

Your 5th Grader's Social Life

By fifth grade, your child is likely to be a lean, mean, social machine, and I mean mean. It's a matter of survival. Now is the time when teasing and gossiping take center stage in the social arena, as children's social instincts become sharp as a whip and entirely ego-centric. By fifth grade, kids have figured out that to win the social game, you have to have some "losers," and fifth graders are anxious to deflect criticism away from themselves, even if that means assigning it to others.

"Fifth graders are very astute and alert to mannerisms," says veteran guidance counselor Mary Pat McCartney: "the way kids are talking and presenting themselves, what they're wearing, who their friends are, etc." Clothing, accessories, hair, and what others are "into" (what activities they pursue, what music they listen to) become defining features, as children are judged less by inherent characteristics than by superficial qualities.

Keeping tabs on the lives of others becomes a social hobby in fifth grade, and it can begin to take a child's focus away from school. Distractions abound: what with fledgling relationships, new haircuts, friends and feuds, what's on the blackboard barely stands a chance. If your child's schoolwork falters in fifth grade, don't be surprised - but don't accept it either!

Parents can help by imposing checks and balances at home: make it clear to your child that there is "social" time and "school" time, and leave no doubt in their minds which comes first. On a school night, make sure homework is done, notes are reviewed, and projects completed before allowing them to chat on the phone or browse the Internet. That way, kids know that social time is a privilege, not a right, and that they are responsible for using their own time wisely.

Whether your fifth grader is a social pariah or a piranha, keep in mind that social stress is par for the course. Fifth graders will need the social skills they're developing to navigate the stormy waters of middle school, and teasing, gossiping, and labeling are normal exercises for children who are pushing the boundaries of who they are and how they want to be represented. "They're just trying so hard to define themselves," says McCartney. And that's something we can all identify with.

