Most of these were not part of the fifth grade regimen, and so it will take some time for the new student to get the hang of it. Your job is to help your pre-teen develop a system for meeting the new expectations. You will need to make a list of the new tasks, decide what materials are needed to organize and maintain the system, and then establish a method for keeping track of the items on the list. Keep it as simple as possible. It's better to start simple and build to complex after basic organizational skills have been learned and are working well. The following suggestions may be helpful:

1. Assignments - Use a large, single notebook for all classes (unless specified otherwise by a teacher). Place a sheet in the very front of the notebook that is to be used to write down daily homework assignments. As assignments are completed, they can be crossed off the list and a new sheet put in for the next day. For assignments that are not due right away, make a large monthly calendar that can be placed on the wall at home for tracking these. This way your youngster will have a visual aid to help him anticipate and plan ahead for more complex assignments.

2. Locker - Set up a routine for visiting the locker. At the very least, be sure that there is a final trip to the locker at the end of each day to get the necessary books for the homework that is listed on the sheet.

3. Homework - Establish a routine for doing homework. Most kids need some time to wind down after school. Sometimes this is taken care of simply due to involvement in extracurricular activities. If not and your child comes right home after school, it is advisable to allow some free time after school before plunging into homework. Choose the time for homework based on when your child seems to be at her best in terms of attentiveness, mental sharpness, etc. If evening is best, then wait until after dinner. However, if you have a

child that gets sleepy early, then you will need to adjust to an earlier homework schedule. The other consideration is your time. Most sixth graders need help with homework, even if only to assist them with study habits. Try to schedule homework at a time when you can be available to help.

4. Planning for the Next Day - Establish a routine for getting supplies and materials ready for the next day. Place all homework and books in the backpack the night before. Do the same with athletic and gym gear. Leave both items next to the door to pick up on the way out in the morning. This will cut down significantly on morning stress as well as help your child develop good organizational skills.

The key to success in this area is practice, consistency, and encouragement. If you set up a schedule and routine, take care to monitor it carefully on a daily basis at least until your child has established good habits. Be flexible enough to make adjustments if certain parts of the plan are not working out well, but don't let your child slide in terms of the agreed upon plan. Be patient at the beginning and keep in mind that you will need to do a good bit of reminding. Count on walking through the process a number of times with your child before she is able to keep track on her own.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PEER GROUP

Most sixth graders are eleven or twelve years old, which means that they will begin to show signs of early adolescence during the coming year. One of the most significant developments during early adolescence is a new interest in the peer group. The sixth grade peer group, like the fifth grade group, still consists primarily of same sex members. What's new is that there is a growing and deeper involvement in the group that facilitates a psychological shift away from the family and toward the peer group as the main source of self-esteem and identity. Moreover, this new interest in the peer group coincides with the initial stages of puberty, which brings with it major physical changes in appearance that are more akin to adulthood than childhood. In sixth grade, this whole process gets underway, but occurs very unevenly. There is probably no other period in the life of a child where development proceeds at such a fast pace and at such different rates for each individual. The effect of all of this is that the groupings and friendships that were intact at the end of elementary school begin to give way in accordance with the different rates of movement into adolescence. Not only are these youngsters subjected to surging hormones and a rapidly changing appearance, but sixth and seventh graders seem to undergo a good deal of emotional upheaval as peer relationships fall apart, reform, fall apart again, and so forth. These young pre-teens are beginning to measure themselves against the peer group, and the peer group at this point is very unstable and fickle.

What parents need to keep in mind is that the daily emotional ups and downs are normal and will continue for most of middle school until everyone catches up with each other. What parents can do is remain available with a sympathetic ear, while also supplying the voice of reason in assisting these young folks through the mire of evolving peer groups. Allow a lot of conversation so that you have an intimate awareness of what your youngster is feeling and thinking, especially in terms of self-image. Secondly, remember that early adolescence also signals the development of hypothetical thinking. This is a good time to engage your youngster in abstract conversations, especially around issues of morality. The peer group serves as a kind of human lab for formulating values and examining different kinds of behavior. As parents you can help your young teen make use of his current experiences to enhance his capacity for high level thinking as well as further develop empathy for himself and others. Last, it is important to keep close tabs on the evolving peer group so that you can spot dangerous liaisons before they solidify. In other words, know your young teen's friends.

