



Eleven-Year-Olds

"Phillip nodded. 'For a girl, you take jokes better than anybody.' Suddenly he pointed down the road and this time the yellow bus was really on its way. He smiled a dimpled smile and I remembered why he's the cutest boy in the J. T. Williams School."

Phillip Hall Likes Me, I Reckon Maybe | by Bette Greene

It's near the end of the morning's math lesson. The children are growing fidgety, but the teacher presses on.

"What's another name for a parallelogram? ... Yes, Max?"

"It's past time for recess. We're missing our recess!"

A chorus of agreement greets the teacher.

Finally out at recess, the fifth and sixth graders mill around on the kickball field.

"Same teams as yesterday!" yells one girl.

"No way!" screams another, "You smushed us yesterday."

"Yeah, but Jamal isn't here today, so that makes it even," says the first girl.

"Yeah, but look who you got today," says the other. The arguments continue. They use up ten full minutes of their precious recess time making up teams. No one seems to mind.

As children move from ten to eleven, major changes begin to take place. In their cognitive growth, children seem to be challenging all their assumptions about the world. Cognitive structures in the brain seem to be rearranging themselves at the same speed with which the body is beginning to transform.

Eleven, of course, marks the beginning of adolescence, especially for girls, whose physical growth is generally way ahead of the boys'. The onset of menstruation is common at eleven, the average being at twelve. As the girls' bodies change, emotional sensitivity and volatility increase. The clear physical difference between boys and girls leads to natural separation between them in the classroom and on the playground.

Although mixed-gender activity still happens and should certainly still be encouraged, it is not as spontaneously attractive for children as it was when they were ten. Watch how children come to the meeting circle or to a game, the boys on one side, the girls on another. Boys are watching the girls change and wondering when they themselves will begin to change. Both genders are interested in knowledge about sex and changing bodies, and this education should continue for both (as determined by the school's curriculum policy).

It's common for eleven-year-olds to question many of the adult judgments they have previously accepted. Teachers may face challenges on nearly every topic: assignments; homework; rules in the classroom; interpretations of literature, history, and governmental policy; adult authority in general. Although not always polite or



on target, these challenges should be seen and addressed as signs of cognitive as well as social-emotional growth.

Elevens are engaged in significant changes in their learning approaches and strategies. Their awkwardness and sometimes apparent rudeness commonly cause conflict between parents and children as well as teachers and children unless the developmental issues are understood. Elevens are often genuinely surprised that adults take offense at their challenges, and they are easily hurt. Parents and teachers also struggle because just a little while ago, at ten, these children were so easy to get along with, such delightful and reasonable friends to have around.

“Saving face” is very important for the easily embarrassed eleven-year-old, even in seemingly innocuous situations. It’s especially important to try to avoid correcting the eleven-year-old in front of peers. Instead, find a time and place away from the group. When possible, waiting awhile after the incident itself also helps.

The growing cognitive strength of the eleven-year-old is fed by learning new and demanding skills in research, such as footnoting, bibliography, and scientific notation. It’s also a good age for learning on the computer. Elevens are especially turned off by traditional workbooks, ditto sheets, and other packaged programs that claim to teach “skills used in real life.” Instead, they need the opportunity to interview the fire chief, take notes at a local meeting, or write a letter to a map company or local corporation.

Although their new skills in these more adult realms may be crude and tentative at first, elevens are motivated by the opportunity to try out brand new arenas of knowledge. Foreign language, music, and new forms of artistic expression are also attractive. These challenges aren’t met without complaint. Easily frustrated, the eleven-year-old may fuss to their teacher that some school work is too hard, while telling their parents how cool the new subject is, or vice-versa. For example, something as hard as written dictation can be outwardly hated but inwardly cherished as a delicious intellectual challenge.

Girls at eleven are at the height of forming cliques, which can result in a great deal of cruelty as well as wonderful friendships. A teacher’s role in dealing with cliques is a delicate balance between letting girls work things out for themselves and providing direct mediation. My experience is that if three girls can’t solve a problem within a ten-minute time limit, teacher intervention is necessary.

Sports and outdoor activity are important to elevens but often include arguments about team effort and the interpretation of rules. Elevens often focus on their own personal skill development in a

sport and constantly compare themselves with the best athletes. Some will drop out of competitive sports around this age as competition gets increasingly serious and the skills more difficult. Teachers and coaches can encourage continued participation by focusing on effort rather than perfection. Trying hard needs to be rewarded as much as scoring.

Changing bodies also affect some girls’ willingness to continue in individual activities such as dance, gymnastics, or swimming. Boys struggle with clumsiness in athletics at this age (as well as at twelve and thirteen) as they begin experiencing marked growth spurts. For both boys and girls, muscles don’t keep pace with bones, and aches and pains at night and complaints on the playground and in the classroom are common.

