

Understanding Your Child's Development & Behavior

A Parent Resource Guide for Elementary School, Ages 4–10

This guide was developed for MPCSD parents/guardians of elementary school students and includes developmental context, what to expect at home, how to support your child, and age-appropriate sleep and screen time guidance for each grade, TK through 5th grade.



Sources & Attribution

The developmental descriptions in this guide are original summaries prepared by the District, informed by and paraphrased from two published works on child development, *Yardsticks: Child and Adolescent Development, Ages 4–14* (Wood, 2017) and *Developmental Profiles: Pre-Birth Through Adolescence* (Marotz & Allen, 2023), and are not reproduced text from either book.

Sleep ranges are drawn from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine's pediatric consensus statement (Paruthi et al., 2016), endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Screen time guidance reflects the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2026 media use guidance, which replaced the AAP's earlier hour-based recommendations with the “5 Cs” framework: Child, Content, Calm, Crowding Out, and Communication for evaluating screen use in context, alongside the Family Media Plan tool from HealthyChildren.org.

Full citations for every source appear in the References section at the end of this guide. These are general guidelines, as individual needs vary, and your child's teacher or pediatrician can help you tailor them.

A Shared Foundation for Partnership

Behavior Is Communication

Children, especially younger ones, often can't put their feelings into words. Challenging behavior is usually a message: “I'm overwhelmed,” “I need connection,” or “I don't know how to handle this yet.” When we approach behavior from the lens of curiosity, we respond more effectively.

Most Challenging Behavior Is Developmental

The behaviors that puzzle or frustrate us are often textbook for the age. The defiance of an 11-year-old, the perfectionism of a 7-year-old, the silliness of a 4-year-old, these aren't problems to fix. They're signs of growth happening right on schedule.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

Resilience Is Built Through Appropriate Discomfort

Children grow stronger when they experience, and move through, manageable frustration, disappointment, and challenge. Our shared goal isn't to remove all discomfort, but to support children in developing the tools to navigate it. That work happens at school and at home, together.

Understanding the AAP's “5 Cs” Screen Time Framework

In January 2026, the American Academy of Pediatrics updated its media use guidance for the first time in a decade. The AAP moved away from fixed hour-based limits (such as the earlier “2 hours a day” rule) and replaced them with a framework built around context and quality, often summarized as the “5 Cs.” Rather than asking “how many minutes,” the 5 Cs ask what a screen is actually doing for a specific child. The screen time guidance throughout this guide reflects that shift.

Child	The same amount or type of screen use can affect two children very differently. Temperament, age, and individual needs matter more than a universal number.
Content	What a child is watching, playing, or scrolling matters as much as how long. High-quality, age-appropriate content is different from fast-paced or algorithm-driven feeds.
Calm	Screens are sometimes used to soothe big emotions. Occasional use this way is normal, but it's worth noticing if a screen becomes the only tool for managing frustration or boredom.
Crowding Out	The central question: is screen use displacing sleep, physical activity, homework, or in-person relationships? If so, that's the signal to adjust, regardless of the clock.
Communication	Ongoing, non-judgmental conversation about what kids see and do online, including a family media plan, matters more than a fixed limit enforced without discussion.

One useful distinction in the updated guidance: recreational and social screen use (games, social media, video) is not the same conversation as educational technology (homework platforms, learning apps). Both call for attention, but not the same rules. For older children and teens, the AAP recommends building a Family Media Plan together (consistent, family-agreed expectations) rather than relying on a single universal number.

AGE 4

TK "Exuberant, Imaginative, and Testing Limits"

OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE *Highly active and often out-of-bounds physically and verbally. Loves silliness, bathroom humor, and big language. Tests limits constantly. Imaginative, dramatic, and easily overstimulated. Needs clear, consistent structure delivered with warmth.*

This Year, Developmentally

Four is a year of expansion and exuberance. Children push outward physically, verbally, and socially, often crossing into behavior adults find challenging: loud voices, dramatic claims, name-calling, and exaggeration are typical. This is not regression or misbehavior; it is the developmental work of the year. Fours are testing the boundaries of language, body, and relationship, and they need adults who can hold those limits with warmth and consistency.

