

**SURVIVING  
THE  
FIFTH GRADE**

**A Handbook  
For  
Parents**

**Introduction:** Grade Level Parent Meetings have been offered as part of the parent education program in the Reed District for many years. District Psychologist, Dr. Allan Gold, facilitates these discussions among interested parents, school principal, and Grade Level Teacher Coordinator. During the course of these meetings parents expressed surprise and concern about the issues that were being raised by their sons and daughters as they move into adolescence. About ten years ago it was decided that it would be helpful to write down the issues and suggestions that came out of these discussions so they could be shared with other families. Ten years later, many of the same questions and issues arise. In fact, issues are now even more complex than they were then and children are dealing with adolescent issues at younger and younger ages. This handbook has been updated to include new topics relevant to raising children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The guidelines expressed in this booklet are intended as a framework to help parents talk with their children and make thoughtful decisions that will support their healthy development. We recognize that each family will address issues differently depending upon its own value system. We hope that the six Character Pillars, which Reed District adopted since the original publication of this booklet, will guide parents in making the value decisions required for child rearing. We sincerely hope these guidelines will encourage parents to:

- Think carefully and keep pace with the needs of their children;
- Talk openly with other parents so they are not trapped by “everyone else does it”;
- Have the courage to stand up for what they know is best for their child.

### ***What are the developmental issues that emerge during this year?***

There is a disturbing trend within our culture for children to grow up more quickly than in the past. The issues of adolescence which used to appear at age twelve to fourteen are now appearing at age ten. Therefore, fifth graders often act as if they have one foot in childhood and one foot in adolescence. Since our students are the oldest children at Bel Aire, there is an additional psychological push for them to act older than they are. The following are some developmental themes of fifth graders:

- Children of this age know that they have good ideas and need to be validated and recognized for their contributions.
- They seek and should be given opportunities for independent decision-making.
- They can be expected to handle the responsibilities of homework and chores and manage their own time with decreasing guidance from parents.
- The peer group becomes increasingly important. Popularity becomes a concern and is often defined by the most precocious, as opposed to the nicest, students.
- Interest in the opposite sex begins in earnest, but children are not prepared to handle the social demands. The difference in maturity between boys and girls often creates anxiety and misunderstandings.
- Students who are not ready for this level of social interaction often feel left out.
- Although fifth graders may become defiant and test limits, parents are still the major influence on their behaviors and attitudes.
- Children’s bodies begin to mature and change at this age. They need to know how to maintain good health and self-confidence.

### ***How can we support their growing desire for independence?***

Since children mature at different rates, some will be ready for more independence before others. Most situations are not “all or nothing” and can be shaped so the child gets some freedom and the parent feels comfortable. The idea is to start with small, safely structured steps and build up . . .

- It is appropriate to allow fifth graders to go to a specific place with a friend, but know where your child is at all times.
- Fifth graders should not “hang out” any place except at home or at a friend’s, where there is parental supervision.
- The purpose of a trip or event should be clearly defined, with time limits, transportation and the involvement of other kids specified.
- Have expectations for communication and a simple plan or schedule for talking by phone or cell phone.

### ***What are appropriate boy-girl activities for fifth graders?***

Children should be encouraged to wait a few years and gain some maturity before developing one-on-one relationships with the opposite sex. This is the time to keep kids busy with sports, music, art classes, theater, etc.

- Co-ed or “couples only” dance parties are not appropriate for this age group.
- “Dating” is not appropriate for fifth graders. Aside from the potential for too early physical activity, boy-girl pairings often lead to status and popularity for some children and, sometimes, cruel exclusion of others.
- Some parents may feel comfortable having their children participate in co-ed social interactions in carefully managed and supervised situations.
  - Such events should have a structured purpose, such as a movie or sports event.
  - A parent is present at all times – perhaps sitting a few rows back at a movie.
  - Such events should be time-limited.
  - Unstructured time is fine as long as there is parent supervision.
  - It is useful to establish rules for appropriate behavior with all of the children and families beforehand (e.g., not running off, manners, etc.)
- Parents who might consider sponsoring co-ed activities should call the parents of the other children to clarify arrangements.

### ***What can we do about cliques?***

Children of this age begin to group themselves into networks of friends who have similar interests. This is perfectly normal. However, when these friendships become “cliques”, parents may need to intervene. Cliques are friendship groups that are rigidly defined and exclusionary. They are usually based on perceived popularity, clothes or perceived attractiveness of the opposite sex. Children within a clique can be unkind to children who do not belong and may even punish clique members for playing with children outside of the group. Cliques are not in the best interest of any child. They stifle individuality and promote elitism.