CHANGES IN THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

There are many changes that occur in the parent-child relationship during early adolescence, but what we are concerned with here are those related to helping your pre-teen successfully take on the new demands of middle school. During elementary school parents often assist their children with basic school tasks. For many parents, it has become a regular practice to do some of the child's work for them and/or to rescue them when they forget to turn in assignments on time, forget due dates of projects, forget to bring supplies to school, and so forth. After all, these were young children at the time, and parents out of love and concern wanted things to go well for their youngsters. The problem is that good intentions can sometimes lead to patterns that should have been discarded long ago. In middle school, the ante goes up as the responsibilities and demands are more difficult and complex. If you have developed a pattern of doing some of your child's work and/or rescuing them when they fall back on their responsibilities, then you are likely to want to continue this pattern when your youngster begins to have difficulty in keeping up. This is the time to make a correction. Sixth grade is a hard year for most children, but it is also a very important year because patterns are established now that will carry your child through the rest of middle school and into high school. You must relinquish any desire to rescue your children from their responsibilities. This means that you are going to need to hold the line when they fall back a bit

and let them experience the consequences of their own actions. We suggest the following steps to help you and your pre-teen make this transition:

1. Training - Begin by following the steps provided in the first section to establish a workable system for organizing and meeting expectations. The key is to provide sufficient training up front, and then adjust the system through regular feedback with your child about how the system is working. Make adjustments that cater to your child's particular strengths and weaknesses as well as idiosyncrasies.

2. Hands-on Assistance - This is an important part of the whole process. You want to walk through the steps of the system with your child and assist with homework and assignments. However, you should never actually do the assignments. You can give instruction on how to approach the work, how to do the work, and offer explanations for what is not understood. Then let your child actually do the work which you can then check and help correct if need be. In terms of organization and keeping track of things, you should initially allow some leeway for mistakes. For example, if your child calls you from school because he forgot to bring in an important assignment, you can rescue him once since this is a new responsibility. The trick is not to rescue him the second time, and to make it clear that you will not even if he calls. You must allow him to make mistakes. These are not mistakes that will cause him permanent harm, but mistakes that provide an opportunity to learn and increase his sense of responsibility.

3. Adjusting Your Expectations - This goes along with the above step. In order to allow for mistakes, you must also make adjustments in your expectations. In other words, it is quite possible that you may see some slippage in grades during the first year of middle school. This is not a negative occurrence if it comes about as part of the process of building responsibility and accountability. With close monitoring and corrective action, most sixth graders who have some initial difficulty are able to pull their grades back up during the second semester once they have learned how to manage their homework and assignments, and have become acclimated to higher academic expectations.

THE PARENT-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

Middle school is not a time for parents to drop back in their involvement with the school, especially during the first year. At the same time, middle school requires a different relationship than was experienced with the elementary school. Like students, parents now have a number of teachers to relate to rather than the single elementary school teacher who knew their child quite well. Secondly, the boundaries between parents and school faculty are more well defined. Part of this is simply a product of logistics, i.e., middle school teachers have many students for which they have some responsibility as opposed to the elementary teacher with a single classroom. They are unable to meet with parents as often, or to have the free flow of communication with parents that elementary school teachers can offer. Another factor has to do with the expectation by faculty that these students have a higher level of maturity, and should be more responsible than the elementary child, thereby needing less intervention at school on the part of parents. Whereas you may have been able to walk into the elementary school classroom to catch a moment with the teacher, you now need to make an appointment, wait for the return of a phone call, get an email address, or correspond with the teacher. The process is more formalized. It also incorporates the underlying assumption that parents should maintain some distance from their children while at school. An example that stands out in my mind is in reference to a young seventh grader who was on the middle school baseball team. Every afternoon his mother slipped a snack to him while he was in the dugout waiting to bat. She was worried about his energy level during practice. Unfortunately, her good intentions resulted in a great deal of teasing by the other players as well as disapproval from the coach. What worked in elementary school is very often just not appropriate in middle school. So, how should parents stay involved? Try the following:

1. Meet with Teachers - Set up meetings with each of your child's teachers towards the end of the first month of school. The purpose of these meetings is to establish a means of communication between you and the teacher in the event that problems arise. It also lets the teacher know that you are a concerned parent, and that you would like to assist with the academic process. Most teachers appreciate such parents. Be sure that you find out how each particular teacher likes to maintain communication whether it be by telephone, appointment, email, progress report, etc.

2. Learn School Policies - Find out from the school what the basic policies are regarding all aspects of operation. Most schools have something written. You should study these policies and review them with your child.

3. Join the PTA - Join and participate in your school's parent-teacher organization. In most public schools, this is the PTA. Private schools

generally have a parent group that serves a similar function.

4. Provide Extracurricular Support - Participate in extracurricular activities as a support parent when you can and as time allows. This could be anything from serving as an assistant coach to working in the concession stand at a school game.

