

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Child development: Pre-teens (9-12 years old)

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Understanding how a child's reactions, thoughts, behaviours and sense of control are influenced by their development can help you imagine what life is like for your child right now. Knowing what children are (and aren't) likely to be able to do and understand at their current age helps you respond in ways that support their positive development and mental health.

This fact sheet describes the main developmental experiences and capabilities of children around nine to 12 years old, and offers ways parents, family members and other adults can support children's healthy development and wellbeing.

Key things to remember about children's development

- Every child grows and develops at their own pace, and so their developmental journey is unique. Some children master certain skills earlier than others and some take longer or need a bit more help and direction.



- A child's development is shaped by their unique genes as well as their relationships and experiences at home and in the other places they learn and play.
- Neurodivergent children and children with a physical or intellectual disability may think, move, communicate and/or process senses differently, which can influence their developmental pathway.
- The best way to support your child's development and wellbeing is to provide a safe and secure environment and respond warmly, consistently and appropriately to their needs.

Children's development from nine to 12 years old

While pre-teens still value their family, and need the stability and predictability of family life, they are increasingly interested in and exploring the world beyond their immediate family. They may do this through sporting clubs, activities at school or by wanting to spend time with extended family, friends or others in their community.

Around this age, children are developing their own identities and thinking about their beliefs and values. As parents and family members, you can support your child's positive mental health now and in the future by encouraging and guiding them as they move between the child and adolescent (teenage) worlds. They need you to support and be patient with them as they start to become more independent, but also still need warm, responsive and reliable parenting and reminders of rules and limits.

Developmental experiences for pre-teens (9–12 years old)

As a parent it can be difficult to understand how your child is experiencing the world and the reasons behind the behaviours you're noticing. The following table shows the main developmental experiences and capabilities of children aged around 9–12 years old, along with ways parents, family members and other adults can support their healthy development.

Before you read this list, take a moment to think about what you've been noticing about your child.

Have you noticed any changes in:

- your child's interests, including about the wider world?
- their thoughts or views about big issues?
- their friendships and ways they interact with their peers?
- the way your child thinks about themselves and is exploring their identity?

As you read the suggestions for ways to support healthy development, consider:

- What are you already doing that is supporting your pre-teen's development?
- Are there any ideas here that you might try?

Common developmental experiences from around 9–12 years of age	How you can support your pre-teen's healthy development
<p>Children's cognitive (thinking) ability is growing rapidly. They often become increasingly curious about the big picture and the wider world. They may begin to question what they believe and value.</p>	<p>Show your child you're interested in listening to their thoughts and views. Talk about issues that are important to them, and events happening in your community, country and around the world. This helps children think and talk about their place in the world.</p>
<p>Pre-teens may be increasingly interested in their identity. This may include wanting to learn more about their cultural identity and family history.</p>	<p>Provide opportunities for your child to understand their identity, to walk in culture and to hear stories about their extended family and past generations.</p> <p>It's common for pre-teens to experiment with how they express their gender identity – their sense of themselves as a boy, girl, both or neither. The Raising Children Network has more information about gender identity and diversity.</p>
<p>Many pre-teens are developing clear views about moral and social issues. They want the adults in their lives to accept their views, even if they don't agree with them. They might test out their views by arguing with adults and rejecting their parents' views.</p>	<p>Listen to and show your child that you value their attempts to test out their views. Actively listen when they argue, support them if they want to learn more about or take part in social movements, and accept that they are going to be more interested in the views of their peers and other adults than your own views.</p>
<p>Pre-teens are able to see things from another's perspective, so they can show genuine empathy for another's experiences and feelings.</p> <p>They're becoming more interested in others and in the world around them. They generally have a firm understanding of 'right and wrong', what is fair and why they should be aware of the needs of others.</p>	<p>Notice and acknowledge when your pre-teen shows genuine empathy or chooses what's right over what's easy or what they would rather do – like if they stop to help another child who has fallen over, rather than win the race.</p> <p>But also remember they're still children, and sometimes will need your support to cope with challenges, such as losing their game of football or netball or dealing with friendship group changes.</p>

