

YOUR INDUSTRIOUS EIGHT YEAR OLD



Your child is well into school by now, and *peer pressure* becomes a strong influence we all tend to fear. Hopefully by now your pattern of support, attention and morals teaching has become such a part of your child's automatic way of interacting, that lapses into peer-motivated deviances are brief and not significantly objectionable. A transition will occur over these years that is expressed in the child's ability to "be good" for his/her own benefits, as he/she sees the natural consequences of independent decision making. Continue to remain consistent in terms of limit setting, expected family participation and chore contribution. You have seen what a difference being a good example of wholesomeness and healthfulness can be – keep up the good work. Give trust and privilege as it is earned not as automatic. TV, video, electronic games and cell phones are privileges to be earned. Never put these devices in your child's bedroom! Try to keep spending active time with your child, showing natural interest in his/her activities, concerns, accomplishments, fears, failures and relationships. Supervision remains important (too young to be a latch-key kid yet). Also continue to show affection, as touch and physical affirmation remain as important as verbal encouragement. Praise specific skills, foresee a special future based on real talents and personality strengths. Take a role in school and sports activities, but avoid the temptation to have unusual expectations of success, particularly on the ball fields and gym.

Developmentally, your child will now be normally free of extraneous movements during motor activities – he/she is as smooth and sometimes smoother than you are! Slower motor skills developers may benefit from less competitive activities such as swimming, horseback riding, martial arts, cross country skiing, biking or from more cognitive team sports (e.g. soccer, volleyball, synchronized swimming, gymnastics). In writing, letter reversals should disappear, a vertical diamond can be drawn as well as three interlocking circles. By eight, a drawing of a person should include 16-20 details or features. The eight year old begins to tell time, usually starts to read for pleasure, (get a library card and visit the library weekly), and develops a particular sense of humor. He/she understands the passive voice and can begin to use irregular verbs properly. Rules are understood and able to be following and personal responsibility for grooming, belongings, and homework and chores is assumed more and more. Any large deviations from these skill levels should be reported and discussed.

From an *emotional and social* standpoint, the child generally has a good dose of self-confidence, enjoys peer interactions, recognizes the need for fairness, is industrious and communicates readily, if he/she is progressing well through middle childhood. It's a good time to encourage interaction with community, religious and school organizations of interest. It's particularly good if you, as a parent, can get involved as a group leader, or at least attend major celebrations, performances, meets or the like.

Special Notes About My Child:

Body image concerns may bother some children at this age, particularly those outside of the norm in size or features. As long as no medically correctable condition exists, reassure your child that the range of normal is broad and that their final height, weight, or other distinguishing characteristic does not define who they really are. Modesty at this age may make it more difficult for some to express these feelings, so be sensitive and do not form nicknames based on physical attributes or dysfunction. Sleep disturbances, stomach pains, limb pains, chest pain, fatigue, sore throats and blurry vision among other symptoms are common complaints which need to be acknowledged, evaluated and met with solutions. Sometimes specific counseling is needed.

Gender role is still being established during this time and experimentation with touching and comparison of genitals is a common, not erotic, behavior. Keep your responses calm and matter-of-fact, provide information, (and preferably discuss) the role of sexual behavior in procreation and in the setting consistent with your value system. In the near future, secondary sexual characteristics with all their hormonal influences will surface and children need to enter this period with accurate non-frightening information. Healthy role models are good during the period of gender identification.

Fears continue to be common at this age, often including dinosaurs, ghosts, robbers, hurricanes, tornadoes, lightning, and fire, and well as child abductors. Television and movies are important sources of fears and still should be monitored for the intensity of the images and the age-appropriateness of the content. No child needs more than an hour of TV a day at this point! Children in divorced or separated parental situations have additional fears of abandonment and non-importance to deal with. Adherence to visits, discussion about how the child has not been divorced or responsible, and telephone contact are vital in these situations. Discuss any unusual or pervasive fears at this visit with your pediatrician.

