

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

Profiles of Development

Eleven Years:

The Gesell Institute of Child Development has observed that children go through a repeating sequence of six different stages with predictable changes in mood and behaviour in each. Eleven Years includes just one such stage. The behaviour observed in these stages reflects the qualities associated in tradition with the planets—in the case of Eleven with Mercury.

The developmental traits in these profiles represent only one aspect of children's behaviour and may be masked, modified or intensified by other factors, both individual and environmental, such as temperament, gender related behaviours, high stress levels, over-stimulation, too much screen time or organic problems.

Note: If your child has turned this age but shows none of these behaviours, please read the previous age level, or just wait a few months, then read this again!

These profiles integrate the wonderful descriptions from the Gesell Institute of Child Development research and the ideas of Rudolf Steiner into my own research. Direct quotations from Gesell are in 'single quote marks' or indented.

Eleven

A stage with Mercury qualities

After the smoothness and equilibrium of Tens, the behaviour of Elevens can appear to be paradoxical. The gift of Eleven seems to be their enthusiastic interest in the world and their wide ranging sociability. Gesell research describes how Elevens, at their best and especially when they are away from home, can be 'wonderful', 'mannerly, helpful, and outgoing', 'delightful', 'alert, imaginative, energetic, ready for anything.' 'They really do enjoy life and take great interest in all that goes on.'

But Gesell also describes Elevens as sometimes 'belligerent, selfish and unapproachable' as well as 'picky, quarrelsome, objecting'. Other descriptions of Gesell illustrate the paradoxical nature of Elevens: 'self-assertive expansion,

restless searching, probing thrusts, proud touchy defences, variable moods dark and gay, flashes of anger and affection, active and effervescent curiosities, eager identifications with home, school friends, low moments of discouragement, high moments of desire and aspiration'. Eleven is now in a stage of disequilibrium. The calm amenability of Ten has gone, leaving parents and teachers a little amazed, confused and frustrated! The most difficult challenges of Elevens are to be seen at home but school also sees its share.

How can we make sense of their behaviour? Again, an understanding of the planetary qualities can bring some insights. In Eleven, one can again find new manifestations of many of

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the characteristics of Mercury we saw in Older Fives/ Younger Sixes, including a youthful enthusiasm, insatiable sociability, a relentless need for movement and independence, self-centredness, and a tendency to create chaos and confusion.

This profile for Eleven is significantly longer than all the other profiles. This is in part to bring

Physical growth

Elevens' physical growth brings new characteristics. The emphasis in physical growth is now well established in the chest, heart, lungs and circulatory system. The onset of puberty is gradually becoming more evident in some. The timing of this can be affected by many factors including genetics, race, obesity, home environment, stress, food, even climate and of course gender, with boys' development often a year behind the girls'. All this means the physical differences between individuals is increasing.

Growth in the breast tissues, driven by new hormonal changes, is beginning in many, including in a few boys, who can be quite embarrassed by this build-up of fatty tissue in the chest and try to hide it. It is an indication in boys that testosterone levels are increasing and sometimes are so high that some converts to oestrogen causing breast swelling and tenderness (quoted in Biddulph, 'Raising Boys' p 37). This can embarrass affected boys who need to be reassured that this swelling is not a problem and in fact may indicate that, later on, their rounded forms are more likely to transform into versions of 'the incredible hulk'!

Towards the end of this year, the emphasis of growth begins to move down into the metabolic system and limbs, with the growth of long bones sometimes spurting ahead of muscle and nerve, causing discomfort in the limbs and pain

some understanding to the complexity and challenges of Elevens. However it is also because Eleven is a time when puberty and development demand new information for parents, and new ways to work with the children in preparation for adolescence. Eleven demands we do things differently while we still have some room to learn how.

in the feet. A few girls, whose breast development began two years earlier, may start to menstruate. The physical harmony of middle childhood is gradually being lost. Elevens experience their bodies in a new way, as becoming "heavier" and as an "obstacle". A new physical awkwardness is beginning. With this new growth emphasis towards twelve, comes new interest in 'will power' and control over different aspects of themselves.