What You May See at Home

At home, fours often save their biggest behavior for the people they trust most. They may be sweet with grandparents and wild with parents, demanding bedtime routines one night and resisting them the next. Sibling conflict is common, and fours can be both deeply loving and instantly furious. Predictable mealtimes, bedtimes, and transitions help them settle, and short blocks of one-on-one adult attention go a long way.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

How You Can Support at Home

- Establish a small number of clear, non-negotiable limits and enforce them consistently across adults
- Give short, one-step directions and reinforce with proximity and visual cues
- Redirect rather than reason at length: four-year-olds do not yet process long explanations
- Offer two acceptable choices to build a sense of control ("red cup or blue cup")
- Warn ahead of transitions with visual or verbal cues ("Two more minutes, then cleanup")
- Model and narrate the behavior you want to see ("I'm using gentle hands")
- Coach through peer conflict rather than solving it for them
- Reserve time-out or removal for genuine safety concerns, not developmentally typical testing

RECOMMENDED SLEEP 10–13 hours per 24 hours, including naps <i>Source: Paruthi et al., 2016 / American Academy of Sleep Medicine consensus statement.</i>	SCREEN TIME GUIDANCE Apply the 5 Cs rather than a strict clock. Child & Content: fours overstimulate easily, so choose slow-paced, high-quality shows and co-view when you can. Calm: notice if screens are the only way big feelings get soothed. Crowding Out: protect active, imaginative play and naps/bedtime. Communication: narrate and talk together, and turn screens off 30–60 minutes before bed. <i>Source: American Academy of Pediatrics 2026 media use guidance (the “5 Cs”) / HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan.</i>
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AGE 5

Kindergarten *"Calm, Eager, and In Tune with the World"*

OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE *Calm, focused, eager to please. Concrete thinker tied to here and now. Likes adult approval and familiar routines. Beginning to use symbols and represent ideas. Friendly, cooperative, often described as "in tune" with the world.*

This Year, Developmentally

Five is a year of relative equilibrium. After the boisterous expansion of four, children settle into a calmer, more cooperative stance. Fives are typically eager to please adults, content with familiar routines, and grounded in the present moment. They take pride in being competent and following the rules. This makes five an ideal year to establish habits: of conversation, of work, and of community, that will support the more turbulent years ahead.

What You May See at Home

At home, fives often want to be near their parents and help with grown-up tasks. They enjoy cooking, sorting laundry, and other concrete jobs that make them feel useful. Bedtime and mealtime routines bring comfort. They typically have one or two best friends and prefer small-group playdates over chaotic gatherings. Tantrums and conflicts still occur but are typically shorter and less intense than at four.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

How You Can Support at Home

- Build predictable routines and post visual schedules where children can see them
- Praise specific effort and behavior ("I noticed you helped clean up the blocks")
- Give clear one- or two-step directions with time to comply
- Invite children into creating simple classroom or family rules
- Offer meaningful choices within firm adult-set boundaries
- Handle mistakes with matter-of-fact repair rather than shame
- Support friendship skills through structured turn-taking and shared tasks
- Recognize that eagerness to please is genuine and respond with warmth

RECOMMENDED SLEEP	SCREEN TIME GUIDANCE
10–13 hours per 24 hours, including naps if still needed <i>Source: Paruthi et al., 2016 / American Academy of Sleep Medicine consensus statement.</i>	Use the 5 Cs to decide what fits your family. Child & Content: fives enjoy feeling capable, so favor interactive, co-viewed, high-quality content over passive viewing. Calm: watch whether a screen becomes the default way to settle down. Crowding Out: keep bedrooms screen-free and protect hands-on and pretend play. Communication: talk together about what your child is watching or playing. <i>Source: American Academy of Pediatrics 2026 media use guidance (the "5 Cs") / HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan.</i>

AGE 6

1st Grade "Enthusiastic, Ambitious, Easily Overwhelmed"

OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE *Enthusiastic, ambitious, often loud and busy. Dualistic thinking: right or wrong, fair or unfair. Reading often begins this year. Perfectionistic and easily frustrated by mistakes. High energy and rapid fatigue.*

This Year, Developmentally

Six brings a surge of energy and ambition. Where five was calm and content within limits, six pushes outward again: louder, busier, prouder, more eager to be first and best. This is often a major academic year, as reading takes hold and number sense expands rapidly. But the same ambition that fuels growth can lead to perfectionism, frustration, and tears when results fall short of expectations. Sixes need adults who can scaffold challenge while protecting effort from collapsing into despair.

What You May See at Home

At home, sixes can be both delightful and exhausting. They want to help, win, lead, and explain, sometimes all at once. They argue rules, claim unfairness, and may melt down over what seems like a small disappointment. Sibling rivalry sharpens, especially around who got more or went first. Bedtime fatigue is real, and behavior often deteriorates as the day ends.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

How You Can Support at Home

- Anticipate perfectionism; break challenging tasks into small, achievable steps
- Celebrate effort and process, not only correct answers
- Normalize mistakes explicitly as part of learning
- Use humor and playfulness to defuse tension before escalation
- Provide movement and physical outlets before demanding sustained quiet work
- Address big emotions with calm presence rather than reasoning in the moment
- Support fairness concerns with visible systems (turn charts, timers)
- Debrief conflicts privately after the child has calmed and is ready to talk