5. Observe School Boundaries - Observe the school's boundaries regarding your access to students, teachers, and/or other personnel during school hours. For example, you should never just show up at a teacher's door during class, or even after class if you have not called ahead and made an appointment. Also, it is very important to allow your children to function within the boundaries of the school without your interference. As parents, your problems and concerns are very important and should always be addressed, but through the proper channels. This will help you maintain a cooperative relationship with the school, and save your child from unnecessary embarrassment.

When Should Children's Education Begin

Preschools have become a regular part of the educational system in our culture, and with them there seems to be a growing interest and emphasis on education in the early years prior to beginning kindergarten. The question is whether or not this is a healthy trend.

There is some evidence that preliminary education in preschool can be helpful for children in their fourth and fifth year prior to entering kindergarten. Activities that seem to be successful in helping children prepare to enter elementary school are those that fall under the heading of "reading readiness" including learning one's ABCs and acquiring some rudimentary skills in writing letters and words, along with word recognition in reading. Also helpful are activities that foster basic math skills such as counting and adding. There is, however, a wide degree of variation among children in terms of skill level at this age depending upon individual temperament, family background, and cognitive capacity.

In general, four and five year olds are not ready for the formalized method of learning that requires sitting still for long periods of time while attending to paper and pencil tasks that engage the child on a primarily cognitive level. They have not yet acquired the necessary state of calm and pliability that facilitates learning at this level and that is the hallmark of middle childhood which begins around the age of six and extends into preadolescence. These youngsters are still working on several developmental tasks that are part of the work of the first five years. Specifically, they are learning to refine ideas and emotions by expressing them symbolically through play. They are also working on issues of gender. Finally, they are making their entrance into the peer group as a social being for the first time, and this requires a whole new set of skills as well as adjustments to one's sense of self. Preschool provides an excellent setting for tackling all these tasks, however, the activity that lends itself most effectively to facilitating each of them is play, not education. Let's take them one at a time.

Symbolic representation begins around the age of two when children first associate words and language with the expression of ideas, feelings, needs, and intentions. The young toddler may point to something he wants while looking at his mother signaling his need for her to bring it to him. As he gets a little older, he will learn to associate a word with the object and may even learn to put several words together indicating not only the object, but also his wish for his mother to retrieve it. Eventually, this same child will be able to say what he wants in full sentences. By the age of four, most children have acquired the basic skills of language and symbolization that allow them to state their needs and intentions. Along side of language development, children are also learning to express emotions and ideas through play. Around two and half years, most children will begin engaging in pretend play using toys such as animals, dolls, or play objects like telephones and lawn mowers. This sort of fantasy play becomes more important in the fourth and fifth year and begins to take on the function of self- expression and exploration, particularly the expression of feelings and emotional issues. Instead of directly discharging feelings through acting them out as a toddler might, they are able to project them into pretend situations and express them symbolically. The mommy dinosaur sends the boy dinosaur into timeout for roaring too loud, and the boy dinosaur gets mad at mommy and jumps on her. The fantasy becomes an expression of the youngster's anger at being told what to do, but places that anger into a safe story where it can be discharged without disturbing the relationship between the youngster and his mommy.

The second developmental task that confronts this age group is gender differentiation. These children are beginning to notice (and sometimes study) the differences between boys and girls and are making identifications with their own gender. Not only are they aware of the physiological differences, but they are becoming acquainted with social differences and like to play-act basic social roles such as mommy and daddy, teacher, doctor, and so forth. Through fantasy play they are able to project themselves into the wider community of social membership as opposed to residing exclusively within the family, and also initiate their social standing as a male or female.

The third task mentioned above has to do with socialization. After the age of three, and certainly by the age of four, children are ready to begin interacting more with other children. They have established a sense of self in the first three years, and are now ready to expand their interpersonal skills to encompass relationships beyond those with parents. Preschool is an excellent idea at this age, even for half days, to provide young children with the opportunity to be around other children in play situations. Preschool play facilitates an introduction to competition (games) as well as cooperation and collaboration, and widens the child's self-image to include participation in the larger structure of groups

In view of these important developmental tasks, I would say that play should be the primary activity in preschool. Play activities that are most valuable are fantasy play, outside games and free play, and arts and crafts. Fantasy play can include a variety of activities such as dressing up in costumes and using props to act out pretend stories, building forts, making up pretend fantasies with dolls or action figures, participating in

more formalized plays or talent shows, and so on. Outside games include childhood sports such as kick ball, red light green light, jumping rope, or playing on playground equipment such as slides and merry-go-rounds. Arts and crafts including coloring, painting, making collages, drawing, and working with clay are quite popular and help foster creativity. Educational pursuits can be facilitated, but should be folded into the creative activities associated with play. There will be plenty of time for formal education when elementary school begins.