



Discovering a Self— Discovering the World Part One

Seventh Grade! A voyage of personal discovery begins

Important things to know about— Helping children discover themselves

- Changes to expect in a 7th grader.
- What parents need to do to help.
- Success goals and learning styles.
- Building skills and exploring interests.

Understanding your 7th grader

Does it seem like your child’s development is totally unpredictable?! It’s true: “normal” development for the average middle schooler varies a lot. Some kids are taller, some shorter, some adjust to school more easily than others, and most girls grow faster and mature faster than boys. One year they are easy to get along with, the next year...oh, my goodness!

In fact, we can almost predict which years are going to be easier and which years are more challenging. There’s a pattern of yearly alternations from age 2 to age 16, with one year a time of balance and good adjustment and the next year a time of growth and being ‘off balance.’ Some years children turn inward, needing time to be alone and ‘brood,’ the next year they turn outward, exploring and enjoying everyone and everything. This chart will give you an idea about which child you can expect to show up for dinner this year and the next.

Age	Characteristics
10	Mind/body/emotions in good adjustment; child seems comfortable within self and within others
11	Balance breaks up; discord and discomfort ;child tests limits, shows “chip on the shoulder” attitude
12	Smoother relationships; positive mood; child has more optimism and enthusiasm for new things
13	Inward focus; child seems thoughtful, moody, very self-conscious, withdrawn from personal contacts

Based on *Your Ten- to Fourteen-Year-Old* by Louis Bates Ames, Ph.D., et al, Gesell Institute of Human Development, New York, 1988

So—rejoice! 7th graders are often easier to deal with than 6th graders were. Yes, it’s true! 7th graders are usually more positive, have better relationships, and are more enthusiastic about life than they were last year. Enjoy this great kid, who is more balanced and even likes you and the rest of the family again.

On the other hand, one of your child’s big jobs right now is to develop close friendships. Learning what real friendship is takes time and energy—and takes the child outside the family. That’s normal. This is the year children begin to search for faithful relationships, something they’ll need to understand, rely on, and be part of for the rest of their lives.

What can parents do to help?

First, love them. Love—in the form of time, not money—is the best economic investment you can make in your child. Love is more important than *anything* else we can give children. Loved children are healthier, learn better, do better in school, take fewer risks, and turn out to be nice, loveable people who can go on to be successful and resilient adults. ***And loveable people are more likely to have good relationships, to be hired and promoted, and to get help when things go wrong.***

Second, make sure they are getting enough sleep, healthy food, and exercise. Growing bodies and growing brains need *lots* of all three. Mid-morning snacks are as necessary for middle schoolers as for five year olds, so stick a power bar in the backpack whenever you can.

Third, focus on their school achievement. Stress the importance of good math, reading, and writing skills. Talk to them about their schoolwork every night after dinner, in some detail— not just “how was your day?” but “yesterday you told me there’d

be a science quiz today, how did it go?” Research shows that families who eat dinner together several nights a week (with the TV off) and discuss homework every day have kids that do better in school.

Next, keep working on your children’s organizational skills, and insist they take responsibility for their actions. *It turns out that children who know that they can be responsible for their own success will end up being more optimistic—and more successful.* So help them practice responsibility for chores and assignments and so on.

If at all possible, don’t leave them alone after school. Children who spend more than three hours a day alone have lower self-esteem, are more depressed, and do less well in school, no matter what their parents earn. “Should Middle Grade Students Be Left Alone After School?” Steven Mertens, Nancy Flowers and Peter Mulhall. *Middle School Journal*, May, 2003.

Setting goals for 7th grade success

Another thing your children will be doing in school this year—with your help and the teacher’s help—is setting some goals that will help them succeed in the 7th grade. The goals need to be personal, simple, and doable, for example:

- I will finish all my homework every night, pack it in my book bag before I go to bed, and hand it in on time.
- When I have free time I will read out loud to my little sister. She’ll like that, and it will help me be a better reader.
- This year I will find an activity that I would like to do [like music or the school newspaper], and join that group, and stick with it.
- I will ride my bike or go running or do *something* with all my extra energy, at least half an hour every day.

Finding out how your children learn best

In school, students will complete an exercise that helps them know *how* they learn things. So another important thing parents can do is ask their children about learning styles. Do they learn best by reading about things? By talking? By building things? By moving their bodies and acting things out? Do they learn best by themselves, or in groups? Does your child think in numbers, in words, in pictures?

Once you know how your children learn, *use* that knowledge. For example, if you see them struggling with an assignment, suggest that they try switching to some other approach that uses a different style. Remind them what their learning strengths are, and help them find ways to use those strengths in school and in their hobbies and other interests.

Exploring skills and interests

Middle schoolers can accept more responsibility at school and like to work on projects with their peers. They also like to make a difference in the world and are great at tutoring younger kids, raising funds for good causes, etc. These projects help them find out who they are and what they’re really good at.

As part of exploring who they are, 7th graders need to test themselves against others. Some do this in sports, but children who aren’t athletic need to join other groups. Find out what is available at your school, church, Boys/Girls Clubs, or local Y’s. Kids who don’t have a place to be themselves in activities with other kids can be tempted to take dangerous risks. The teen years are risk-taking years—you have to make sure the risks are *good* risks.

Children at this age also need rituals and reward ceremonies. They need “their” adults to recognize them for their achievements; they want to know that they are growing up, getting ready to join the adult world. One good way to help them explore their interests is to get them going talking about themselves and what matters most to them. For starters, you could ask them to finish these statements:

- If I could spend the rest of my life doing my favorite thing, it would be.....
- I always feel good when I am
- I just seem to have a natural ability to.....

Kids this age *love* to talk about themselves. It’s normal. It’s healthy. It helps them learn. So—ask!

Ask your child—

Tell me the story of your day at school. What was the worst thing that happened? The best thing?

Who’s your favorite teacher? What do you think makes a teacher good? How would you teach if you were the one in charge of the class?