School demands, both **academic and social**, continue to progress, but school refusal is more of a rarity than before. Excessive peer problems can result in withdrawal, so be sensitive for these changes and allow some “trendy” behavior as long as it is safe physically and morally. Expressive language accelerates around this time, so for any persistent stuttering or dysfluency, address the problem quickly. Additional language skills include understanding dependent clauses and conditional phrases. Attention span will increase to almost one hour by age eight – any deficits in task completion, concentration or unusual “hyperness” need addressing. Children are still “concrete” thinkers, but can surprise you with depth of insight at times.

Behavioral issues that surface include bathroom joke sharing, imitation of gas passing, experimentation with vulgarities, food play and dawdling, bedtime refusal, and homework procrastination. If you have cultivated a morals base and your child understands an absolute standard for behavior with consistent consequences for infractions, these things should pass with reminders about house rules and swift, consistent limit setting or privilege withholding. Try not to reinforce bad habits by over reacting. Extend bedtimes slowly as a privilege (your child is getting enough sleep if in the absence of illness or stresses he/she wakes at or near the time necessary to get ready for the school day without much difficulty). **Chores** should be clearly understood, special pay in addition to allowance can be provided for special work accomplished. Try not to cajole or nag about homework – as hard as it is to be silent, let natural consequences for irresponsibility prevail, and link privileges to successes in work completion. (For total school failure or homework refusal, there is probably a more pervasive problem and swift intervention is necessary).

The formation of **healthy habits** is perhaps a major goal during the middle childhood years – habits that will afford a long and healthy life free of the encumbrances of disease caused or made worse by poor healthy choices. Toward that end, continue to educate in nutritional areas and allow participation in meal preparation and cleanup, provide and encourage well balanced diets, (avoid the junk food aisle and fast food joints as much as possible), help your child maintain appropriate weight by providing exercise outlets and being a good example, and continue to limit passive “screen” (TV, video) entertainment to about sixty minutes per day

Your Industrious Eight Year Old

Cigarettes should be avoided in all family members; alcohol, if used, should be handled responsibly by parents. Tooth brushing and flossing, as well as regular dental checkups should be routine. A well rounded perspective on work and play, individual and community, and temporal and eternal things should be cultivated. Spiritual sensitivity should be attended to and emotional health should be cultivated by prioritizing the family. Allow liberal exposure to intellectual stimuli, but make it age appropriate. Your individual child should learn how to be a healthy individual without being individualistic (selfish).

The *physical exam* this year will include a general checkup as well as vision check, speech evaluation, blood pressure check, and perhaps hearing or urine screening if deemed appropriate. Immunizations or labs may be necessary—your pediatrician will advise. Your doctor may ask to review school records or reports.

As with any age, *safety* concerns are paramount, particularly with respect to bicycle safety (helmets) and proper bike sizing. The rules of the road must be learned and followed, and any night riding requires proper lights and reflectors. Car seats are just being abandoned for regular adult restraints—make sure they fit well. Similar safety precautions and equipment should accompany skateboard, skate, and snowmobile use. Water sports and ice skating areas should be checked for safety and supervised. A good general safety rule is to know where your child is at all times – a system for reporting in is helpful. Areas to avoid include deserted buildings, building sites, excavations, refrigerators, and drainage reservoirs or canals. The yard should be kept clear of rusty nails, broken glass, etc. Don't leave power tools around and teach proper use of the tools you'll let them use. Continue to review fire escape and safety plans, update alarm equipment. Keep hazardous chemicals stored properly. Do not smoke. Keep Life-line and emergency numbers handy. Use sun screens and insect repellants liberally (we see thousands more sunburns and complications of bites and stings than any reactions to these necessary products!).

“What is the bond between parent and child that can make the difference between citizens and criminals? It is the bond with the entwining strands of love, praise, and discipline. Love is the emotional warmth that gives us our security; praise is the words of pride or smile of approval that gives us our self worth; discipline is that consistently applied standard of right and wrong from which we get our moral values.” -- David L. McKenna

Prepared by David L. Ragonese, M.D., F.A.A.P.

Revised 3/07