Common developmental experiences from around 9–12 years of age	How you can support your pre-teen's healthy development
<p>Around this age, children are becoming more logical and practical in the way they think. As a result, they will often reject things they see as 'babyish', like toys they used to love and their younger siblings' make-believe play. They're starting to think about the wider world and their place in it.</p>	<p>Bring your pre-teen into adult conversations (when appropriate) and don't force them to sit or play with 'the kids' when you're at family or social events. But you can also remind them to be kind to their younger siblings and other children and not spoil their imaginative play.</p>
<p>Most pre-teens have the thinking and language skills to solve problems and resolve differences. Children who have delays in language abilities and difficulties keeping up with schoolwork can feel frustrated or embarrassed. This can lead to behavioural issues if children decide they'd rather be seen as the 'bad' child than the 'dumb' one.</p>	<p>Help your child to identify what they're good at, and to talk to you if they're having any trouble keeping up with their schoolwork. It can be helpful to talk to their teacher about any signs of developmental delay or learning difficulties.</p>
<p>Individual strengths start to become clearer. Often pre-teens become focused on a particular interest or something they're very good at.</p>	<p>Look for the things your child shows interest and/or strengths in and find opportunities for them to develop their knowledge or skills. For example, you might show them you're interested by asking questions, so they can tell you everything they know about the ocean; or take them to the park so they can show you their new basketball skills.</p>
<p>Socially, it's common for a child of this age to have an intense and exclusive 'best friend' relationship, typically with a child the same age and gender. Older 'tweens' (around 11 or 12 years) tend to start developing closer relationships with friends, usually based on a common interest like a hobby or sport. They're becoming more influenced by their peer group, although adults are still important role models to them.</p>	<p>Encourage your pre-teen to play a sport or join clubs or groups at school so they can socialise with peers who share the same interests.</p> <p>This is an age when children can experience bullying or be involved in bullying behaviour. Make sure you – and they – know about childhood bullying and how to respond.</p>
<p>Towards the end of the pre-teen years, many children begin developing physically. The start of puberty can make children feel awkward and self-conscious.</p>	<p>Be on the lookout for signs your child is becoming withdrawn or wanting to stop doing things they used to enjoy because they're feeling 'different' to others their age.</p> <p>Encourage and support your child to stay physically active (e.g. play a sport at school or a club or walk the dog every afternoon). It's essential for their physical and mental health but can also help them feel good about themselves and focus on what their body can do, rather than how it looks.</p> <p>Pre-teen children may be spending more time on screens doing schoolwork and connecting with their friends, but it's best to try to limit their screen time to around two hours per day.¹</p>

If your family is navigating tough times

When a family is facing difficulties – such as financial or housing stress, health issues or relationship breakdown – it affects everyone, even children. It's normal for a child's developmental process to be interrupted and different to what's described above if they, you or the whole family is dealing with tough times.

Find out more about how you can [support your child's development during tough times](#) in our fact sheet.

When to seek advice

The pre-teen years are a time in which difficulties managing strong feelings can show up as changes in a child's mood, social relationships or learning. In children around nine to 12 years old, signs of difficulties coping include:

- changes of mood, lasting one or more weeks and impacting on friendships and learning
- feeling overwhelming emotions like fear or experiencing panic symptoms
- difficulty concentrating or in keeping track of conversations or instructions
- [changes in sleep](#) (e.g. trouble getting to sleep) or eating habits (e.g. eating more or less than usual)
- unexplained headaches, stomach aches or complaints of 'feeling sick' a lot
- becoming withdrawn (e.g. staying in their room alone for long periods), school refusal or no longer wanting to do activities they used to enjoy.

As a parent, you know your child best. If you have any concerns about the way your child is developing or coping with physical, emotional, social or other changes in their life, talk to your doctor/GP or another health professional. Identifying a cause or a developmental delay and getting help early can make a big difference to your child's development and long-term wellbeing.

More information

This fact sheet is part of our series on key developmental experiences for children from birth to age 12. This collection of resources looks at what parents and other adults can do to support healthy development at different points in a child's developmental journey.

AVAILABLE HERE

More resources on child development



The Raising Children Network has more detailed information about [pre-teens and teenagers' \(9–18 years old\) development](#) (including social and emotional development, ADHD, and puberty and sexual development).

By learning and staying curious about what your child is experiencing, thinking and feeling, you can support their healthy development and their mental health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

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References

1. Department of Health and Aged Care. (2021). [Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians: For children and young people \(5 to 17 years\)](#) [Web page]. Australian Government.