

Meet a Typical Fourth-Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors

Classroom

A stronger interconnectedness in their brain structure means improved abilities in planning, problem solving, information processing, and long-term memory. This upgrade enables them to realize that authority figures are not always "right" — an important epiphany, but it sometimes doesn't make parenting, teaching or friendships easier.

Takes pride in finished work, attention to detail but may jump quickly between interests.

Likes to negotiate – this is the age of “Let’s make a deal.”

Fairness issues increase; can be deadly serious about competition. Competition should be presented in a light-hearted and humorous way.

If help from adults is offered too late, child may feel neglected; if offered too soon, child may feel insulted.

Setting expectations is important; may be quite sensitive when they fail or are criticized (real or imagined); are their own worst critics.

Social Behaviors

Much more friendship-focused; often busy evaluating the behavior and fairness of others, determining who is a “good sport” and who is a “bad sport.” This friendship-fixated behavior is absolutely normal. Your child's brain is developing a unique "self" at this age, with thinking patterns based on individual neural pathways.

Frontal lobes have now developed to the point where they have more impulse control and a better grip on their anger; encourage your child to advance in emotional maturity by steering them toward healthy friendships that encourage ethical values.

More likely to complain about things; sees adult inconsistencies and imperfections.

May write notes to the opposite sex (such as “I love you” or “I hate you”).

Communication Style

Baby talk sometimes re-emerges.

Loves vocabulary, language play and information.

Use of hyperbole.

Age of negatives: “I hate it,” “I can’t,” “boring,” “yeah, right.”

“Dirty” jokes.

Meet a Typical Fifth-Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors

Classroom

As the brain develops, your child's neural pathways are becoming faster and more efficient, resulting in the ability to think more abstractly. Some subjects, such as math, become easier.

The ability to classify information, arrange things in a series, and to pinpoint exactness all grow stronger.

Enjoy being noticed, rewarded for efforts. Proud of academic products.

Quick tempers can lead to physical outbursts and tears, but these brief incidents are generally quickly and easily solved.

They remember faults more than assets, both in themselves and others.

Social/Emotional Behaviors

Increased neural pathways have created a unique sense of "self," but their upgraded analytic ability also enables them to become keenly, painfully aware of how they fit, or don't fit into certain social groups. You can't keep your child from trying to locate their place in their peer group and children this age need to discover how their "self" fits into the world — in terms of gender, social status, ethnicity, and belief systems. Parents can be loving and wise guides, offering perspective, advice and support to boost their fragile egos during this shaky time. Encouraging friendships from different areas of their life will help.

Friendship groups that were more fluid in earlier years now grow more rigid, and even the most sensitive and caring girls and boys can be socially aggressive. As mentioned above, anger is the most common emotional expression for both boys and girls. However, quick to anger – quick to forgive.

Boys tend to get along well with other boys. Some boys still tend to form large groups and may move from one group to another fluidly. Others may have one or two "best friends".

By 5th grade most girls are sliding into puberty while most boys will not be there until 8th grade.

Fifth grader brains may waffle between recklessness and paranoia. Try and warn them about the dangers of unsafe behavior (drugs and alcohol, no helmets), and for those who lean towards timid; encourage them to try new challenges and that it is alright to make mistakes.

Communication Style

Cooperative and competitive.

Expressive, talkative, likes to explain. Good listeners, actively receptive.

Meet a Typical Sixth-Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors

Classroom

Your sixth-grader's brain is rapidly growing, especially in the prefrontal cortex area of the frontal lobes. This cognitive area - considered the central decision-maker or "CEO" of the brain - is responsible for functions like mediating conflicting emotions, making ethical decisions, inhibiting emotional and sexual urges, general intelligence and predicting future events. As it grows it is also undergoing a rewiring process, which can be disorienting for tweens and manifest itself in recklessness, poor decision-making and emotional outbursts.

Because the prefrontal cortex is still developing, the amygdala (responsible for fight or flight, primitive emotions and responses) controls decision-making. This means that tweens are highly sensitive to rewards – now is a good time to use point systems and charts at home in regards to homework and other chores.

