Growing Through the Grades:

4th–5th Grade



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What changes in 4th and 5th grade?

Fourth and fifth graders often begin moving into early preadolescence. Parents may notice:

- A stronger desire for independence and privacy
- More questioning of rules and parental authority
- Greater sensitivity to criticism or embarrassment
- Increased awareness of popularity and social status
- More complicated friendships and group dynamics

- Stronger comparisons with peers
- More academic pressure and fear of failure
- Early puberty and body-image concerns
- Greater exposure to technology and social media
- A shift from openly seeking comfort to acting as though they do not need it

What changes in 4th and 5th grade?

The Developmental Paradox

Children may seem mature and insightful in one moment, then emotionally overwhelmed in the next.

This is not manipulation or regression.

Their cognitive abilities are developing faster than their emotional regulation and judgment.



Looking Beneath Attitude and Defiance

At this age, distress does not always look like sadness, anger, rejection, or fear. It may look like:

- Eye-rolling or talking back
- “Whatever” or “I don’t care”
- Refusing to talk
- Blaming others
- Avoiding homework
- Lying or hiding information
- Arguing about fairness
- Becoming controlling
- Irritability or anger
- Withdrawing into screens or their bedroom



Looking Beneath Attitude and Defiance

The behavior may be communicating:

- “I feel powerless.”
- “I’m embarrassed.”
- “I think I disappointed you.”
- “I’m worried I’m not good enough.”
- “I need more control.”
- “I don’t know how to talk about what happened.”
- “I need you, but needing you feels vulnerable.”



This does not make disrespectful behavior acceptable. It helps us respond to the emotional need while we hold a boundary.

Looking Beneath Attitude and Defiance

“Two things are true”

“You’re really angry with me **– and** you may not speak to me that way.”

“You want more privacy **– and** I still need to know that you are safe.”

“You were afraid of getting in trouble **– and** telling the truth is still important.”

“You disagree with the rule **– and** the rule still stands.”

Looking Beneath Attitude and Defiance

Connect, Limit, Support

01
Connect

Show that you understand the child's experience.

02
Limit

State the boundary clearly.

03
Support

Help the child find a more effective next step.

Example in Action:

Connect: "You feel like I'm treating you like a little kid." – **Limit:** "You may not slam the door in my face." – **Support:** "You can tell me you need ten minutes, and then we'll come back to the conversation."

Staying Connected when Children Talk Less

You may become concerned when a previously talkative child starts answering questions with:

“Fine.”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t know.”

“Can I just go to my room?”



Children this age often need connection without pressure. Direct questioning – especially immediately after school – can feel intrusive or overwhelming.

Staying Connected when Children Talk Less

Reduce the pressure to disclose

Instead of:

- “How was school?”
- “Who did you play with?”
- “What’s wrong?”
- “Why aren’t you talking to me?”

Try:

- “I’m happy to see you. You don’t have to talk yet.”
- “You seem quieter than usual. I’m here if something is on your mind.”
- “You don’t have to tell me everything, but you never have to handle something scary or unsafe by yourself.”



Staying Connected when Children Talk Less

Use side-by-side connection

Children often talk more readily when conversation is not the main event:

- Driving in the car
- Walking together
- Preparing food
- Shooting baskets
- Doing a puzzle or craft
- Going for a snack
- Sitting together before bed



Aim for small, consistent moments of attention instead of waiting for a major heart-to-heart conversation

Staying Connected when Children Talk Less

Create a ritual of connection

Consider:

- Ten minutes together before bed
- A weekly snack or walk
- A question of the day
- One-on-one time with each child
- A “high, low, and something unexpected” check-in



Connection works best when it’s not offered only after something goes wrong

Friendships, Exclusion, and Social Belonging

Peer belonging becomes especially important during these years

Children may experience:

- Shifting alliances in friendship groups
- Feeling left out
- Gossip or rumors
- Pressure to choose sides
- “Best friend” conflicts
- Teasing disguised as joking
- Group chats or online exclusion
- Pressure to act differently to fit in
- Worry about being seen as weird, childish, or unpopular



Social pain is real pain. Adults may see a situation as temporary or minor, while the child experiences it as a threat to belonging.

