

The School Years Ages 7 to 11 - Physical Development

By Mike Witzky

Big changes take place when your toddler leaves the baby years and begins the school adventure. The first days of pre-school and kindergarten are traumatic for both mother and child. Even children who may have been in day care will experience some difficulty. For the most part, this passes soon after mom leaves and the class begins.

In general, physical development during the middle childhood years seems smooth and relatively uneventful for a number of reasons. Most children master new physical skills quickly, provided they have an opportunity to practice. Boys and girls are just about equal in physical abilities during these years, except that boys have greater forearm strength and girls have more flexibility. In addition, sexual differences are minimal, so the task of understanding sexual identity remains simplified for the time being. Problems that children may have about their physical appearance are related more to their increased cognitive development. Children become much more aware of the opinions of others during middle childhood; they also notice and react to the differences among their peers.

At the same time, the social world of the school-aged child becomes much broader, as elementary school brings together children who have different backgrounds and abilities. Preschool children who can't tie their shoes, speak clearly, or read the letters of the alphabet are usually unaware that many of their classmates can. However, in elementary school, children become much more aware of differences. Consequently, some children may begin to feel different, become lonely and unhappy, and can transform physical differences into psychological problems during these years.

While it may be comforting to parents and teachers that children come in all shapes and sizes, it is not always comforting to the children. School aged children are not always adept at anticipating how their own comments might affect someone else, so they are likely to tell each other "You're so short, you look like a first grader," or come up with nicknames like "Tubby." Racial differences, while noticed, usually do not present any difficulty unless the child's home environment has influenced the child's opinions. Children are much more accepting of racial differences than adults. Learning disabilities and hyperactivity may also affect a child's adjustment during these years.

What is important for a parent to know is that, for the most part, children thrive during these years. For others who may experience some of the problems identified here, parents should call this to the attention of the school and the teacher. There are many effective interventions when these concerns are identified early.

If you think your child may need professional assistance, please go to the "Find a Service Provider" section of the BHG Web site <http://www.bhg.org> to locate a behavioral healthcare agency in your county.

About the author:

Mr. Mike Witzky is the Executive Director of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Union County. He can be reached at (937) 642-1212 or by e-mail at: witzkyme@bhg.org.