

7th Grade Social Changes: What To Expect

The beginning of the teenage years is a confusing time for many adolescents—and for parents trying to understand their behavior.

by Patti Ghezzi



To get an idea of the 7th grader's mindset, take a look at his backpack, if you dare. Chances are it's a disorganized mess of papers, books, headphones, and half-eaten bags of chips.

"It's all part of the 7th grade package," says Susan Rakow, an assistant professor of education at Cleveland State University and a veteran 7th grade teacher.

Grade 7 is a transitional time when kids are leaving their childhood behind and looking ahead to high school. Their lives are changing, their bodies are changing, and keeping their math homework in the correct folder just isn't a priority.

"Seventh-graders, particularly boys, face significant challenges in organization and motivation," Rakow says. "It's typical of adolescence. They're asserting their uniqueness and facing new challenges."

Actions Have Consequences

Students in 7th grade often spend time and energy convincing their parents to go away, but in reality kids at this age need clear limits, meaningful consequences, and parental support. Instead, parents sometimes take a hands-off approach in hopes that their child will become more independent.

For parents struggling with how much to hover during homework time, Rakow offers this advice: Let the first half of the first marking period go by without intervening unless she asks for help. Once you get initial feedback from the school, adjust the game plan accordingly. If her grades in math are terrible, Rakow suggests, you can say "I need to see your math homework every night before you put it in your backpack."

If that doesn't happen, "then have consequences," she says. "Real ones." For example, you could take away your child's video games until her grades come up or restrict access to television, the computer, or her cell phone.

It's important that parents make good on their threats of punishment. If you tell your 7th grader you're going to ground her if you get another report saying she isn't doing her homework, then you need to ground her.

"Our lives are so busy, we don't follow through on consequences," Rakow says. "The kids find out we're full of baloney."

Another shift that continues from 5th and 6th grades is the need for kids to gain approval from peers rather than adults. They are no longer motivated to do well in school because they want to please their teachers or their parents. They want to gain favor among their peers. Girls who have always been good at math may get the message that it's cooler to be dumb in class than to be the student who always has the right answer.

They are searching for meaning in their lives but often find school assignments void of meaning. "They question us and say 'Why do I have to do this?' and we say 'Because you'll need to know it later when you're in the real world,'" Rakow says.

Like so many parental retorts, that doesn't cut it. "They live in an immediate, self-involved place," she says. A 7th grader responds better to a reply such as "Because if you don't learn it and your grade drops, you are going to be grounded every Saturday night for a month."

The hardest part about having a 7th grader is that their behavior can be confusing. One minute you're talking about current events and your child seems like an adult; the next, he's stomping away and throwing a temper tantrum, Rakow says. That's why it's so important for parents not to let discipline issues slide: "It goes from being a stage to being their behavior."

Time for Exploration

Another issue parents face with their 7th grader is conflict over activities. Your child may want to play a sport as well as an instrument and remain active in a youth group, running her parents ragged. Or she may want to drop piano lessons in favor of soccer.

"It's a very exploratory time of life," Rakow says. "In many cases, the child has a lot of interests."

Rakow recommends allowing your child to explore several activities if he wants to, knowing that by high school his interests will have narrowed. "If you really think they're making a poor choice, you negotiate," she says. For example, you may be able to convince your child to stick with piano lessons for one more year if you promise to let him drop the activity without a guilt trip if he still wants to at the end of that time.

Even as your child is busy juggling more activities and subjects than ever before, he may have little to say. You ask how school was: "Fine." You ask what he did: "Nothing."

"Too often, the parents give up and don't pursue it," Rakow says. She prefers a play-by-play approach: What did you do in first period? Second period? At lunch?

Once your child tires of this interrogation, he might just open up and give you a few more details the first time you ask "How was school?"

The 7th grader can test a parent's patience, but the key is to not surrender. Once they learn it's not OK to quit doing their homework, to stop working hard in school, to demand a cell phone only to never answer it when a parent calls, and to mumble one-word responses to their parents, they'll realize it's useless to push back.

And then, don't be surprised if out of nowhere you get a glimpse of the fantastic teenager your child is turning into. "When a child is well-parented in middle school," Rakow says, "I find that they rise to the occasion."

For more information, read ["7th Grade Academics: What To Expect"](#)

Journalist Patti Ghezzi covered education and schools for 10 years for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She lives in Avondale Estates, Ga., with her family, which includes husband Jason, daughter Celia, and geriatric mutt Albany.

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