Friendships, Exclusion, and Social Belonging

Listen before investigating or fixing

“That sounds really painful. You thought you were part of the group, and then you found out they made plans without you.”

Avoid immediately saying:

- “They’re just jealous.”
- “Forget about them.”
- “You have plenty of other friends.”
- “This won’t matter in a few years.”
- “I’m calling their parents.”



These responses are well-intended but can leave the child feeling misunderstood.

Friendships, Exclusion, and Social Belonging

Ask what kind of help they want

Other helpful questions include:

- “What happened from your point of view?”
- “What do you think the other person might say happened?”
- “Is this a one-time conflict or something that keeps happening?”
- “Do you feel safe?”
- “What would you like to happen next?”
- “Would you like to practice what you could say?”



Start by asking: “Do you want me to listen, help you think it through, or help you decide whether an adult needs to be involved?”

Friendships, Exclusion, and Social Belonging

Teach the difference between conflict and bullying

Equal Power

Conflict

Generally involves children with **relatively equal power** who are having difficulty navigating a disagreement.

Key element: Mutual disagreement where both parties hold comparable influence.

Power Imbalance

Bullying

Generally involves **repeated, targeted behavior** and an intentional **power imbalance**.

Key element: Repeated targeting where one child exerts unfair power or control.

Children need opportunities to work through ordinary conflict. They definitely need adults to intervene when there is humiliation, threats, harassment, repeated targeting, or a significant power imbalance.

Friendships, Exclusion, and Social Belonging

Helpful social scripts

01

“I didn’t like that. Please stop.”

02

“I’m not going to talk about her when she isn’t here.”

03

“I want to be your friend, but I’m not choosing sides.”

04

“I thought we were joking before, but this doesn’t feel funny anymore.”

05

“I need help with something that keeps happening.”

Academic Pressure, Perfectionism, and Resilience

Academic expectations often increase in fourth and fifth grade. Children may become more aware of grades, test scores, learning differences, and who appears to be “smart.”

You may notice:

- Procrastination
- Avoiding difficult assignments
- Rushing through work
- Frequent reassurance-seeking
- Meltdowns over small mistakes
- Saying, “I’m stupid”
- Refusing to try unfamiliar activities
- Hiding poor grades
- Comparing themselves constantly
- Giving up when success is not immediate



What looks like laziness or defiance may actually be anxiety, shame, overwhelm, or difficulty with executive functioning.

Academic Pressure, Perfectionism, and Resilience

Validate without reinforcing helplessness

- “You’re worried that this grade means you’re not smart.”
- “You wanted to know how to do it immediately.”
- “It’s hard to watch someone else succeed at something that feels difficult for you.”

Then communicate confidence:

- “A hard assignment is not proof that you cannot do it.”
- “You do not need to feel confident before you begin.”
- “I won’t do it for you, and I won’t leave you alone with something that feels impossible. Let’s find the right amount of help.”



Academic Pressure, Perfectionism, and Resilience

Ask what kind of support is needed

“Do you need help understanding the directions?...

Making a plan?

Getting started?

Or staying with it?”

This helps separate different problems that can all look like “I can’t do it.”



Academic Pressure, Perfectionism, and Resilience

Praise coping and process

Instead of focusing only on the outcome, notice:

- Starting despite anxiety
- Asking an appropriate question
- Trying a second strategy
- Taking a break and returning
- Accepting feedback
- Recovering from disappointment
- Telling the truth about a mistake



What this sounds like:

"You were disappointed, and you stayed in the conversation."
"You didn't get the outcome you wanted, but you handled it."
"You made a mistake and took responsibility. That takes courage."

