

** Parents often approach me with questions about what is common and developmentally appropriate for their child's age. In collaboration with the school counselor at St. Joseph, we researched and compiled information about 7th graders. Be aware that children move through these stages at different rates, some sooner, some later. I hope this is helpful. - Denise Rouso, St. Anne School Counselor*

Your Seventh Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors of 7th Graders*

Cognitive/Classroom

- Your seventh grader's brain is under going a "reconstruction phase," especially in the prefrontal cortex area of the frontal lobes. It is undergoing a significant rewiring process that solidifies certain neural highways while abandoning the majority of the others. This transitional phase is often disorienting for tweens, and can manifest itself in recklessness, poor decision-making and emotional outbursts.
- The prefrontal cortex (responsible for functions like mediating conflicting emotions, inhibiting emotional and sexual urges, and predicting future events) continues to develop and the amygdala (responsible for fight or flight and primitive emotional responses) continues to control decision-making. The result: tweens are highly sensitive to rewards. The highly pleasure-seeking and impulsive 7th 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 needs frequent and on-going 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

- Emotionally, 7th graders are changeable, unpredictable and often very hard to read.
- 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 observations and conversations with friends, kids attempt to figure out the standards and try to meet them.
- Within groups and between groups, repartee, teasing and other dominance behavior – whether gentle or not so gentle – can be used to establish and reinforce the hierarchy.
- Experimenting with their social power and that includes the "power" to hurt.
- Girls tend to focus on close relationships; boys tend to travel in small groups and engage in a lot of horseplay and practical jokes.
- 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, music, 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.
- Is more tolerant and reasonable than at 6th grade and has an increased ability to see others' perspectives.
- Adult personality begins to emerge.

Communication Style

- Sarcasm emerges
- Double meanings, word play, jokes of intellectual interest
- Peer "vocabulary" (slang) important

You're the best judge of your child's development and what is "normal" for him or her. Just when you think you've figured out your child, something changes. You may find strategies that once worked no longer have any impact on him or her. Don't worry, this is normal. If you would like more resources or information, please contact your pediatrician or you may contact Denise Rouso, St. Anne Counselor, 206-282-3538, ext. 115 or at drouso@stannesea.org.

**Information compiled by Jennifer Moyer-Taylor, St. Joseph School Counselor and Denise Rouso, St. Anne School Counselor. References on back.*

My Son's Grades Fell in Middle School

By Kathy Glass, Consulting Educator of greatschools.com

QUESTION:

My son received good grades all through elementary school. When he went into seventh grade, the first year of middle school for him, there was a huge downward shift. I spoke with the principal, teachers and counselor. They said that they have seen a lot of seventh-graders slip at this age. Why should seventh grade make such a difference?

ANSWER:

Seventh grade does make a difference because adolescents are growing in so many ways—intellectually, physically and emotionally. Their brains are still developing while their bodies continue to grow and change. They tend to be emotional instead of rational as they navigate through a world that seems uncomfortable. Now throw a new school and its many challenges into the mix.

For instance, consider locker assignments, which carry a host of anxiety-provoking questions: Will my locker be near someone I know? Do I have time to go to my locker during passing period, or will I suffer humiliation if I'm late for class? Will I be able to use the combination? If I can't, whom do I ask?

And then there are the other issues that arise around going to a new school. Who do I sit with at lunch? Will I know anyone in my classes? Are the teachers nice? Will I be able to finish my homework for each class? Will I be able to get good grades? Do I have to change into sweats during PE in front of others? What if I can't find the way to all of my classes? Are the new kids going to like me? Are the older kids at this school mean? These lurking questions constantly plague a young person's mind and compete with his focusing on academics. There is much to worry about that leaves adolescents fraught with self-doubt.

So what can you do to alleviate this anxiety? Here are some suggestions:

Request a Parent Meeting.

If your son has different teachers for each of his subjects, ask to meet with all or most of them. Ask how your son is performing and behaving in each class so together you can come to some conclusions and decisions about how to proceed. It could be that he is performing well in one class and connects with that teacher, but in other classes he is slipping and shows disinterest. Middle-schoolers long for connections with teachers, so capitalize on any positive relationship he might have with one particular teacher. It is this personal bond that could lift his spirits and set him on the right track.

Hire a tutor.

A tutor can potentially support your son both academically and emotionally. Academically, he can boost skills and confidence, which can give your son the necessary tools for academic success. Your son might also forge a valuable connection with a tutor who could then serve as a mentor. To find a tutor, ask a school counselor or teacher for a recommendation of an older student at the school or someone outside campus. If there is a local college nearby, post a request on a job board. Also, check your local newspaper which might list tutoring opportunities.

Encourage participation in an extra-curricular activity.

If there is a sport or after-school club of interest, encourage him to get involved. By participating, your son can meet new friends, bond with those with similar interests, and develop skills, which can elevate his self-esteem.

You can support your child by understanding what he is going through at this important and change-filled time of his life, by being an advocate for him, guiding him and making opportunities available that will help him feel successful.

Advice from Great Schools' experts is not a substitute for professional diagnosis or treatment from a health-care provider or learning expert familiar with your unique situation. Great Schools recommends consulting a qualified professional if you have concerns about your child's condition. If you have any questions or concerns about your child, consult your pediatrician.

Your 7th Grader References (from the front):

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Thompson, Michael and Grace, Catherine O'Neill (2002). *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*. New York: Ballantine Books.

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