

# Growing With the Whole Child in the Elementary Years

Sheldon Clark

Our children get older. It seems to happen so fast, and often in a series of events that blend into a blur. And yet there are times in a child's life which we can see as milestone markers – certain ages at which clear development takes place. In fact, we can probably safely identify four distinct periods of development between birth and adulthood, covering approximately the ages 0-6, 6-12, 12-18, and 18-24.

Childhood is generally thought to be encompassed in the first two of these stages. At Community Independent School, children in the first stage, ages 0-6, attend the Early School, beginning at age three in the Jewelweed program, before moving to the Sweetgum/Loblolly (prekindergarten/ kindergarten) program. During the second stage, ages 6-12, children enter the school's elementary program, first as a Sundrop (1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> grade) before progressing into the Forget-me-not gathering (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grade). It is during the elementary years that children often begin to fully adapt to living as a human being in society. Whereas in the first stage a child lives primarily within the life of the family and a limited area outside the home, children in the second stage of development begin to interact in a larger social arena, within larger and more complex settings, and in an increasingly interdependent society.

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As in all periods of development and learning, children in the elementary years move through a construction of the self. There are several factors which influence this process, primary among them being the child's own activity, adults and their work on behalf of the child, and the environment within which the child grows, including any place where children are engaged in activity that peaks their interests, and uses both mind and body to contribute to the different dimensions of the human personality.

At Community Independent School we value the development of the whole child and the different aspects of personality which are central to each child's process of self-construction. Certainly our teachers work with children to help them develop their cognitive side, but there's more at hand when considering a child's overall growth. Working to meet the development of whole children is vital at any age, but in the elementary years children often expand in rapid and varied ways. The elementary program at CIS is designed to aid children in their growth as human beings, to help them expand in their own roles within community, to help them solve problems, and to help them consider their own part within the context of group interactions.

## **Social Development**

### ***children in relation to others***

When discussing social development we consider the ways in which human beings live together and how we affect one another. As a result, much of what we hope to achieve at CIS is to help children understand the part they play in their classroom gathering as a society in and of itself.

Whereas in the first developmental stage a child's personality is often oriented toward others within the home, in the second stage children rapidly expand their orientation to include those who are outside their primary environment. This happens over time, and is aided by helping each child to arrive at a more full understanding of our shared context as people, and a recognition of our common hopes, dreams and cares.

To achieve this at the elementary level, we continue the work begun in earlier years to help children understand and verbalize their own needs. At the same time, children are guided in their growing understanding of the needs of others, and helped to see how we as humans have many needs in common – for exploration and determination; for safety, both emotionally and physically; for companionship; and for support. To help this process, CIS' elementary program brings children a curriculum and cooperative learning activities which offer genuine motives for the joint pursuit of knowledge. We fill our learning environments with opportunities for students to plan and work together, and we offer experiences which expose students to an increasing number of people in the world around them.



## **Cognitive Development**

### ***children in relation to ideas***

Cognitive expansion is an important part of children's total development as knowledge is the foundation from which they begin to make choices, to act independently, and to interact with others.

There are two important things about children in the 6-12 year old stage which effect their cognitive growth. The first, as already noted, is that their consciousness begins to extend outside the home and its chosen circles of family and friends. The second, and one that is central to cognitive growth, is that this age child shows an increasingly strong desire to know the reasons for things. Children in the second stage of development want to understand things for themselves, and so in CIS' elementary classrooms we present concepts with which children can grapple intellectually, and which both acknowledge and build upon their own growing life experiences.



In the first stage of development, we help children understand the concrete things around them, and give them tools with which to work – sorting, counting, and organizing. In the elementary years we use both concrete and abstract approaches to approach the increasing depth of ideas found in the sciences, language and mathematics, and cultural subjects such as history and the arts. We also seek to integrate different aspects of the

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curriculum, helping children to consider possible relationships between ideas and how different skills support and build upon one another. In the first stage, the child's attention is fixed on activity. In the second stage the child's attention is focused on finding the reasons for things with a mind that is increasingly able to reflect and to dream. It has been said that "Touching is for the younger child what imagining is for the older child." At CIS, our goal is not just to help children

grow in academic skills, but to involve them in learning opportunities which excite them to use those skills as tools for exploration.

### **Moral Development** *children in relation to the world*

In the first period of development, between the ages 0-6, children begin to build their character, and discover the strengths of their own personalities. As they grow, however, the second period from roughly age 6-12 becomes a time when a child's strengthened personality begins to move out into the surrounding society. Children at this age

often begin to make more conscious decisions about new situations. As they move through the elementary program their sense of right, wrong, and of overall "justice", at first so concretely black and white, begins to develop finer shades of grey. Certain societal expectations begin to take firm root, while at the same time children begin to encounter different situations, and to consider what might be the best course of action in each. To meet this development in the elementary years, CIS works to provide experiences which help children discover the relationship between their own actions and the needs of others. In so doing, we hope to help children move away from having their actions guided largely by adults and toward a place where they can guide themselves from a position of experience and understanding.

### **Emotional Development** *children in relation to themselves*

The Latin word for emotion is *emovere* – *e*, meaning "out" which is added to *movere*, which is "to move". Movement is fundamental to the elementary years at Community Independent School. Certainly elementary aged students have broader physical movements, but they are also moving into broader intellectual and social settings, many of which relate to issues of community, justice and a growing sense of right and wrong. If this sense of movement is the basis for self-construction in the cognitive, social and moral aspects of human

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development, then this same movement is directly related to development in a child's emotional range. At Community Independent School, children are offered curriculum and work that are appropriate to each individual, helping them to feel both confident and satisfied. Our students become eager learners in an environment which allows for exploration and their own need for self-determination. They grow comfortable in their social relationships, knowing that their classroom fosters trust, cooperation and respect. They are secure in an environment where issues of fairness and justice, vital in the minds of elementary-aged children, are explored, and where children spend their days in community and are encouraged to work together toward the betterment of all.

Mahatma Gandhi spoke of education in terms of a spiritual training, or education of the heart. "A proper and all round development of the mind," he once wrote, "can take place only when it proceeds with the education of the physical and spiritual faculties of the child. They constitute an indivisible whole." As a school which strives to educate the whole child, Community Independent School holds this understanding as a guiding principal. Its application begins in the Early School and then deepens as children age through our elementary program. The elementary years represent important steps for all children as they make their way through life's journey. At CIS we value the chance to help children along their way!