Resilience is not avoiding disappointment. It is learning: ***"This feels bad, and I can get through it."***

Independence, Responsibility, and Sturdy Boundaries

Gradual Transfer of Responsibility

Children this age need greater ownership of their responsibilities–but they still need structure, coaching, and supervision.

Rather than choosing between controlling everything and letting the child manage everything, parents can gradually transfer responsibility.

Offer meaningful choices within clear limits

"Your homework and backpack need to be finished before screens. You can decide which one you do first."

"You can disagree with the family rule. You cannot ignore it."

"You may take some space. We still need to return to this conversation."

Key Balance: *Structure provides safety, while choices within boundaries build true ownership.*

Independence, Responsibility, and Sturdy Boundaries

Use routines and systems

If parents are repeating the same reminders every day, the family may need a system rather than more talking.

Consider:

- A written after-school routine
- A homework checklist
- A consistent location for school materials
- A family calendar
- Device charging outside bedrooms
- Preparing backpacks the night before
- Breaking long-term projects into smaller deadlines



Key Takeaway: *Clear routines transfer ownership to the child while eliminating repetitive daily conflict.*

Independence, Responsibility, and Sturdy Boundaries

Solve repeated problems collaboratively

During a calm moment:

"We keep arguing about getting ready for school. I don't think either of us likes how mornings feel. Let's figure out what keeps getting in the way."

Discuss together:

- The child's concern
- The parent's concern
- Possible solutions
- What support the child wants
- When the family will review the plan

Important Limit: *Collaboration does not mean the child gets to decide every boundary. Parents remain responsible for safety, health, family values, and reasonable expectations.*

Technology, Privacy, and Parental Involvement

Social Connection

Technology becomes increasingly crucial to feel connected to friendship and belonging during these years. For children, a device may represent **social access** – not simply entertainment.

Validating Feelings From Limits

That means limits can create genuinely strong feelings. The feelings are **valid** even when the limit remains necessary.



Key Takeaway: *Validate the emotional weight of digital boundaries while maintaining necessary safety limits.*

Technology, Privacy, and Parental Involvement

Proactive Boundaries

Discuss expectations before problems occur:

- When and where devices may be used
- Which apps and games are allowed
- Who children may communicate with
- What information must remain private
- Whether parents will review messages or activity
- What happens if something upsetting occurs
- Where devices charge overnight



Privacy is earned gradually; safety is not optional

"I respect your growing need for privacy. It is also my job to keep you safe online. I want you to know what I will check and why, rather than checking secretly."

Key Takeaway: *Avoid using monitoring as a threat. Be transparent about what supervision looks like.*

Technology, Privacy, and Parental Involvement

Protect the relationship when something goes wrong

Children are more likely to seek help if they believe they will not immediately lose all access or be shamed.

Communicate:

Reassuring support online:

"If something scary, sexual, threatening, or confusing happens online, you can always come to me. We will handle it together. You will not be in trouble for asking for help."

When setting a limit:

Validating & hold boundaries:

"You're angry that screen time is over. I understand why stopping is hard. I'm not changing the limit. Would you like five minutes to transition, or would you like help finding something else to do?"

Key Takeaway: *Keep open lines of communication so children seek guidance instead of hiding mistakes.*

Puberty, Body Image, and Identity

Some fourth- and fifth-graders begin experiencing puberty-related changes. Even children who have not started puberty are often talking about it with peers.

Children may feel:

- Curious
- Embarrassed
- Self-conscious
- Proud
- Confused
- Worried about developing earlier or later than peers



Key Takeaway: *Parents can reduce shame by speaking calmly and matter-of-factly about bodies.*

Puberty, Body Image, and Identity

Important messages:

- Bodies develop at different times and in different ways.
- No one's body should be a source of teasing.
- Children have a right to reasonable privacy.
- Questions about bodies are normal.
- Bodies are not "good" or "bad" based on size or appearance.
- Children can talk to a trusted adult about anything confusing or uncomfortable.

