

# Valley Oak Children's Services



## Early Childhood Education Services

### WHAT ABOUT THOSE MIDDLE YEARS?

The middle years of childhood can sometimes see to be a paradox. For parents, the years between six and twelve are often quick ones that fly by in a flurry. For kids, this is the time when the world rallies against them in holding them back. They can't wait to grow up, get older, move faster, and forge ahead in becoming who they are. And yet, progress in the middle years seems slow to parents, slower to kids, and accomplishments become much less apparent. Once a child can ride a bike, the distance he can travel becomes less notable.

The fast-paced growth of early childhood (when a child's behavior may change dramatically from month to month) is replaced by long periods of seemingly calm waters peppered with sudden rifts that catch us off guard. It is hard to believe that anyone could be so demanding by day and so sensitive at night; be so cocky one minute and fearful the next; be so self-assured in one situation and uncertain in another. This unpredictable behavior is indicative of the backing and forthing all children go through between six and twelve. The middle child's body, mind, spirit and conscience are instinctively striving for competence, for competence is what these middle years are all about.

"The stretch between six and twelve is critical, for it will determine how the teens will go. These children are easy to love but not to know. They shine for their teachers more than their parents. They try hard to conform, and yet their differences continue to grow, in size and shape and ability. They act self-sufficient but they need you more than ever. They treasure their friends, and let you know it, and adore their families but seldom show it. They talk endlessly but say little that grabs your interest. They're our young pioneers, stepping gingerly out into the world,

where everything they have ever known or assumed is challenged, beginning with Santa Claus." This is an excerpt from Marguerite Kelly's book, The Mother's Almanac II, which (in about 400 pages) tackles the job of being "the most complete book ever written on the joys, challenges, and changes of the school years." The book is a jewel and comes heartily recommended as a fun, warm and easy-to-read reference for everything from developmental milestones to homework, sibling rivalry, health concerns, sports, chores, friendships, pets, problems, and more. Much of this information was taken from Kelly's book.

**Six** year olds are challenged by the necessity of fusing the two environments of home and school. This is their job for the duration of year number six. It's a big job - and largely responsible for the observation that six old children can seem like human roller coasters. They will be moody, modest, curious, talkative, rowdy, adorable, sensitive, serious, giggly, defiant, affectionate, eager, forgiving and great fun all in the course of a day. Although school is a most welcome and almost always positive adventure, it is also a powerful experience for these boys and girls who are just realizing that they aren't, after all, the center of the universe. Most children feel a bit disillusioned at this age since school represents a reflection of the real world. There is always someone bigger, smarter or tougher than he is. This is a reality every child must learn to handle, and positive, realistic expectations from home will be necessary to help him balance his ego against the awesome power of school. Most sixes do well with this reality check and add it to the bank of inner strength they are developing that is meant to last a lifetime. Many sixes spend time at home "playing" school and of course, insist on being the teacher. Six year old children can

usually swim fairly well, hike a couple of miles and ride a bike faster than ever before with little regard for the consequences. The ultimate optimists, sixes are cocky children with fewer tears than you might expect and egos as fragile as a butterfly's wing. This is because he has discovered that the world is bigger than he ever imagined and he is just one person among many. This new perspective can be painful, especially for the pampered child. Instinctively, a six knows that the best defense is a good offense and at home, six becomes an aggressive soul, especially with Mom. The more sixes can cut the ties, the easier it is for them to walk out into the world, and that is what a six has to do. By mid-six, many confusions have been resolved and such a sense of equilibrium prevails that these kids almost brim over with enthusiasm. Much of this is channeled into school, for these children think about little else. School will continue to be a major factor in life for at least twelve more years, but it will never be appreciated as much as it is by the six year old.

