



PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK

A Parent's Guide to Whole-Person Development

DR. PATRICIA M. MCCORMACK

Issue 6: Profile of Elementary School- Aged Children

Dear Parent,

Family photo albums or video histories illustrate how quickly and imperceptibly physical changes occur in children. In the absence of biological challenge, nutritional deficiency, or abuse, physical maturation occurs on its own time schedule regardless of parent intervention. Development of the cognitive, emotional, affective, moral, spiritual and social aspects of personality, however, is affected by parenting practices, home environment, and the influences of other significant adults, peers, or situations.

This newsletter is the last in a series of six issues devoted to explaining how a child of elementary-school age develops a thinking self, an emotional-affective self, a moral self and a spiritual self. Stage theories of development attempt to identify normal trends. Though stages represent a rank-order direction or movement towards adulthood, they are more fluid than rigid and the age correlations that they suggest are merely guidelines. The focus of this newsletter is to summarize highlights of each school-age group and to offer suggestions of ways that parents can influence the maturing process. May this newsletter support your efforts in the whole-person development of your child.

PRIMARY SCHOOL (Grades K, 1, 2 or ages 5, 6, 7)

Early childhood is a time of developmental transition in all areas of growth: cognitive, emotional-

affective, moral, and spiritual. During primary school, preoperational (pre-logical) thinking predominates; that is, thought is intuitive, one at a time, and very much black-and-white. Near age 7 children begin to demonstrate the ability for concrete operational thinking; that is, ability to understand multiple viewpoints but in need of literal, tangible actions. Though needing consistent reinforcement in early stages of emotional-affective development, initiative and industry emerge as the essential elements to be integrated into the life of primary-school aged children. Initiative means becoming a self-starter, confidently originating plans without requiring coaxing from others. Industry is the ability to give steady care over time to a task and to finish what one starts. Industry is the major work of the elementary-school student. The moral reasoning of kindergarten children, based on unquestioning obedience, typically gives way to a moral attitude of "What's in it for me?" around age 7. At the same time, 7-year-olds experience a shift in faith development from a long stage of self-centered, magical thinking, and imagination to fascination with stories, literal interpretations, and a desire for certainties.

Suggestions: Since primary-grade children are motivated by a "What's in it for me?" attitude, use "tit-for-tat" reasoning to teach reciprocity. Appeal to love instead of fairness as a motivation. Practice kind, caring actions as a family for folks outside of the family. Explain the reason behind rules. Promote empathy, compassion, and cooperation.

Encourage imaginative play. Gently correct misconceptions and do not overreact to mistakes. Avoid labeling or assigning guilt. **Pre-school:** Be patient with questions. Expose child to recognize other points of view. Organize the environment with routine, procedure, and system. Practice consistency, continuity, predictability. Keep promises. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Avoid double standards. **By kindergarten:** Give concrete examples and specific, literal directions. Encourage artistic expression. Talk about intrinsic values involved in external realities, like the patience needed to make a cake. Introduce child to the concepts of motive, intention, cooperation, and teamwork. Value effort more than result. Arrange age-appropriate responsibilities. Practice prudent supervision, not intrusion. Give skill-related encouragement, not empty praise. Allow for choice, but limited to two or three options. Expect accountability; calmly exact pre-determined consequences. Do not assume responsibility for tasks that your child is capable of accomplishing independently. **About age 6:** Expose children to varied experiences so that they intuit personal strengths, weaknesses, preferences and abilities. Establish reasonable standards and deadlines. Use natural and logical consequences as teaching tools. Balance personal freedom with contribution to the common good (that begins with family).

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL (Grades 3, 4, 5 or ages 8, 9, 10)

Compared to early childhood, middle childhood is a season of stability. Three of the four areas of

development (cognitive, psychosocial, and spiritual) remain the same. Logical thinking, initiative and industry, and faith story-telling remain the focus of whole-person growth, though the maturing process draws children more deeply into mastery of the stages and increases readiness for future growth. Middle childhood is characterized by the need for concrete experiences; interest in theorizing; systematic approach for problem solving; rigidity; a fascination with categorizing, story-telling, and collecting (stamps, dolls, books, etc.). The major transition in middle childhood is in the area of moral development. For many 9-year-old youngsters, their moral reasoning shifts from a motivation of "me first" to interpersonal conformity. They want to please important others in order to be thought of as a "good boy" or "nice girl" or "valuable team member."

Suggestions: Foster industry by teaching your child about household tools and skills. Involve the child in tasks that require steady care over time (watering plants, pet care, etc.). Present Gospel principles and the Ten Commandments as tools for relationship with God, self, and others. Avoid comparisons with others. Encourage self-control and self-reliance. At this stage, faith development is rooted in story-telling. Read to them and tell stories about family, about their own early childhood, and about the world. Let them know they are loved even when they aren't perfect. **By age 7:** Provide exercises in cause-effect. Actively explore the physical environment. Encourage questions. **About age 8:** Provide practice in summarizing. Engage in solving puzzles, mysteries, predicting endings to stories. Brainstorm alternative solutions and consequences associated with scenarios.

MIDDLE SCHOOL (Grades 6, 7, 8 or ages 11, 12, 13)

Middle schoolers continue to develop the capacity for concrete, logical thinking, the intellectual mode begun around age 7. They still need a concrete image to aid their reasoning process, explain something to others, or to comprehend a problem. They make a gradual shift from inductive reasoning (specific to generalizations) to deductive modes of thinking (general to the specific). They become attracted to concepts of fairness, justice, social reciprocity, and equality. **Around age 12** early adolescents begin to make connective links among ideas and think abstractly, no longer needing concrete images. They can hypothesize and understand complex language forms like metaphors and sarcasm. The opinions of others become important. During middle school both moral and spiritual development are "conventional," meaning that conformity to community influences grows at this age. Throughout early childhood the desire for reward and avoidance of punishment continued to shape behavior, but it is not until early adolescence that personal conscience begins to develop. Conscience shifts from imposed rules to owning an inner standard. **Around age 13** middle-school students transition from the story stage of faith development into the belonging stage, blending together a sense of self, values, and commitments. At this stage community attitudes are highly influential in shaping faith. Faith is deeply held, but it is not yet very self-reflective. Industry remains the foundation for self-esteem development at the middle-school level, i.e., goal setting, meeting deadlines, finishing tasks, organizational skills, time management, long-range projects, planning work and working the plan. A posi-

tive foundation of security, autonomy, initiative and industry is essential to identity formation, the next stage in emotional-affective development. Forming identity is the major task of adolescence, ages 13-25.

Suggestions: Give opportunities for adolescents to explain their thoughts, discuss justice issues, do group problem solving, debate, and teach others. Establish a democratic climate at home where the child has input to rules and where you balance parent control with adolescent self-reliance. Encourage independent conscience based on self-respect and social responsibility. Involve your adolescent in service to the human family. Give practice in clarifying values, i.e., naming issues, brainstorming pros and cons, consequences, alternatives, and the associated Gospel values. Require examples to support ideas or opinions. Cultivate industry through deadlines, time management, and organizational skills. Create long-range projects with periodic check-in points. Work side-by-side on difficult tasks. Model how to goal-set. Recognize that your child is forming his or her own faith and that it will most likely be different from your own. Talk with your child about your own faith journey and how your faith has grown or changed. ♦



Patricia M. McCormack, Ed.D., is an associate of the Center for Catholic Education at Catholic University, Washington, DC. She taught in elementary and secondary schools; served as elementary-school principal; and directed teacher education at the college level. She speaks and writes frequently on topics of formation education. Reach her at DrPatMcCormack@aol.com