

Parents often approach us with questions about what is common and developmentally appropriate for their child's age.

We are grateful to school counselors Denise Rousso (St. Anne) and Jennifer Moyer-Taylor (St. Joseph) for allowing us to reproduce this short compilation of their research in order to assist you in navigating these sometimes challenging, yet wonderful times.

Be aware that children move through these stages at different rates, some sooner, some later.

We hope you find their words helpful.

Your First-Grader

Common Cognitive, Social and Emotional Developmental Behaviors of First Graders

Classroom:

- Typically learning 10 new words a day (which means a new word every 90 minutes!), 6-year-old brains have developed interconnected “mental language maps” where they can quickly chart and categorize the meaning of words. This is a significant opportunity to include him/her in adult conversations and learning new languages because this *rapid* brain growth in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation happens primarily before age 7.
- Often use teasing, bossing, tattling, tantrums and complaining to try out relationships with authority. (This is to be understood but not excessively tolerated.)
- Can be extremely sensitive and will respond *strongly* to both encouragement *and* criticism.
- Dishonesty peaks at age 6, especially if they are asked directly to admit wrongdoing. This is in part due to their new developmental ability to realize that others have different thoughts than they do.
- Wants it all, has difficulty in general making choices.
- Grows more independent, yet feels less secure.
- Continues to crave affection from adults, anxious to do well but does a lot of testing.
- Difficult for them to accept criticism, blame and punishment.
- Because they are going through the “industrious” developmental stage, they may try and take on too much work-wise, as their eyes are bigger than their stomachs or skills.
- Very open and receptive to new learning.
- Very eager, curious, imaginative and enthusiastic.
- Schools replace home as most significant environmental influence.

Social Behaviors with Peers:

- Because a first grader's developing brain is leaping from magical thinking to logical and rational mental processing; she/he is eager to learn rules and regulations and will tend to be fixated on rules of the games, justice and fairness. Although this may drive the adults in their life nuts, it is actually a positive developmental stage!
- They are fixated on winning and being first so taking off the competitive edge off games is important.
- Friendships are very important yet unstable; can be bossy and unkind/critical to peers.
- Strong need to win and may change or invent rules to suit her/him, wants to be “first”.
- Can be rigid, demanding, and have difficulty adapting at times.
- When asked *why* they feel certain emotions, most 6 year olds don't know and have a hard time explaining why they feel sad, mad or other feelings. This is because the cerebral cortex is not yet connected to the amygdala-which makes it difficult for them to put their feelings into words.
- Very emotional-functions at opposite extremes.

Communication style

- Loves jokes and guessing games.
- Boisterous and enthusiastic.
- Complains.

*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.***

Information compiled by Jennifer Moyer-Taylor, St. Joseph School Counselor and Denise Rousso, St. Anne School Counselor. For permission to customize, copy and circulate, please call Denise Rousso at 206-282-3538 X115 or email at drouso@stannesea.org. Copyright 2012.

Ask the Experts – A snapshot of a common friendship behavior

My Son Worries That His Friends Don't Like Him

By Debra Collins, Family Therapist

QUESTION:

My first-grader is very sensitive. He's always worried about not having any friends. He has lots of friends in his class. But if they disagree with him or refuse to share, he thinks that they are being rude and that they don't like him anymore. The next day or five minutes later everything is fine. But this worries him. I don't know how to assure him that they like him and just not to worry about this. Help me help him. I don't want him to grow up insecure and just a follower.

ANSWER:

How wonderful that your son has lots of friends. More often we hear about trends of early aggression in boys, not camaraderie.

Your son is learning about peer relationships. It is difficult to navigate different temperaments and interaction styles. There is bound to be some conflict. It is common for children at his age to feel slighted and then have it blow over in five minutes. But ask his teacher about his interactions. Teachers usually have a sense of age-appropriate behavior. You can also arrange play dates at home or other non-competitive socialization opportunities for more peer-interaction practice.

It is a natural reaction for a parent to want her child to be happy and successful in his relationships. However, sometimes our own fears about his well being may be misinterpreted by the child. Without knowing all the details, I can only give you what I think may be another contributing factor based on how you worded your question. You stated that your son is "very sensitive" and that you "don't want him to grow up insecure and just a follower." Is it possible that he has misinterpreted your reassurance? He may perceive people disagreeing with him or concerned about him as not liking him. An adult understands that you want your son to be resilient and independent, but a 6-year-old may view this as rejection.

Children at this age think in literal terms. If you think this may be a possibility, you might want to gently explore with him who else he fears may not like him when there are disagreements. Reassuring him about how you feel about him may straighten out any miscommunication and help him relax his concerns about not being likeable.

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 1st Grader References

Ames, L.B., Baker, S.M., Ilg, F. (1981). *Child Behavior*. Harper & Row: New York. Pellissier, Hank. Retrieved on August, 31, 2011. <http://www.greatschools.org/parenting/behavior-discipline/slideshows/4451-brain-first-grade.gs>.

In Social Skills. Retrieved August 25, 2011, from <http://www.greatschools.org/parenting/behavior-discipline/1349-my-son-worries-that-his-friends-don't-like-him.gs>

Pellissier, Hank, *Health and Behavior*. Retrieved November 9, 2011, <http://www.greatschools.org/parenting/behavior-discipline/slideshows/4391-brain-first-grade.gs>.

Wood, Chip (1997). *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom 4-14*. Maine: Northeast Foundation for Children.