**Seven** is a pivotal year. The age of reason arrives with the beginnings of empathy and compromise and sevens become less egocentric. Cuddly, silly, worried, and self-conscious, these children seem to have a dreamy sort of sadness about them. They are preoccupied with arranging their emotional and mental puzzle in a new way. She will fret over the numerous possibilities of being left out, of doing poorly in school, of being seen naked. More so, she will worry about not being accepted and is overly sensitive most of the time. Rejection is a new feeling for sevens and may be hard to explain, even to themselves. Praise, acceptance and respect from parents can help sevens through this turmoil and help them to feel confident. Even so, a seven will brood and pout and complain and sulk part of the time. Sevens are truly shy and precious people who try to be good and expect to be perfect. School continues to be of major importance (although not as exciting as the first grade) and telling time is a new trick that brings on visible pride. Reading is easier and many sevens read to themselves and others at home. Sevens have a longer attention span and will, for the most part, finish what they start. Activities are more focused and a mania surrounding collecting (just about anything) may

begin. Sports may seem attractive to sevens and even though both boys and girls may play together on teams, they will segregate themselves in their minds, for each sex wants little to do with the other. Sevens like jokes, clubs, paper (planes, dolls, etc.), scissors, colored pencils and paste. This child's love for magic, adventure, fantasy and mystery helps to balance out the overly sensitive seven year old.

**Eight** year old children have had their seventh year to pull themselves together. These kids are silly, wonderful, exuberant and voracious both in terms of food and anything new. They need new places to go, new things to do, new books to read, new trees to climb and new places to explore. Suddenly this child is a PERSON who has opinions about everything and who happens to be there every time you turn around. This is because eights are always listening, listening, and listening some more. Privacy is a thing of the past for parents of an eight year old child. They don't miss anything that's said and they use this information – combined with imagination – to insert themselves into every adult situation they encounter (in books, through conversation, on TV, in real life). Old enough now to empathize the eight will imagine how he would behave in each situation. This is one more way the eight figures out what kind of person he is. The need to be heard – to truly be listened to – is very serious with this child and eights will often gravitate to those who truly take time to listen to them. This kind of quality attention is good for any child, but eights require it and from eight until ten, these kids want to be just like their parents. At this age, they not only need (but also enjoy) the camaraderie that comes from working alongside people they admire and parents are their heroes of choice. Although eights will play in groups more and more, this is the age for the "best friend." This best friend may change from time to time but not the need to have one – this will continue until at least eleven and will be a major part of the middle child's life. Incidentally, eights, nines and tens absolutely align themselves by sex, so best friend talk will always follow this rule. Eights also enjoy drama (any kind), money (any amount), maps, shopping, comics, Vikings, pyramids, knights, and are generally fairly happy campers.

**Nine** is an age of ping pong emotions and behavior, full of highs and lows – outgoing one day and withdrawn the next. You will see a nine go from content to tense, from forgetful to fanatical – but basically, the nine is still an easy person to have around. Self-motivation is perhaps the essence of this age and parents would do well to nourish this force like never before. Nines are trustworthy souls who revel in opportunities to be (semi) on their own and who seek the joy of feeling trusted and responsible for themselves. Nines strive to feel competent, and camping, hiking and bike trips are suitable activities for these kids – with appropriate supervision (not too close, not too far) and a great deal of food. With the thrilling conviction that peril may lie just around the bend, nines gain confidence, competence and sense of capability. These children will typically bond more tightly with fathers (or father figures) but friends are the top priority. If they're not together, they're on the phone and an outing is only worthwhile if a friend tags along. The nines tend to be organizers and conformers, and at this age, mere clubs turn into gangs with a loyalty as fierce as it is innocent. There may be fights now, and if so, the cause is probably because one nine has accused another of **liking a member of the opposite sex**. This, of course, is completely entirely and totally unthinkable. Nines feel compelled to collect anything and everything, and when not with their friends, will spend hours classifying and rearranging their inanimate best friends.

**Tens** are at a time of metamorphosis and a welcome one at that. These kids are happy with just about anybody most of the time, with the exception of siblings, ages 6-9. If this is the case, a little extra dose of sibling rivalry can be expected. Tens think before they act and have exaggerated emotions that bring on tears, quickly followed by giggles. Despite the emotionality of tens, they are interested, interesting people who fit in well with their families. Good old mom and dad may become the focus of sincere affection and loyalty. This, in turn, encourages parents to treat them more as adults, which is just what they need to produce an upward spiral of good behavior. Tens are almost always good social assets for short and long family jaunts. Talking is their favorite pastime and parents who listen will have great opportunities to know their child that

