

Kids Really Are Different These Days

Kids today aren't the same as they were even a few years ago. Social and technological changes are having an effect on their social development.

By Diana D. Coyl

You undoubtedly took a course on human development when you were preparing to teach and are reminded daily of developmental changes as students grow before your eyes. As a teacher, you're able to place theories and research on developmental domains (e.g., physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional) and influences on development (e.g., social, cultural, environmental) in the context of real students. If you've taught for several years, you've probably talked with colleagues about how different stu-



dents are today than they were just a few years ago. Well, you're right. Upper elementary children today, while retaining many of the characteristics ascribed to them generations ago by theorists such as Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, are different.

Developmental characteristics across multiple domains remain relatively predictable for the upper elementary years, but they do reflect changes in society and school expectations. Culture, personal experiences, and relationships affect children's development as children's development affects their personal relationships and experiences. Increasingly, peers play a role in shaping social and emotional development, as well as children's academic and physical self-concepts, though adults continue to serve as important sources of information, support, and positive role models.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Obesity and heightened body awareness are more problematic today than in past

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generations. Obesity has become a serious health risk for many upper elementary children. Nearly one in five children are overweight (about 12.5 million nationwide). The prevalence of obesity in this age group has doubled from 6.5% in 1980 to 17% in 2006. Besides the physical health risks associated with obesity — more children are being diagnosed with high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type II diabetes, sleep apnea, bone and joint problems (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services 2008) — being overweight negatively affects children's psychological and social well-being. Numerous studies have found associations between upper elementary children's body image and weight concerns, dieting attitudes and behaviors, media influences, family and peer teasing, self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Adding to these problems, while obesity rates increase, the percentage of children involved in daily physical education programs in the United States has decreased dramatically in 30 years (NASPE 2005).

The media increasingly influence upper elementary children's ideas of ideal body types. Athletic abilities are likely to define boys' popularity and self-confidence, whereas physical appearance is critical for girls. Adolescent and preadolescent girls typically desire to lose weight, even when they are of normal weight for their age. Preadolescent boys more frequently report the desire to gain weight by increasing their muscularity (McCabe and Ricciardelli 2004). These trends are more common among Caucasian girls than African-American boys and girls (Lawrence and Thelen 1995).

We have known for years that children's physical development has implications for their emotional and social development, an issue especially salient in regard to increasingly early onset of puberty, especially among girls. Where boys usually benefit socially from the growth spurt and increased muscle development associated with the initiation of puberty, the increase in fat for girls that is a normal part of pubertal change is inconsistent with cultural ideals of thinness and heightens the risk for poor body image and dieting behaviors. Physically, some children may look older than their actual ages. Early maturation increases the likelihood of involvement with older peers and health-compromising behaviors. Research shows that early pubertal development is associated with smoking, alcohol use, poor school performance, and earlier sexual behaviors and has been linked to lower self-esteem for girls (Graber et al. 1997).

MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

The increasing importance of media and technology in children's lives affects social and communica-

tive development. Children acquire electronic games, personal computers, and cell phones at ever-younger ages. Surveys indicate that about 82% of children are online by 7th grade and experience about 6.5 hours per day of media exposure. Technologically savvy children can use several devices at once, commonly referred to as media multitasking (Wallis 2006).

Some children communicate more through electronic devices and spend less face time with family members and peers. Text messaging and e-mails provide limited or no access to other people's emotions, and the rich language of nonverbal communication that occurs in real-time interactions is lost. In addition, the quality of family time may be compromised if parents or children are using technology. Consider how family dinner conversation might be affected if family members are watching television, listening to music, checking e-mail, answering the phone, or text messaging.

How does children's media multitasking affect their cognitive performance? The human brain is not capable of focusing on more than one thing at a

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time; the experience of media multitasking requires the brain to perform sequential processing, switching attention back and forth from one task to another. Research findings are clear that the quality of complex tasks (e.g., homework assignments) and depth of thought is reduced when individuals' attention is divided. Although children may claim that they can

work better while listening to music or using media devices, research consistently shows that when individuals' attention is divided, their errors increase significantly and projects take twice as much time or more to complete (Wallis 2006).

SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Children's self-understanding deepens across the elementary years. Increasingly, they describe themselves in terms of socially referenced, psychological traits such as *popular, nice, helpful, smart, and dumb*. Self-understanding develops through a process of social comparison, interactions, and feedback from others. Peers can be particularly important to the development of children's self-concept in academic, social, and physical domains (Santrock 2008). For example, research indicates that supportive peer relations are related to adolescents' positive school-related behaviors, intentions, and attitudes (Coyle, Jones, and Dick 2004), and classmates' evaluative feedback predicts changes in children's academic self-concept, effort, and performance (Gest et al. 2008).

Recent research also supports the view that upper elementary children's social perspective taking, which is the capacity to imagine what others may be thinking and feeling, increases with age (Gurucharri and Selman 1982) and training. Theoretically, individuals who are better at perspective taking are more likely to display prosocial behaviors and empathy for others, and they demonstrate better social problem solving and more effective ways of handling difficult social situations. Perspective-taking skills differ greatly among children of the same age (Gurucharri and Selman 1982). The quality and quantity of interactions between children and adults (parents and teachers) significantly affect children's ability to recognize emotions in others and to respond appropriately (Santrock 2008).

Upper elementary children's emotional development is characterized by:

- The ability to experience more than one emotion in a given situation;
- A greater perspective on events leading to emotional reactions (contextual awareness); and
- Increased recognition of typical emotional responses to given situations (emotional scripts).

Upper elementary children make rapid gains in the appropriate expression and control of emotions (e.g., they can suppress or moderate emotions more successfully). They become better at using self-initiated

strategies to cope with strong emotions and at expressing their emotions in socially acceptable ways. By age 10, most children have an adaptive set of techniques for regulating emotions (Santrock 2008).

EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Children's emotional competence is an important factor in their school experience, especially in light of continuing problems with poor student conduct and bullying. Peer relations can promote social and emotional development or hinder it. Individuals who are bullied report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem into adulthood. Childhood bullies are more likely to engage in criminal behavior later in life. Overall, boys are more likely to bully and be bullied and to report physical bullying. Girls are more likely to report verbal and psychological bullying, sometimes referred to as relational aggression (National Institutes of Health 2001). This latter type of aggression targets victims' relationships and peer standing through the use of sarcasm, hostile and cold verbal comments, social exclusion, gossiping, and spreading rumors (Talbot 2002). Cyber-bullying is also a growing concern; more children and adolescents are reporting the posting on personal web sites of text messages, e-mails, and compromising or malicious information and photos that damage individuals' reputation and status and that negatively affect their school experiences, as well as their psychological and emotional well-being (Raskauskas and Stoltz 2007). Intervention programs informed by research tend to be more effective in addressing the pervasive problem of bullying (Kallestad and Olweus 2003).

In contrast, high-quality friendships provide support and security, and they may serve as an effective buffer against relational and overt victimization by other peers, particularly for girls (Schmidt and Bagwell 2007). Friends play a significant role in influencing children's experiences. Children's descriptions of their friends and their expectations of them change with age. Upper elementary children report the importance of companionship, common interests, loyalty, and the gradual development of opportunities for intimate disclosure (Mathur and Berndt 2006). Numerous studies have found that high-quality friendships have a positive effect on children's social adjustment, self-perceived social acceptance, their ability to cope with stressors, their involvement in school-based activities, grades, and test scores (Berndt and Keefe 1995). One recent longitudinal study reported that 6th graders without friends showed lower levels of prosocial behavior, lower academic achieve-

ment, and greater emotional distress compared with children who had friends (Wentzel, Barry, and Caldwell 2004). In contrast, friendships characterized by conflict, dominating behaviors, rivalry, betrayal, and competition are associated with lower grades and self-worth and with higher self-reported adjustment problems (Laursen and Mooney 2008).

The upper elementary years are a developmental period in which prevention and intervention efforts can be particularly effective in deterring negative trajectories or outcomes, such as poor academic performance and dropping out of school. As children move into adolescence, opportunities for adult influence tend to diminish. Upper elementary children's increased cognitive, emotional, and social skills make them enjoyable and perhaps more challenging to work with, but this developmental period provides unique opportunities for adults and children to work together in ways that are likely to be mutually rewarding. **K**

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