At eleven, the awkwardness of adolescence is just beginning, both physically and emotionally. It’s a time when feelings and relationships are seldom clear or simple. Teachers and parents need to see through children’s language, facial expressions, moods, and intentions and understand that behind them is the child’s beginning quest to establish independence and identity—the chief task of adolescence.

Eleven-Year-Olds: Growth Patterns

PHYSICAL

- Restless and very energetic
- Need lots of food, physical activity, and sleep
- Experience more colds, flu, ear infections, etc.
- Many girls experience an early adolescent growth spurt and sexual maturation; some boys begin rapidly growing taller

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

- Moody, self-absorbed, and sensitive
- Like to challenge rules, argue, and test limits; may be cruel; sometimes physically aggressive
- Worry more about who's "in" and who's "out" than when they were younger
- Need lots of time to talk with peers; heavy users of the phone, cell phone, instant messaging, and email
- Impulsive—often talk before thinking
- Often behave best when away from home
- Have trouble making decisions
- Need adult empathy, humor, and sensitivity to help them cope with their rapidly changing minds and bodies

LANGUAGE

- Enjoy arguing and debating
- Appreciate humor
- Imitate adult language

COGNITIVE

- Would rather learn new skills than review or improve previous work
- Becoming more adept at abstract thinking—for example, they can understand ideas such as "justice"
- With improving reasoning skills, they can establish and modify rules and develop hypotheses
- Increasingly able to see the world from various perspectives

Eleven-Year-Olds in the Classroom

VISION AND FINE MOTOR ABILITY

- Highly improved fine motor skills lead to more confidence in exploring delicate work (for example, calligraphy, linoleum block printing, and Japanese brush painting); art is an important vehicle to greater focus in reading and math
- May complain of headaches and read only for short periods of time; music may aid their concentration
- Often enjoy handwork (weaving, braiding, sewing; etc.), which may aid concentration and serve as an outlet for stress
- Love computer games and being on the computer in general, sometimes as a stress reducer or, in the case of email and text messaging, a social outlet; adults should help make sure that social use of the computer does not contribute to problems with cliques, bullying, or other inappropriate behaviors or put children at risk in any way

GROSS MOTOR ABILITY

- Motor skills (such as throwing, catching, and kicking) improve rapidly; they like to measure their individual best
- "Quiet time" in school day gives needed physical rest, as well as a break from academics and intense social-emotional dynamics

COGNITIVE GROWTH

- Developing new abilities in deductive reasoning, making this a good age for scientific study, mathematical problem solving, invention, and debate, but hands-on learning is still critical for most
- Learn well in collaborative groups

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COGNITIVE GROWTH

- Self-absorbed and interested in imagining themselves in adult roles; this makes history, biography, and current events exciting
- Like "adult" academic tasks such as researching, interviewing, footnoting, and creating a bibliography
- Enjoy board games, intellectual puzzles, brain teasers, and even tests
- Usually challenged rather than defeated by reasonably hard work; need help with time-management and homework skills
- May show interest in and facility for languages, music, or mechanics; need time to explore these areas
- Interested in learning about older and very young people

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR

- Desire to test limits and rules is an important developmental milestone, not a personal attack on the teacher; class meetings, peer mediation, student councils, and cross-age tutoring can be highly effective in resolving issues
- Love the challenge of competition; prefer team sports and getting better at playing as a team
- Teachers can help with inclusion/exclusion issues by changing learning groups to adjust the social mix
- "Saving face" is important; not necessary for the teacher to "win" arguments; giving children private, physical space to think things over helps resolve problems peacefully
- Teacher empathy, a light attitude, and a sense of humor help elevens take themselves less seriously

Eleven-Year-Olds: Curriculum

READING

Provide opportunities for children this age to:

- Take on week-long reading assignments, still using trade books
- Do more nonfiction reading tied to subjects that interest them
- Read biographies
- Read to children in younger grades

WRITING

Expect from these children:

- *Writing:* Willingness to practice, although revision can be a struggle; writing that incorporates personal interests and is more adult-like in plot, character development, and style; very rudimentary research reports; much enjoyment of poetry writing, cartooning, and journaling
- *Spelling:* Ease and accuracy for some children, with most enjoying the challenge of spelling difficult words; readiness to learn more dictionary skills
- *Writing Themes:* For most, blood and gore, fantasy, science fiction, love and romance; for advanced writers, experimentation with a variety of personally compelling themes
- *Handwriting:* Functional cursive for most

Favorite themes for children this age:

- Games
- History
- Biography
- Government
- Community service
- Physical development and body systems
- Plant growth and other forms of measurable, systematic development

Provide opportunities for children this age to:

- Solve complicated word problems
- Study probability and statistics through real-world problems
- Use calculators and computers
- Work on speed and accuracy in computations
- Work with percentages

THEMATIC UNITS

(Social Studies, Science, Current Events)

MATH