

Child Development - a quick overview and some tips

Hello again parents,

I thought I would go back to basics and provide you with a quick outline I found of 'normal' child development for primary school aged children and some ideas about how we can best support them through the ages and stages. Yes I can sense some eyes glazing over but bear with me it might be helpful one day. Having some information about what kids are dealing with and going through might help us understand and deal with some of those 'frustrating' behaviours. Some knowledge of social and emotional development may provide greater wisdom and more appropriate responses and consequences. However, do not move the goal posts in regards to what is acceptable behaviour and what is not in terms of behaviour. Maintain good, reasonable boundaries. Remember that we should always strive to be Bigger, Stronger, Wiser and Kind (Circle of Security). And finally remember not to take behaviours too personally (tricky I know when your 6 year old is in the middle of a full blown meltdown and telling you that they hate you!).

4 years old.

- Will start to be critical and will define the world in simple terms - right or wrong, good or bad, nice or not nice.
- They will start to realise the power of their words and will sometimes use them to get their way or to control others. They will often back up what they are saying with actions (hitting, pushing, grabbing) or non-verbals (tone, volume, facial expressions, posture/stance).
- Will become competitive.
- Will still blur reality and fantasy sometimes. Might tell lies, extravagant stories, or have imaginary friend/s.
- Still building their sense of self and experimenting with independence, so might be stubborn, defiant and bossy.
- Will do all sorts of things to avoid bedtime.
- Might have bad dreams. These have been called 'night terrors'.
- Might develop a fear of the dark or become anxious thought of being separated from parent or caregiver.
- Will start to enjoy playing with other kids rather than simply alongside them (hallelujah!).
- Will test their limits with you but will still be keen to please and help you out when they can.

The support they need:

- When setting rules, explain to them why the rules are important. They are curious and developing their ideas about how the world works. It doesn't mean they'll 'get it' straight away, or that they'll comply.
- Keep your requests simple. An OT once said to me only give instructions that include 3 things eg at bedtime - teeth, pjs, bed. Apparently it works for husbands too.
- They desperately want to make you happy. Let them know whenever you see good behaviour.
- Don't argue with a four year old. Just don't. They'll out-do you any day and if they don't have the words or a sound argument, they'll just keep asking 'why'.
- When it comes to less-than-impressive behaviour, ask what happened but don't ask why they did it. Asking 'Why did you do that?' will just encourage a lie because the boundary between fantasy and reality in the world of a four year old is very - very - loose. And we don't want to 'trap' them into a lie especially if we witnessed the behaviour first hand.
- When they do something wrong, apply gentle consequences but explain why the behaviour is wrong and that you know they can do better next time. They need to know you believe in them - they will do as you do.
- Be consistent. If you don't think it's always important to enforce a rule, your child will, understandably, think it's not won't always important to follow it. And follow through if you have set boundaries and consequences.
- Encourage their independence but remember they are still young. Let them be little people when they are stressed or tired. Give them lots of kisses and cuddles, even though they are 'big people now.'

Five years old.

- Will understand the importance of rules but might divert from the rules when playing. Rules tend to be 'flexible' - for them at least.
- May accuse others of cheating if they don't win a game.
- Will start to show empathy and an understanding that other people might have points of view that are different to their own.
- Will be able to share but might still find it difficult, especially when it comes to their special things.
- Might be afraid of failure, criticism and spooky things like ghosts or monsters.
- Attention span will start to increase which will impact on the type of discussions you are able to have with them.
- Might come across as being an 'expert' on everything.
- Will enjoy joking around and will start to develop toilet talk and humour (hilarious...)
- Will be looking to make their own decisions, particularly around what to wear and what to eat.

- If starting at school, might be moodier, more sensitive or more tired than usual. It's exhausting having to sit still and concentrate for long periods.

The support they need.