While Elevens have the youthful vigour, energy and movement associated with Mercury, they also have difficulty with their concentration and energy, and may be erratic and not at all dependable. Gesell describes their emotional unsteadiness— in their carelessness, forgetfulness, day dreaming and dawdling, and fluctuating emotions— and their physical unsteadiness—in their restlessness, boisterousness, and when they wriggle, grimace and need to move a lot. Their temperature control seems erratic—they are either "too hot" or "too cold". Fatigue is more pronounced than it has been and may be evidence of an increased need for sleep. In their activities too they show uneven performance: 'Eleven is in constant motion and loves gross motor activities but is also a watcher, explorer and above all, a conversationalist.' They talk a lot and eat a lot, though appetite may vary from ravenous to poor and finicky.

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In health, perhaps it is not surprising that Elevens tend to hypochondria and somatic complaints. Gesell also observes: 'Though Eleven's health may be quite good, there is a tendency to an increasing number of colds, flu, ear infections, and occasionally even pneumonia. The tendency for an infection to spread, as into ears and lungs or even into the meninges, as in mumps meningitis, is a quality of the age, as it was at the earlier age of five and a half to six years... With any overexertion or overexcitement allergic children may develop asthma.'

It is interesting that in the Gesell stages associated with Mercury like this one, we see ailments predominantly associated with the mucous membranes, glandular systems and lungs, all associated in tradition with Mercury. Perhaps even Elevens' ability to cry more easily is associated with Mercury's capacity to move bodily fluids more freely—for Eleven is one of the most tearful ages.

Eleven years also brings, not only new hormonal changes for most, but also new brain development—the proportion of grey brain matter begins to decrease at this time in relation

Chaos and the need for movement

Perhaps all this also explains some of Eleven's scattered-ness and tendency to chaos. It is also possible that, like Mercury, Elevens actually *enjoy* a little chaos, and like the challenge of being able to hold themselves together in the midst of chaos. Elevens certainly seem to hunger for sensory stimulations of all kinds, hence the noise, the posters and paraphernalia, the food, the comments about smells. They also seek a lot of social interaction and deliberately provoke reactions from others.

Their characteristic need for movement adds to this feeling of chaos around Eleven. This need

to white matter, which increases and will continue to do so through adolescence. Some brain development studies (see Blakemore & Choudhury 2006) suggest that the proliferation of synaptic connections occurring at this time may make the brain less efficient, for there is a slight dip in certain brain functions, in accuracy and speed, especially in tasks involving the executive functions in the frontal cortex at this age. This happens later in boys than girls, which suggests a link with pubertal changes. This may explain the anecdotal evidence that, for example, for a time, some elevens find it harder to verbalize some things than previously, and that in some children, previous learning difficulties can re-manifest.

There are a number of factors here which might contribute to the difficulties Elevens face in finding equanimity: hormonal changes, unpredictable energy, the need for more sleep, unstable metabolism, physical complaints, colds and feeling unwell, emotional unsteadiness, and possible neurological confusion from new brain growth. Elevens clearly need a great deal of understanding.

for movement was also seen in Older Fives/Younger Sixes. It is helpful to picture Mercurial movement here; it is a liquid movement that is free flowing, changing direction, dispersing, coming together, following its own path and inclination. It is movement to resist stuck-ness and rigidity and in doing so brings changeability, formlessness and asymmetry. All this creates a disconcerting restlessness and lack of predictability, and hence a feeling of chaos, but out of these can come the change and freedom which Elevens seek.