RECOMMENDED SLEEP	SCREEN TIME GUIDANCE
9–12 hours per night <i>Source: Paruthi et al., 2016 / American Academy of Sleep Medicine consensus statement.</i>	Let the 5 Cs guide daily decisions. Child & Content: sixes fatigue fast and perfectionism runs high, so favor calmer content matched to their skill level, especially in the evening. Calm: notice if screens become the only way your child recovers from a hard moment. Crowding Out: protect movement, reading practice, and an early bedtime. Communication: keep talking openly about what's being watched or played. <i>Source: American Academy of Pediatrics 2026 media use guidance (the "5 Cs") / HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan.</i>

AGE 7

2nd Grade "Cautious, Introspective, Perfectionistic"

OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE *Cautious, sensitive, introspective. Often perfectionistic, sometimes a complainer. Linear thinker who likes patterns, rules, and quiet work. Skills consolidate rather than leap forward. Wants to get things right.*

This Year, Developmentally

Seven is often a quieter, more inward year. Children become more thoughtful, more sensitive to criticism, and more focused on getting things right. The outward exuberance of six gives way to a more cautious, deliberate stance. Sevens may erase repeatedly, complain that work is too hard, or refuse to start until they feel sure of success. This is not laziness or clinical anxiety: it is the developmental work of the year, as children take stock of their growing skills and worry about losing ground.

What You May See at Home

At home, sevens often want quiet time alone or with a single trusted person. They may have a favorite stuffed animal, book, or hiding spot, and they appreciate being asked rather than told. They notice family dynamics and may worry about adult conversations, money, or news they overhear. Bedtime can become extended with new fears, requests, and reflections. A predictable, calm evening routine helps.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

How You Can Support at Home

- Approach with gentleness; seven-year-olds hear correction sharply
- Give private, specific feedback rather than public correction
- Allow processing time before requiring a verbal response
- Reassure that mistakes are safe, expected, and recoverable
- Break challenging or open-ended tasks into small, sequenced steps
- Provide quiet space and downtime when sensory or social load builds
- Take worries seriously; do not dismiss or minimize them
- Support friendship pairs rather than pressing for large-group participation

RECOMMENDED SLEEP 9–12 hours per night <i>Source: Paruthi et al., 2016 / American Academy of Sleep Medicine consensus statement.</i>	SCREEN TIME GUIDANCE The 5 Cs are especially useful this year. Child & Content: sevens worry easily, so favor calmer, skill-building content and notice how a show or game leaves them feeling. Calm: notice if a screen is the only place worries get soothed. Crowding Out: guard quiet downtime, reading, and sleep. Communication: stay closely involved, since sevens welcome it, and parental controls are appropriate at this age. <i>Source: American Academy of Pediatrics 2026 media use guidance (the “5 Cs”) / HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan.</i>
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AGE 8

3rd Grade "Speedy, Social, and Industrious"

OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE *Speedy, social, industrious. Eager group worker, sometimes careless and rushed. Strong appetite for projects and conversation. Energy and ambition return, often outrunning quality. Likes feeling competent and noticed.*

This Year, Developmentally

Eight is fast, social, and ambitious. After the more inward year of seven, children come back outward: talking, moving, joining groups, and tackling projects with enthusiasm. They want to be busy, to belong, and to feel competent. The risk of the year is that ambition can outrun quality: eights take on more than they can finish well, rush through work, and skip steps. The opportunity is that with the right structure, they can do impressively complex and collaborative work.

What You May See at Home

At home, eights are typically chatty and engaged. They want to tell about their day, debate dinner choices, and weigh in on family decisions. They develop strong opinions about food, clothes, and fairness. Sibling relationships shift as they seek more independence from younger siblings and more access to older ones. Friendships outside the family take on growing importance, and playdates, sleepovers, and group activities feature prominently.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

How You Can Support at Home

- Set clear expectations for quality of work, not just completion
- Provide frequent, specific feedback to counter the year's tendency to rush
- Channel social energy into structured group work with clear roles
- Use checklists and visible progress markers to support careful work
- Coach through social conflicts rather than solving them for the child
- Address interruption and impulsivity with consistent, low-drama reminders
- Recognize achievement without inflating it; eights read exaggerated praise as false
- Balance freedom with clear accountability for behavior and work quality

RECOMMENDED SLEEP 9–12 hours per night <i>Source: Paruthi et al., 2016 / American Academy of Sleep Medicine consensus statement.</i>	SCREEN TIME GUIDANCE Build a family conversation around the 5 Cs. Child & Content: eights love group and multiplayer play, so review games and apps for fit. Calm: watch whether boredom is only ever resolved with a screen. Crowding Out: make sure screens aren't displacing friendships, projects, or activity. Communication: build a simple family media plan together and revisit it often. <i>Source: American Academy of Pediatrics 2026 media use guidance (the "5 Cs") / HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan.</i>
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AGE 9

4th Grade *"Industrious, Self-Critical, and Searching"*

OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE *Industrious but self-critical. Anxious, perfectionistic, more aware of fairness and social nuance. Sees shades of gray. Friendships matter intensely. Wants to be taken seriously by adults.*

This Year, Developmentally

Nine is often a more turbulent, inward year. Children become more critical of themselves and others, more aware of social nuance, and more sensitive to fairness. The cheerful industriousness of eight gives way to a more searching, sometimes anxious stance. Nines often worry: about schoolwork, friendships, family, and the world. They want to be taken seriously and respond well to adults who listen carefully, set realistic expectations, and avoid public correction.

