

6th Grade Social Changes: What To Expect

This is a year of transitions, from the physical and emotional changes of adolescence to the new environment of middle school.

by Patti Ghezzi



Your child's 6th grade year is likely to be a bundle of contradictions. He pushes you away, then criticizes you for not understanding him. She is less engaged at school but insists she doesn't need your help.

"Go away!" your child says one minute.

"Don't leave me!" she says the next.

Don't be surprised if your involvement in the parent-teacher organization is suddenly a source of embarrassment. Your child may groan when you mention you'll be at school later in the day when just last year she would have squealed with delight.

"It's not that they want to rebel; it's part of the change," says Al Summers, a veteran middle school teacher who now directs professional development at the National Middle School Association. "Parents tend to look at that as 'My kid doesn't need me as much.'" In reality, your child needs you more than ever: "This is a development stage where the parent has to be involved with all aspects of the child's life."

Rapid Brain Development

The social characteristics of a 6th grader are hard to miss: Obsession with the opinions of peers, lack of interest in the opinions of parents, mood swings, tendency to keep thoughts and feelings secret from parents, intense desire to fit in with a crowd. Sixth-graders feel awkward. When they cry, they can't explain why they are upset. The smallest wayward glance can prompt your child to get up from the table and race to her room. "Stop looking at me!" she might hiss.

"The research in this case is very, very clear," Summers says. "For young adolescents, it's the biggest brain development stage next to birth-to-3. It's also when hormones kick in, and kids don't understand what's going on."

Early adolescence hits most kids around age 10 and lasts until about age 15. Yet children within that age range can vary widely in social development. Some girls are wearing makeup while others are still playing with dolls.

It's also the year most kids transition from elementary to middle school—so after being the oldest kids in school, they go back to being the youngest. Class sizes are often larger in middle school, which may make it harder for your child to adjust and focus.

You can help your child understand the physical and emotional changes she and her friends are going through. You can be there to listen to her struggles and offer suggestions. But parents shouldn't take it personally when their 6th grader rejects them as a confidante. "This is the age when they are beginning to look outside the family for meaning in life," Summers says. "They are constantly doing a mental inventory of where they fit in."

Summers recommends that parents consider compromising when it comes to school involvement. If your child is mortified at the prospect of you chaperoning a dance or field trip, offer to do something more discreet, such as assisting in the teacher workroom or signing up for a fundraising committee. Or instead of chaperoning every field trip, you might agree to attend just one per semester. Don't feel hurt or turn your child's normal adolescent development into a bigger drama than it is.

Stand your ground when it comes to rules you set up for your child's safety, such as insisting on meeting his friends' parents or requiring her to abide by a curfew. Look for ways to compromise that will send a message to your child that you are not going to pull back but you are willing to adapt.

Taking Charge of Learning

Don't be surprised if your child is less engaged and motivated at school. Try different ways to help him become more interested in learning. For example, rent movies and library books that are tailored to his interests. Talk about current events. Ask to see his schoolwork just to check whether you remember it. (Don't be surprised if you don't—adolescence hasn't changed much, but the school curriculum has.)

At this age, kids need to be responsible for their own learning. Encourage your child to speak up when she doesn't understand something and ask for help before she gets completely lost. Encourage your child to set high goals for himself rather than waiting for you and the teacher to set goals for him.

Parents should be careful not to pass on to their children their own negative attitudes about learning—especially in subjects with a reputation for rigor, like math and science. Parents will sometimes enroll their child in the easier course rather than the more challenging one because of their own fears, says Hank Kepner, president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

"When the parent says 'I was never good at math,' the kid gets the message that he won't be, either," Kepner says. Instead, he advises, offer to sit down with your child and tackle a tough math problem together.

Keeping a positive attitude during your child's 6th grade year may not be easy, especially for parents who struggled when they were that age. But it's important to embrace the changes as a part of your child's normal transition to adulthood—even if you can't bear the thought of your child becoming an adult. Consider it one more contradiction that is just part of 6th grade.

For more information, read ["6th Grade Academics: What To Expect"](#)

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