- Encourage anything that will get your child moving, particularly if it is in a group or a team with others. This will help your child to develop important skills like taking turns, getting along with others, working together, negotiating, compromising, and winning or losing graciously.
- Set aside time each day to play with your child or spend one on one time together. This will give your child the opportunity to let you into their world, which will always be one of the best places to be. From here you can get a feel for what is going on in their beautifully flourishing minds.
- Start to expand your child's emotional literacy by naming and discussing feelings.
- Connect rewards to responsibilities. 'How about you help me clear the table and then you can have dessert?'
- Continue to keep rules simple and try not to have too many.

Six years old.

- It's pretty likely that they will know a lot more than you. Just ask them.
- May start tantrums again (great!).
- Can start to test the limits but will still want to please you and help out.
- Will seek praise for their school work and for the good things they do.
- Will seek to master new skills and to feel competent.
- Might worry about being away from you.

The support they need.

- Encourage their efforts and acknowledge when they have worked hard.
- Encourage effort over outcome.
- Ensure they get the support they need if they are struggling at school.
- Avoid overpraise or meaningless praise and let them know that they are special, but so are other people.

Seven years old.

- Might tend towards complaining, usually about their parents or the rules, but also about friends and other kids.
- Will feel misunderstood by many.
- Can be dramatic about school, friends or life in general (the age of the dobber!).
- Will try to use words to talk about how they are feeling but may become frustrated and angry when they are upset.
- Will be becoming more aware of what other people think.

The support they need.

- Listen and validate what they are feeling and know that you don't need to fix their problems.
- Discuss how they might solve the things that are causing them trouble. Give them space and encouragement to come up with their own ideas. Let them try problem solving.
- Don't be drawn into the dramatics and immediately think that things are a mess because they are saying they are.
- Emphasise the positive.

Eight years old.

- Will want you to think the way they do and will have little tolerance for your difference of opinion. They will actually be very sensitive to what you think of them.
- Will often fight with the mother (of course they will!).
- There won't be a lot of grey. Things will be black or white, right or wrong, good or bad.
- This tendency to think in absolutes might cause a little trouble with friendships. Take comfort in knowing that yours won't be the only kid struggling with this. They'll be okay - this is the part where they learn about friendships and how to get along with people. Its important stuff!

The support they need.

- When you're praising their good behaviour, be clear about what it is they have done.
- Avoid arguing whenever you can. With their black and white thinking, an argument will just mean that someone is right (them) and someone is wrong (you). Instead, ask them to explain their point of view and encourage them to see things from different angles.
- Spend plenty of time together to cement the relationship for the pull away that is coming at adolescence.

Nine years old.

- Friends will start to be more important than parents, and this will continue through adolescence.
- What their friends think will start to become more and more important.
- Will narrow the friendship field by having closer friendships, but less of them.
- Will share jokes and secrets with friends.
- Will push against rules and directions and may disrespect you.
- Will be able to be loving and silly but will also develop the capacity to be selfish, argumentative and abrasive.

What can you do?

- Provide them with opportunities for independence and to make their own decisions.
- Avoid being too bossy or directive.
- Encourage them to start thinking about things from another point of view. Try to develop empathy.

Ten to eleven years old.

- The tantrums of childhood will be calming down by now. Enjoy it - adolescence is on its way!
- Might still argue about rules and the necessity and detail of them.
- Will try to explain away misbehaviour through excuses and justifications.
- Promises become important and they will remember EVERYTHING

What can you do?

- Don't make promises you won't be able to keep.
- Avoid arguing with them whenever you can. They will often have an argument for everything. Hear what they have to say, make your decision, then end the conversation and walk away!
- Let them push against you in safe ways - let them try different things, express their own opinions, and make their own decisions when appropriate.
- Know where your boundaries are and be ready to implement consequences when they make a bad decision. Make the consequence about their behaviour, not about who they are.

Even as adults, we can be prone to having tough days, tantrums and tears sometimes. Imagine what it's like for our kids who are finding their way in the world. Remember that a) each child is different and will grown and develop at different times; and b) you are the expert when it comes to your child - nobody knows your child like you do. And finally as always it is always so much easier said than done and we will have good days and not so good days.

Good luck!

Juliet the Social Worker and Imperfect Parent