Parent Guidance:

Avoid commenting frequently on the child's weight, size, eating, or changing body.

Focus on health, strength, sleep, energy, and caring for the body.

"Your body belongs to you. My job is to give you accurate information and help you take care of it."

Repair: Staying Connected Through Conflict

Conflict often increases as children seek more independence. Secure attachment does not mean avoiding conflict. It means children trust that the relationship can withstand disagreement.

A strong repair includes:

1. Naming what happened.
2. Taking responsibility for your part.
3. Acknowledging the impact.
4. Restating the boundary if needed.
5. Trying the conversation again.



Example: "I became sarcastic when you questioned the rule. That probably made you feel dismissed. I'm sorry. You deserve to be spoken to respectfully. The rule still stands, and I want to explain it without putting you down."

Repair: Staying Connected Through Conflict

Parents can apologize for how they handled a boundary without apologizing for having the boundary.

Repair teaches:

- People can be angry and remain connected
- Accountability does not equal shame
- Mistakes do not make someone bad
- Relationships can recover



Closing

Fourth- and fifth-graders may push us away, argue with us, or act as though our opinions no longer matter. But beneath that growing independence is still a child asking:

“Do you like who I am becoming?”

“Can you handle my feelings?”

“Will you still love me when I make mistakes?”

“Will you guide me without controlling me?”

“Can I tell you the truth?”

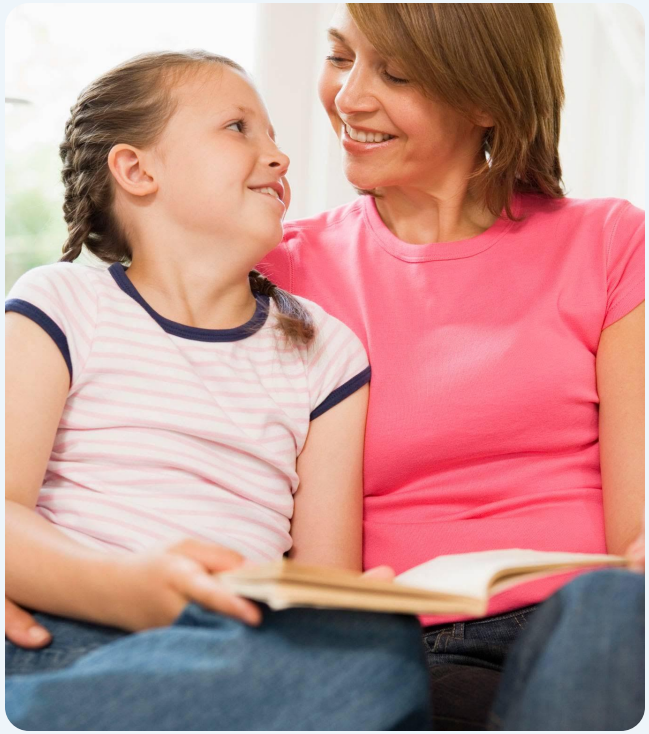
“Do I belong here when I don’t feel like I belong anywhere else?”

The goal is not to prevent every mistake, friendship problem, poor grade, or painful feeling.

Closing

The goal is to help children internalize:

- I am good inside, even when I make a poor choice.
- I can disagree without damaging the relationship.
- I can experience disappointment and recover.
- I can ask for help without being ashamed.
- My parents respect my growing independence.
- My parents will still step in when I need protection.
- I do not have to be perfect to be worthy or connected.



Closing

Final takeaway

As our children's world gets bigger, our role changes – but it does **not** become less important.

home

A secure home base

Close enough to support them.

explore

A sturdy guide

Strong enough to let them practice doing hard things.



Thank you for listening!

Have more questions or need more support?

EMAIL SUPPORT

e
m
ail

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