- Since parents are the role models for their children’s behavior, they are encouraged to think about how they discuss and interact with other people.
- Parents also need to listen carefully to the way their children talk about and treat other children.
- Children should be encouraged not to judge others on superficial characteristics. Instead, they should be encouraged to find each person’s positive attributes.
- If a child is having difficulty with friendships, it is suggested that parents:
  - Listen with empathy to the child’s concerns. Sometimes that’s all it takes.
  - Help the child not to exaggerate or personalize negative comments or situations.
  - Help the child recognize that friendships change frequently and the situation may be temporary.

-Assess whether the child is seeking appropriate friends or should be encouraged to pursue other children who might be more receptive.

●If a child is treated unkindly by other children for an extended period of time, parents should inform the classroom teacher, so s/he can carefully monitor the situation. If further intervention is necessary, the teacher, principal, and/or school psychologist can be helpful. It may also be appropriate to call the other parent to discuss the issue. If the concerned parent is non-accusatory and recognizes that there are two sides to each story, the other parent is more likely to be supportive in solving the dilemma.

### ***What limits should be set on movies?***

Although some children in their desire to appear grown up may seem to be unaffected by violent and sexual material, do not be fooled. Research on violence in the media provides overwhelming evidence that children are negatively affected by repeated exposure to the unpunished violence that is prevalent in many television shows and movies. Children who are exposed to a lot of violence tend to be more pessimistic about life, to become numb and unresponsive in situations where another person is being hurt and too often choose physical aggression as a way to solve problems. Violent acts combined with sexual relationships also send a particularly negative message to young boys and girls who are just beginning to define their potential relationships with each other. Given these considerations, parents suggested following the recommended ages of the movie rating system:

●Parents agreed that PG-13 movies should be pre-screened or carefully reviewed by a parent before Fifth Graders are allowed to see them. Films with violent or sexual content are not appropriate for Fifth Grade students. If a parent chooses to take a child to a film with mature content, it was recommended that he/she accompany the child and discuss the movie afterwards to ensure that the child understands the real life implications of movie behaviors.

●R-Rated movies are not appropriate for fifth graders.

●Parents deciding the take groups of children to movies or selecting videos for parties are encouraged to contact the other parents when a movie is rated above PG, to be sure that others feel comfortable with the selected film.

●If a child is invited to a movie or party with videos, parents are encouraged to call the hosting parent and ask about the film that has been chosen.

### ***What about television?***

As with violence in the movies, parents are cautioned to protect their children against the pervasive influence of television. The impact of a particular program may seem inconsequential, but the undisputed harmful effects of hours of violence or negative stereotyping is well documented in child development research.

●Parents agreed that television should be limited and children should be encouraged to participate in other family or individual activities with as reading, games, or sports.

●Many parents do not allow their children to watch television on weeknights.

●It was suggested that television programs be treated like movies. Shows that contain violence or sexual material are not recommended for fifth graders.

●When children watch TV, parents are encouraged to join them and use the opportunity to discuss racial and sexual stereotyping, the effects of “put down” humor, different approaches to problem solving and the consequences of these things in real life. Children should also be educated about the hidden messages in advertisements and the ploys that are used to encourage children to buy.

●MTV is not recommended for fifth graders because many of its programs contain violent and sexual material. Parents can contact the local cable company and have that channel blocked from the home.

## ***What about videogames?***

Videogames are very popular, particularly among boys. There is increasing evidence from research that the brain is affected from excessive time spent on the computer, leading to attention problems. There is also evidence that some students are desensitized to the violence portrayed in the games and can act out violent ideas if they are alienated or angry as they get older.

- it is not unusual for parents to limit computer game time to the weekends only
- respect the rating system for videogames; if a game is rated T (teen) or M (mature) don't buy it
- action or violent games with cartoon figures are less damaging than those with very realistic players
- total "electronic time" (T.V., computer, videos, Play Station, Gameboy, Nintendo, X Box) should be limited. These are addictive activities. If your child begins to crave more and more computer time and is less able and willing to go outside to play or interact with friends, cut out the computer altogether.

## ***What about music?***

Although parents may want to close the door or turn it down, they need to get involved with their children's music to better understand their interest and unique subculture.