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Gesell gives wonderful pictures of this need for movement in Eleven: 'He is constantly on the go—eating, talking, moving about. It is hard for Eleven to sit quietly. He seems almost constantly in motion.' 'Activity, especially when the child is in any way confined, (as when sitting in a chair at an interview) is so constant that one almost becomes seasick when watching.' 'Eleven is always...active, ready for anything. Even when sitting in a chair he twists and turns, waves his arms, wiggles his feet.' 'If there is an object in hand, such as a ball or a glasses case, they repeatedly toss it up and down. As they grow restless they stand, stretch, want to shift to another chair or lie on a couch.' 'The face is as mobile as the rest of the body. There is a remarkable play of expression across it... Eyes sparkle as they shift from side to side, then suddenly dart toward the person they are talking to. The eyebrows may be raised and lowered. Lips are often pursed or the tongue protrudes, usually to one side.' 'The tensional outlets of Eleven [also] involve increased motor activity.'

Sense of Self

One of the cardinal characteristics of Eleven is their 'extreme egocentricity'. They are self-absorbed and self-assertive. They give the impression that many of their more difficult behaviours are a form of immature defence of the self—the rebellion against mothers, quarrelling with friends, their belligerence, selfishness and unapproachableness, their setting up of resistances to work against. These can make life uncomfortable for others, especially within the family, where it can be more difficult to escape from Eleven. Eleven's behaviour may be especially hard to bear because Eleven often seems to make 'little or no effort to cooperate in even the most minor ways,

Mercurial energy and enthusiasm also characterise Elevens. Again Gesell describes this: 'The eleven-year-old is bursting with energy and enthusiasm for the things he likes to do, which are many. Outdoors, girl or boy may enjoy almost anything that involves physical activity—and the more active the better.' 'Eleven is not an age when boy or girl characteristically complains that "There's nothing to do." For Eleven, there is almost always something to do.' This lively energy is also brought to their social interactions, for better or worse!

So, on top of their physical challenges of hormonal activity, new brain growth, fatigue and physical discomforts, Elevens are in a stage with Mercury qualities which drive them to keep moving, with an enthusiastic interest in the world and people, seeking social interaction, all of which they may be in no state to manage well at times.

let alone smooth things out for other people. He is slow to respond and quick to criticize.'

While fluctuating energies would not be helping here, at the core of much of their trouble, is Elevens' Mercurial need for independence and freedom, a need which requires understanding if trouble is to be avoided. Elevens have a stronger feeling for their individual rights than before. The Steiner Waldorf School curriculum, which aims to meet the children where they are in their development, includes the study of Ancient Greece at Eleven. Early democracy is where Elevens are at. Like the Ancient Greeks, Elevens are still dependent on a slave class (you?) but want their say. They are desperate for freedom of movement, independence and

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feelings of control over their own lives but they may not yet have learned about the responsibility which comes with this. "Why do I have to do what the family tells me?" they protest.

However in childhood, especially at Eleven, this need for independence presents a conflict, because, like it or not, the child is still dependent on adults to survive. So Elevens crave independence, but are limited in this and resent it, with parents and mothers (the source of most dependence) getting the brunt of the resentment. We also saw this conflict in Older Fives/Sixes. Elevens' sense of their own competence is growing and they may not see

Emotional development

The Gesell descriptions reveal much uneven and contradictory behaviour in Elevens—they can be very "good" for a spell and then "very bad"; they show 'that sudden sweep from high to low, the unaccountable shift in mood, the same rudeness, the same devilish unreasonableness [as seen at five and a half years].' Their increasing emotional maturity seen in good moments seems to be completely sabotaged by fatigue, frustration and new needs at others.

Their inconsistency is seen most clearly at home. Here, where their feelings are kept less in check, they feel impulsions and moods never experienced before with 'sudden drops, high peaks, and jungle-like confusion.' In their inexperience they show peaks of intensity; they can fly into a rage at short notice or burst into laughter. Their moods may be variable, mopish and grumpy in the morning, and bright and cheery in the afternoon. Emotions and voices rise, they yell, swoop through the room uttering threats; they quarrel with siblings.

