

Gameplan for Parenting Your Elementary Schooler

Reprinted from Dr. Laura Markham's website AhaParenting.com. She also has a wonderful book called: [Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids](#).

It can be a relief for busy parents that school-age kids are more and more focused on the peer group. But on the other hand, if you spend the day apart, it's easy for your worlds to become increasingly disconnected. You may not be able to see it yet, but your influence is already starting to wane, as your child begins to shape his or her behavior outside the home based on the norms of schoolmates or neighborhood kids.

Your goal over the next few years is to build a strong relationship with your child, which will provide a counter-balance to peer culture and a solid foundation to get you through the teen years. What does connected parenting look like at this age?

1. Stay connected.

Now she's so self-sufficient, and so peer-oriented, it's possible to go a whole weekend and barely see your nine-year-old. Resist the impulse to say yes to one more playdate so you can get more done. Instead, spend some downtime just hanging out with your kid, doing nothing. Now is when you lay the foundation for a great relationship once she's a teenager.

2. Develop family rituals that foster connection.

Family meetings. Sunday morning brunches. Saturday lunch dates with Dad on the way to weekly grocery shopping. Apple picking trips every September, or making costumes together before Halloween. Whatever works for your family, but make these connection opportunities into routines, so everyone expects them and looks forward to them.

3. Take your cues about independence from your child.

Independence develops at different rates in different kids. Remember that after periods of independence that require "grown-up" behavior, such as sleepovers, your kid's "baby self" will come out for extra attention from you. Don't insist that he be mature all the time.

4. Help kids develop problem-solving and negotiating skills.

I know, it's exhausting to negotiate constantly with your children. There are some who believe that the secret of making parenting bearable is to never open that door. But do you want your kids to become people who just follow orders and do what they're told? If so, you leave them open to the pressures of the peer group, as well as to victimization. Not to mention that kids who learn to obey without question become adults who blindly do what they're told -- which means they can end up committing atrocities because they were just following orders. If you want a child who takes responsibility for their own behavior, they have to learn to think for themselves.

You don't want your kids to feel powerless. You want them to feel like it matters when they open their mouths, when they take action. Should they get what they want by whining? Absolutely not. Should they learn that they can get their way by marshaling good arguments and making them in a reasonable, humorous, charming way that meets your needs as well as theirs? Absolutely, if you want them to get anywhere in life.

Now, teaching your kids these skills doesn't mean you simply let them constantly nag at you and then give in, against your better judgment. It means you say NO as soon as that's your answer, and you mean it and stick to it. It means that if they want to petition you for a different answer, you set up a discussion time to listen to their arguments and state your objections. If they can overcome your objections, you can allow yourself to be sold, and -- this is crucial -- you say why. In most cases, you will have to brainstorm and problem solve together for a solution that works for everyone. That's win-win parenting.

5. Teach healthy food habits.

Now is when they should learn to internalize their own food monitoring: Have I had enough protein today? Calcium? All seven servings of vegetables and fruits? Most of all, set a good example. Read labels. Eat healthy. Don't diet. Don't even talk about dieting (it doesn't work, and it sets up a pattern of deprivation followed by over-eating). Throw out your scale. Have healthy snacks around -- a bowl of carrot sticks, or cut up apples and cheese. Milk or plain yogurt makes a great filling snack with a banana. Early food habits become entrenched for life.

6. Resist the impulse to over-schedule.

Yesterday was Sunday. My husband had to work. I felt vaguely guilty when he asked me what the kids and I planned to do. I had no plans. I was really looking forward to a day without soccer games or music lessons. Of course, NYC is on my doorstep, with literally thousands of wonderful, edifying options. But -- and I know this is an excuse -- it was raining and by the time we walked the ten minutes to the subway we would have been soaked. So while I picked up the house, my kids (ages 5 and 9 when this was written) spent the morning turning our family room into a rain forest, full of cut-out trees and vines and stuffed animals. After lunch, he did homework while she did mazes. Then she and I read together while he designed a roller coaster at the kitchen table. A cozy, quiet, peaceful, fun day with zero electronics. An oasis in our jam-packed week. Every kid deserves days like these every single week. Some people call them "Slow family living." I just call them essential.

7. Limit electronics.

This is when the habit of reading takes hold, and it can't compete with the lure of electronics. Besides, unlimited computer use creates an addiction that will be virtually impossible to break later. Of course, your child will use the computer, for homework, and increasingly, for fun. But unlimited use isn't any better for them than sitting in front of a TV all day. Do you really want them to be computer junkies when they're sixteen, or do you want them to be in the school play, building their science fair project, reading Hemingway, dancing, organizing their friends to make pies for the local soup kitchen?

What about cell phones? Unless your child is walking to school alone without a trusted adult (or in some other situation where they need to reach you), wait. There's no reason a nine-year-old who is always with a trusted adult needs a cell phone. It poses problems and exposes your child to situations that your child doesn't yet have the brain development to manage.

8. Make sure your child's peers value academics.

By the time kids are in fourth grade their attitudes toward schoolwork are influenced greatly by their peers. How much effort they put into schoolwork and how well they do in school will be very similar to how their immediate peer group

approaches schoolwork. If you want your child to do well academically, be sure he or she is in a peer situation with kids who value learning. To me, this is so important that I would move my child into a new school to give him a peer group that prioritized academics. But most of the time, the parents set the tone at home and the child seeks out peers who come from families who also value learning.

9. Pay attention to your child's peer relations.

Your child's peers will become increasingly important as he gets older, and will impact tremendously who he becomes as an adult. Kids who are rejected or ridiculed by the other neighborhood kids can develop an inferiority complex that plagues them throughout life. Kids who find themselves a specific role -- the class clown, or the brain -- often turn it into a lifelong way of being, which eventually begins to limit them.

Make sure your child has plenty of opportunities to be with other kids and to learn how to function well in groups. While you don't want to compromise your family's values -- you may not watch TV in your family, or let your nine-year-old daughter dress like a pop star -- notice when the peer group makes your child feel different, and make adjustments as necessary so that she can fit in.

10. Start Family Meetings.

Continue (or start) family meetings. Held regularly at a mutually agreed upon time, family meetings provide a forum for discussing triumphs, grievances, sibling disagreements, schedules, any topic of concern to a family member. They help kids feel like their family cares, and their opinions matter. Ground rules help. Everyone gets a chance to talk; one person talks at a time without interruption (pass a "Talking Stick" if you want); everyone listens, and only positive, constructive feedback is allowed. To get resistant kids to join in, combine the get-together with incentives such as pizza, or assign them important roles such as recording secretary or rule enforcer.

11. Focus on Values.

Values in most families are never directly discussed, which means we don't get the chance to counter the values our kids are learning from the culture. Now is the time to consciously consider what our values are, and to find ways in daily life to discuss -- and live -- them with our children.

12. Move Beyond Discipline.

Are you inadvertently developing your child's contrary side by using power-based discipline methods? Yes, your child needs to learn to make repairs when he inadvertently damages a relationship or breaks something. But most importantly, you want him to WANT to be the kind of person who tries to do the right thing. That means more connection and less control. That's why your best discipline strategy is a close parent-child relationship, clear limits, and lots of empathy.