Strong desire to test limits – which actually is an important developmental milestone - but may come across as resistant and rude. "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" 6th graders are often genuinely surprised to hear that adults take offense at their challenges, and they are easily hurt.

Learns well in groups although inclusion and exclusion issues require changing social group structures often. However, if highly sensitive to embarrassment or exposure, may prefer working on projects alone or with one other partner rather than a group.

"Saving face" is especially important; consequences and corrections ideally occur without others present. When possible, waiting a while after the incident helps student to process.

Easily frustrated, the 6th grader may fuss about how hard something is to the teacher while telling the parents how cool the subject is, or vice versa.

Girls' physical growth is generally ahead of boys, with their language and fine motor skills maturing up to six years sooner.

Social/Emotional Behaviors

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. Looking for "sameness" in others. During this time teenagers gravitate toward, and find security and pleasure in, people who are like them.

Cliques peak among girls in 6th grade. According to some researchers, this cliquish behavior seems to be a way for young girls to practice forming deep attachments. Experimenting with their social power and that includes the "power" to hurt.

Friendships among girls tend to be intimate and complex, with an emphasis on secrets and whom they can trust. Cycles of getting mad, not speaking and then making up may happen very often. Adults need to be aware of a balance between letting girls work things out themselves and facilitating mediation.

Desire to gain approval from peers rather than adults increases. Less likely to be motivated to do well in school because they want to please their teachers or their parents.

An increased ability to de-center and see things from various perspectives, although still very much self-absorbed.

Communication Style

Appreciates humor

Loves to argue; debater

Imitates adult language

Meet a Typical Seventh-Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors

Classroom

Your seventh grader's brain continues to rapidly grow, especially in the prefrontal cortex area of the frontal lobes. This area is responsible for functions like mediating conflicting emotions, making ethical decisions, inhibiting emotional and sexual urges, general intelligence and predicting future events. It is going through a significant rewiring process that solidifies certain neural highways while abandoning the majority of others. This transitional phase is often disorienting for tweens, and can manifest itself in recklessness, poor decision-making and emotional outbursts.

The prefrontal cortex continues to develop and the amygdala (responsible for fight or flight and primitive emotions and responses) continues to control decision-making. The result: tweens are highly sensitive to rewards. The highly pleasure-seeking and impulsive 7 th grader is vulnerable to the dangers of risk taking and experimentation. It is important to talk to them about peer pressure, dangers of drugs and alcohol, and the importance of safety.

Is excited and challenged by lengthy homework assignments and projects that culminate in visible products such as reports with beautiful covers, skits about famous people in history, or scientific models with working parts.

Research and study skills advance, but still need frequent and ongoing help from parents with organization, homework and breaking down long-term projects into chunks. Parents can help by giving encouragement and redirecting them to the task at hand.

High interest in current events, politics, social justice; also pop culture and materialism.

Their ability to be totally responsible and totally irresponsible at the same time can be annoying to adults.

Social/Emotional Behaviors

Fascinated by group dynamics, hierarchy, and the code of behavior required to be part of a group. At this age, groups set the standards. In conversations with friends, they figure out those standards and try to meet them.

Within groups and between groups, repartee, teasing and other dominance behavior – whether gentle or not so gentle – are used to establish and reinforce the hierarchy. Also experimenting with social power and that includes the “power” to hurt.

Searching for “fidelity” in relationships, which is a faithfulness or loyalty to a person or belief. Minutes turn to hours on the telephone and in front of the mirror. They define themselves by hairstyles, shoes, CD's, movies, TV preferences, sports teams, the dance rage and what older kids are doing. School becomes the place to be, but not always for our intended purposes.

Girls tend to focus on close relationships; boys tend to travel in small groups and engage in much horseplay and practical jokes.

Is more tolerant and reasonable than at 6th grade and has an increased ability to see others' perspective

Adult personality begins to emerge.

Communication Style

Sarcasm is frequent

Double meanings, word play, jokes of intellectual interest

Peer "vocabulary" (slang) even more important

Meet a Typical Eighth-Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors

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