- Everyone agreed that parents should screen their children's music to ensure that it does not contain excessive violence, profanity or explicit sexual language.
- Parents are encouraged to talk with sales people where their children buy music to get feedback on the musical content and to understand the rating systems on CD's and tapes.

## ***What about use of the Internet?***

Many parents are aware of the dangers of unsupervised Internet use. Children are often more computer-savvy than their parents, but can still be lured into or link into websites or chat rooms that are either inappropriate or frightening for them. A few precautions can help avoid uncomfortable or dangerous situations.

- Parents should monitor their children's use of the computer, including laptops. Ideally, they will use them in a common living area at home for easy checking.
- Children should be reassured that if anything comes up on the computer than worries them, that it is ok to tell parents and that they won't get in trouble.
- "Chat rooms" for children and adults can be used by strangers who may talk inappropriately with your child. If a child receives a scary or bothersome message on-line, the child should be instructed to notify a parent right away.
- Children should be warned never to give their names, addresses or phone numbers on-line. They should also be told not to assume that another person on-line is always telling the truth.
- Instant messaging (IM) is replacing the telephone as the medium of choice for teens and pre-teens. If you allow IM, discuss with your child the types of interactions that can occur on IM. Often children will say things on IM that they would not say in person. This can be mean talk or sexual banter, as they get older.
- Meeting new people on IM is possible as friends introduce friends to each other who may attend another school. Children should be cautioned to make sure that the person claiming to know their friend actually does know that person. As noted above, children should still not give out full names, phone numbers, or addresses in these circumstances.
- Children should also be advised not to buy anything on-line. If they purchase something by mistake, they should be encouraged to tell a parent so the order can be cancelled.
- Parents are encouraged to consider blocking chat lines, instant messages and Internet news groups. Instructions are usually included in user's manuals under "parent controls".
- Although computers and on-line services have exciting educational potential, unfocused use or excessive use of games should be limited just like TV.

●Parents should learn how to trace Internet websites that children have visited, as a monitoring approach.

### ***How should we handle the use of the telephone?***

Using the telephone is a natural outgrowth of the social development of many fifth graders. Although most parents understood their children's desire to use the phone, they also felt it was important to set limits. Using the telephone is viewed as a privilege, not a right.

- Some parents limit the length and number of phone calls each evening.
- Other parents establish times when phone calls are not allowed, such as dinner time, homework time or after 8:00 p.m.
- If a child receives teasing or harassing phone calls from another child, parents are encouraged to contact the parents of the offending child immediately. Children should be reminded that this is not an appropriate use of the phone and may result in the loss of privilege.
- If necessary, a parent may be able to determine the source of the call by pressing \*69 which automatically dials the previous caller.

### ***What about cell phones?***

More and more fifth graders are requesting cell phones, as they see slightly older peers or siblings using them.

- Fifth graders should not have personal cell phones yet; they become a status symbol, toy, or item to boost popularity.
- There might be a family cell phone that is provided to the child when he/she is out with a friend or on an errand for the sole purpose of notifying the parent of safe arrival or in case of emergency. The phone would be returned when the child comes home.
- Phones with text messaging and camera capacity are not necessary; these can be abused. Children should be taught appropriate use of cell phones.

### ***How should we respond to foul language?***

Swearing does become more of a peer group phenomenon during the fifth grade year. Children's choice of language is their primary way of interacting with others. Through language, they can communicate intelligence and caring . . . or disrespect and disregard for the feelings of others. Bel Aire School policy does not tolerate any offensive language on the playground or in the classroom. Swearing is obviously not consistent with the Character Pillars.

- Parents need to be cognizant of their own styles of expressing anger or frustration and the messages they send to kids.
- Children should be encouraged to find intelligent and thoughtful ways to express their feelings. Swearing is not an acceptable way of expressing feelings.

### ***How should we respond to the way kids dress?***

It was suggested that parents become familiar with the school guidelines for appropriate dress. At Bel Aire, clothing must be suitable for PE. Pants must fit at the waist. Clothing with offensive or suggestive language or graphics is not allowed. Parents are encouraged to talk with their children about the messages they send to peers or others if they choose inappropriate dress (i.e., short crop tops, baggy pants that ride low in the hips, or shorts and t-shirts worn to dress occasions).

### ***How can we support the child who is a "late bloomer"?***

Many students, especially boys, are not ready for the independence and intense social interactions that some fifth graders are seeking. This is perfectly normal! Children must be validated for their own timetable and assured that all children are different. When they are read for such interactions and independence, they will know it.