much better. If they are not talking, they are probably listening or reading, for tens tend to surround themselves with words. Tens are more entertaining than they have been in years, with sharper conversations and more logical arguments. By now, they probably have a moral code that despises dishonesty, injustice, drugs, cigarettes, and all the wrongs of the world. And, don't be surprised if they are mighty self-righteous about it, for tens feel it is their duty to make the world a better place and sincerely believe they can. It's just a matter of figuring out how and every encounter teaches them something. At this point, all knowledge, no matter what the source, whets their curiosity. The result is a fresher, more spontaneous person with enthusiasm like you've never seen. Aside from the dare devilish things they like to do, it is the free and easy neighborhood play that brings the most consistent pleasure. The boys hang out with the boys and girls with each other, and even though their interests are often different, there exists a growing camaraderie between the two. Obvious changes are happening to the bodies of these ten year olds and no one is more aware of this than themselves. While tens are embarrassed by sex, they are still deeply interested in it and will look everywhere for information. It maybe wise and important to bring up this complicated subject and review it many times as a topic that is both important and complex. Tens typically harbor an obvious disdain for cleanliness and neatness and an equal passion for food. Except for bedtime, tens seem to manage their time fairly well, and are seldom late for appointments and never for school, which they still love.

**Elevens** are children whose mood swings reflect the fermentation inside. They talk fast and often too loudly, argue with everyone and insult anyone. And then, they are sociable, silly, laughing souls who know how to charm you right down to your socks. It's very difficult to know what to expect because all of their emotions are exaggerated. Elevens are especially like fives when they get close to six – at one moment trying to get there too soon; at another, afraid to move on. However, this age isn't just a storm before a calm but a whole new phase, a breaking free, so they can think and act in new ways. Now they are painfully conscious of themselves, and

the chemical and nervous changes going on in their bodies trigger tension, affecting behavior and unsettling friendships. Elevens must find out who they are and they do this by finding out who they are not. This happens when they confront everything and everybody. Their emotions plummet regularly and their language is highly charged with words such as “hate” and “desperate” and “to die for”. Since elevens act so excessively, parents tend to behave the same way, setting up contests of emotion that can continue for years. It may work best to let this child be – and be aware that the sensitivity the eleven feels right now is almost more than manageable. A parent’s display of faith in their eleven will bolster self-confidence and keep them from feeling sullen and resentful much of the time. Parents can do this by granting new liberties, spending extra time alone with this child, and appreciating the generosity that often comes with this year. Elevens love shopping, friends, music, games, overnights, talking, movies, music and behaving like teenagers. This can be a rough one, so extra hugs, special notes here and there and a surprise once in awhile certainly can’t hurt.

**Twelve** is the last true year of childhood. It is a time when parents may be surprised by the independence, thoughtfulness and intelligence this child brings into the family. Never before have so many skills coalesced so well and this competence, combined with a greater tolerance for others, gives twelves a new harmony and promise of things to come. These big kids are still clearly children (although some may already tower above mom) and a sense of the ridiculous may seep into their lives. They like to tease, love an audience and usually have enough self-esteem for a little self-mockery. These traits can truly be refreshing and easy to enjoy. Twelves

will ask for advice but will now deliberate on their own and come to a decision that is personal, regardless of what the gang might do. This child is a more balanced person and a much easier one to have around the house. Food – variety and quantity – is critical now and cleanliness is no longer a problem. Twelves will usually help out with the housework and decorate their rooms with zest. They need friends in every situation – and privacy to confide in them. Exchanges between boys and girls are more comfortable (but still feisty) and parties will usually include an activity (swimming, dancing, bowling, etc.) and lots of time for gossip and games. Twelves are generally less affectionate than younger children but need those hugs more than ever, even though they may seem reluctant to return them. These children find themselves at the doorway of adolescence with one foot still hopping with joys of childhood.

Every child, like every family, is different. The child molds the family while the family molds the child and each family gets its true identity from the people in it. Many families find it harder to give time and attention to the middle-years’ child than to the preschool child because the school age child acts so self-sufficient. Parents would be wise to fight this reaction. These kids – while taller and busier, more private and less needy – require open affection, lots of hugging, honest praise and unconditional acceptance every day from the people they love the most. If you respect a child enough to listen to him, truly listen; you in turn will be loved by that child. Throughout the middle years, children spend much time away from home – and the family is still the place where they feel they belong. Have some fun, give a hug, lend an ear and enjoy these kids. *The teen years are just around the corner...*