Mother, or the person Elevens are most dependent on, is the person they are most

why they cannot have more freedom. They may argue vehemently and subjectively and can twist the facts to their advantage. While they may seem to enjoy the tussle on some level, they can also be trapped within it.

So now we add a driving need for independence and freedom, without the capacity to bear the responsibility that goes with this, to Elevens' physical challenges, fatigue and discomforts, along with their need for movement and perhaps a little chaos. This takes a great deal of understanding from adults and it is certainly not a time for us to take personal offence from their behaviour. Elevens need us to be more calm and solid in their chaos than ever.

uncooperative with, most critical of, most challenging to rules and restrictions with, most rebellious with. This person gets the worst of their 'fault finding and argumentativeness, name calling, talking back and dramatic rudeness.' But this is also the person most able to allow them some independence, and to teach them about responsibility. This is not always easy because 'they are impulsive and lack perspective, they are often unaware of their own difficulties and rudeness.' Nevertheless, it is the parent's responsibility to begin this process of democratisation of Eleven!

Gesell researchers reveal where part of Elevens' problems lie when they describe how Elevens can be peevish when they do not have enough time to play or sleep. When they are too tired, when they do not have a chance to recover in their own time and place, they do not deal well with challenges. They may need help with having good routines to support good sleep and "downtime" for recovery, with nothing else organised.

Getting Elevens to help

As with Tens, it may be, at times of fatigue and physical discomforts that adults need to be willing to re-negotiate when work is done. Getting cooperation for help with household tasks is a real challenge with Eleven. As the Gesell research reveals: 'Eleven not only hates work but resists doing it and acts badly when required to help.' They show rebelliousness against parents, resistance to imposed tasks and proprieties, can be inconsistent, critical, self-willed, awkward, troublesome and difficult to guide.

Negotiation over tasks to be done does give Elevens a chance to feel more independent and gives them the freedom to step forward to offer, rather than be forced from behind. Being flexible in your expectations can help here. What tasks really matter, (health and safety), what are a matter of taste or habit (well-made beds)? Are there some tasks which are more bearable for your Eleven to do than others? We all have preferences, some like to put the garbage out, but not do dishes. What can be offered as "work" possibilities that would be helpful to you in some way? Be creative in this. Don't get stuck on everyday tasks. Occasional (sweeping the porch) or one off tasks (cleaning cobwebs) can be helpful too. So can beautifying and "spoiling" tasks. It may be in picking fresh flowers or bringing you a cup of tea, or making a pancake breakfast for the family on Sundays. What is important is that every person contributes in some way to the well-being of the family. Sometimes creating a list to choose from helps in this.

A very helpful question to ask from now on is: "What would help?" (for you to be able to do this better, to feel happy about it and so on.) Or if all else fails, "What would be least bad?" Can

some "structural changes" (like providing a dirty clothes basket to throw clothes into!), help avoid some sources of conflict in the first place? Problem solving together is educational and empowering, and might give their excessive criticism a positive outlet. But do it when you and they have energy, in the good times. This is creative parenting.

Another emotional challenge for Elevens is dealing with their anger. Gesell researchers comment on this too: Elevens 'strike out, hardly realizing what they are doing. This striking out—in action, words and feelings—is all the more apparent to us because it is against people.' Their anger manifests in 'sudden, furious outbursts uncontrolled, especially when directed toward younger siblings.' Adults may need to find ways to help Elevens become more aware of when frustrations are building up and what helps to prevent anger from bursting out in destructive ways. It is helpful to teach them that it is not that anger is bad (it can be very useful in telling us when something is wrong—in righteous anger) but what we do with the anger, which can hurt others. Here is an opportunity to teach them how to communicate constructively with others, by trying to talk about the problem, and what would help, rather than just hit out or blame, especially with siblings. A complete ban on all "putdowns" within the family is a helpful rule to have in place, with negotiated consequences if the rule is broken (something that benefits the hurt child preferably.) Adults, of course, have to follow the "no putdowns" rule as well.