- Children should be encouraged to recognize their own interests and to seek out friends with similar interests.
  - Parents need to listen to the concerns of their child when he/she feels left out, but students should be encouraged to trust their own feelings of comfort or discomfort in social situations.
  - Parents can point out families who have similar values and students who are at similar maturity levels so that children are less socially active don't feel so alone.
  - Parents can sponsor activities with other families or groups that would be fun for everyone and developmentally appropriate (i.e., a sports event, skating, picnic, Great America, etc.).
- Children who are less socially mature can still be good students, good athletes and have highly developed skills in such things as the arts, music, drama and computers. They can also be considerate and engaging children and thus ensure themselves a place in the social fabric of the class. Encouraging any and all of these personal skills and traits can be helpful in boosting the spirits and social status of the late bloomer.

### ***How do we talk to fifth graders about sex?***

Fifth graders in the 21st century are often exposed to information about sexual matters far earlier than their parents were. In addition there is increased pressure from the media and from older "role models" to become sexually active earlier. It is important to be able to talk, if not entirely comfortably, at least openly and honestly about sex.

- Answer questions with a little bit of information; if your child wants more, they'll ask.
- Have books available or be prepared to go on the Internet to find out answers to questions together (except watch out for pornography).
- Be prepared to answer the questions "when am I old enough to have sex?," "why can't I .....?" Most parents don't want their children to "grow up too fast," but have trouble articulating why. Fear of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are easy responses, but don't address our deep desire to protect our children from emotional hurt, from desensitization to the joy of sexual activity within a committed and loving relationship, and the simple desire to have them look forward to something as they get older and mature.

### ***How much allowance should they be given? What limits should be set on their spending?***

Fifth graders are able to understand the value of money and should have the opportunity to save and spend money and understand the consequence of both.

- Allowance is an opportunity to help children learn to manage money. Most children expect to use their allowance to purchase extra items, such as a movie, a CD, magazine, or snack. The types of things that a child is expected to purchase should be reasonable given the amount of allowance. Ideally, the child is not given quite enough for all he/she might want and therefore learns to "budget" spending.
- Some families follow the rule of thumb that the weekly amount be one dollar for each grade, or \$5.00 per week in fifth grade. This amount may vary depending upon family finances, what the child is expected to purchase, and current economics (the purchasing power of a dollar).
- Many parents feel that children should not be paid for doing routine chores around the house. These are seen as part of everyone's responsibility within the family. However, extra chores such as washing the car may be paid extra.
- Some children who want to earn additional money may be encouraged to offer small services in the neighborhood.
- There are pitfalls from parents' lending money to their children whenever asked. It is suggested children should be taught to delay gratification and to save for special items. Children should be discouraged from lending money to other children.

●Children might also be encouraged to save a percentage of their allowance in their own bank account and to donate some to a charity of their choice.

### ***What can parents do to support each other during this transition?***

Parents need to keep an open dialogue with other parents, particularly the parents of children's friends. Since families have different values, parents cannot always expect to agree with each other, but they can begin to understand and respect their differences. Children also need to understand that parents do not always think alike and that it is okay to make decisions that are different from a friend's decision. This kind of independence establishes an important foundation for later years when peer pressure increases and the risk of sex, alcohol and drugs becomes more dangerous. Parents can be models for resisting peer pressure, including pressure from their own children.

### ***Where can we get help?***

The best place to start is right at Bel Aire. The teachers and school principal are available to provide suggestions and support. The district psychologist is happy to talk with parents about any concerns and can help locate appropriate resources if outside help is needed. The school and town libraries as well as the Internet also have resource books for parents.

### ***In conclusion . . .***

There are times when every parent feels alone and uncertain about what is the best decision for his/her child. We hope this handbook has provided a framework to help you address some of the challenges that come up during the fifth grade year. Please remember that these are only suggestions and that each family must decide on rules, consequences, limits, and privileges that are consistent with their own values and beliefs. We do encourage parents to continue talking with each other, to discuss the difficult issues and to build an involved community that will support all of our children. The task of raising children is far too complex for any of us to do it alone. Furthermore, we hope that you will have the courage to be parents, to say "no" and to set the limits that our children need. As a seasoned parent once said, "We have a small window between now and age sixteen. We must take full advantage of this opportunity. It will not last." Finally we hope that you will cherish your child during these transitional years. Our fifth graders need parents who will listen to their concerns, respect their ideas and increasing maturity and, most of all, love and accept them even when their behavior makes it difficult.