What You May See at Home

At home, nines can be more private. They may close their bedroom door, keep journals, or have intense, hours-long conversations with a best friend on the phone. They are quick to notice family hypocrisy and may push back on inconsistencies in adult rules. Tears, moodiness, and complaints about being misunderstood are common. They can also be deeply loving and reflective, especially in one-on-one moments.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

How You Can Support at Home

- Listen more than you talk; nine-year-olds need to feel genuinely heard
- Take concerns, criticisms, and complaints seriously
- Correct privately and celebrate publicly to protect dignity in front of peers
- Acknowledge unfairness when it exists rather than minimizing it
- Match expectations to real capacity; rigid demands often backfire this year
- Coach through self-critical self-talk with warmth and realistic reframing
- Address group dynamics early, before exclusion patterns solidify
- Invite children into problem-solving conversations about classroom issues

RECOMMENDED SLEEP	SCREEN TIME GUIDANCE
9–12 hours per night <i>Source: Paruthi et al., 2016 / American Academy of Sleep Medicine consensus statement.</i>	Revisit agreements through the 5 Cs. Child & Content: nines are sensitive to social comparison, so look closely at social media, feeds, and group chats. Calm: notice whether screens are used to manage worry or social stress. Crowding Out: protect one-on-one time and sleep; charge devices outside the bedroom. Communication: keep an open, non-judgmental conversation going about online life. <i>Source: American Academy of Pediatrics 2026 media use guidance (the “5 Cs”) / HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan.</i>

AGE 10

5th Grade "Easygoing, Cooperative, a Golden Year"

OVERVIEW AT A GLANCE *Easygoing, cooperative, generally content. Concrete thinking solidifies; abstraction emerging. Loves facts, lists, and projects. Likes rules and fairness. Welcomes adults and warm relationships.*

This Year, Developmentally

Ten is often described as a "golden" year. Children tend to be cheerful, cooperative, and generally pleased with themselves, their families, and their teachers. The intensity of nine softens, and a kind of calm confidence settles in. Tens like rules, value fairness, and are usually willing partners in school life. Adult relationships are typically warm and trusting, which makes this an ideal year to deepen habits, expectations, and academic skills.

What You May See at Home

At home, tens are often pleasant company. They enjoy family meals, conversation, and shared activities. They may have a few stable friendships and prefer them to larger social circles. Tens often develop strong interests: collections, hobbies, sports, books, and can talk about them at length. Family routines run more smoothly than at nine, though early signs of the coming preadolescent changes may appear toward the end of the year.

Developmental overview adapted from Wood (2017) and Marotz & Allen (2023). See References.

How You Can Support at Home

- Leverage the year's cooperative spirit to build durable habits and routines
- Involve children in setting classroom or family expectations
- Give real responsibility and follow through when they meet it
- Provide honest, substantive feedback: tens can handle it
- Recognize genuine accomplishment without over-praising or inflating
- Set high expectations warmly; tens generally rise to meet them
- Address minor infractions matter-of-factly, without drama or lecture
- Use the year's warmth to deepen adult–child relationships for the years ahead

RECOMMENDED SLEEP	SCREEN TIME GUIDANCE
9–12 hours per night <i>Source: Paruthi et al., 2016 / American Academy of Sleep Medicine consensus statement.</i>	Use ten's cooperative spirit to co-create a Family Media Plan built on the 5 Cs. Child & Content: review apps, games, and platforms together before middle school independence begins. Calm: notice if a screen has become the default way to unwind. Crowding Out: keep sleep, activity, and in-person relationships protected first. Communication: keep the conversation ongoing as independence grows. <i>Source: American Academy of Pediatrics 2026 media use guidance (the "5 Cs") / HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan.</i>

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Note: The age-by-age developmental descriptions, “what you may see at home” narratives, and support strategies in this guide are original summaries organized by the District, drawing on general concepts from the sources above. No text has been copied or closely paraphrased from Wood (2017) or Marotz & Allen (2023); readers who would like the authors' full discussion of each age are encouraged to consult those books directly. Sleep ranges reflect the American Academy of Sleep Medicine's 2016 consensus statement. Screen time guidance reflects the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2026 media use update and may be revised again as guidance evolves.