At the same time, Elevens do show more self-reliance and their claims for the right to make certain decisions of their own are perhaps healthy signs that they feel the new freedom of

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moral choice within themselves. They do try to tell the truth and show a growing sympathy and thoughtfulness. In the outside world at least

Fear of being alone

There is also a challenge for Elevens in finding a healing space for regathering of themselves at times of trouble. At some ages, children find this in having time alone by themselves and are happy to do this. However at Eleven, and possibly the other Mercury stages as well, this may not help. Elevens may be reluctant, even fearful, of being alone. Signs of this need to be watched for, treated with sensitivity, and certainly not used as a threat.

Gesell, once again, describes this: 'Elevens rarely choose to be alone and are forever in the midst of the family circle, even though they get on badly with both parents and siblings.' 'Perhaps no other age gets on as badly as Eleven does with siblings.' Yet Elevens 'are right in the midst of any family activity, working at the dining room table, responding to everything that is going on around them, fearful they will miss something. In fact, some spend very little time in their rooms. But even in the family group Eleven is fidgety and restless...' 'Relatively fearless Ten has become more fearful at eleven. Children of this age seem afraid to be alone. This may account for their constant presence in

they are able to be more reserved and controlled.

the family circle and may be the reason they spend so little time in their rooms. They don't talk about this fear but may ask to have the light on in the hall and the door open. They look in closets or under the bed.' 'If forced to be alone, Eleven might imaginatively become two people to play both side of a chess or a baseball game so that he can experience that feeling of interplay which is enjoyed so much.'

All this is another reminder of just how much children can change from age to age. This is not a time to force aloneness, either at home or at school, or on excursions or camps. The time for being comfortable with aloneness will come again later. Instead we can help them to find a peaceful, conflict free, individual space while still being in the presence of others, if that is what they need. It is also possible they can find comfort, as it was for the last Mercury stage at Older Five/Younger Six, in rhythm and movement. In repetitive movement, walking, skipping, or quiet swinging in hammocks, or on swings. Or in craft or artistic, musical experiences which move the human soul in a more inward way.

Eleven's best self and sociability

When Elevens' particular needs are met well and the environment is supportive, and perhaps where there are no siblings to argue with, Elevens are more likely to show the best part of themselves. They are also more likely to show this side to others who have no cause to confront or restrict them—those outside of home and school in particular. Then they can be

"angels" and show an engaging outgoing sociability, a free ranging curiosity, especially about adults.

With this bubbling spontaneity Elevens may also show a quality of innocence and naivety. They can be polite, earnest and sincere as well as friendly, enthusiastic, dynamic and charming! They can be the life of the party. They

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love to interact with others, including the challenge of arguing with them. But as one mother explained to Gesell, "It is all one way. You cannot argue with *him*." Many of these qualities are ones associated with Mercury. Their social interest goes beyond their peer group; they are interested in everyone. Gesell researchers wryly comment: 'In fact, many

Friendships

Friendships are important to Eleven, and are often intense and strong. Their friends are their motivation to go to school. Their need for contemporaries, even when the children get along badly with them, is insatiable. Friendships have a new depth and quality, and are more discerning and important. Both boys and girls tend to have more than one good friend. 'Some just loosely have "a whole gang" of friends; others arrange them in a definite hierarchy.' 'One Eleven typically asks [the interviewer], "Could I just say who *isn't* my best friend?"' 'Play can be included in their relationships with people, but the people are now actually more important than the play.'

The gesture of Elevens' friendships has a different quality from the friendships of the years before and after. Nines are more loyal, Tens are more amenable, Twelves are more loving and compassionate. Elevens seem to be perhaps more self-serving, less restricted by ethical matters, although they insist that things be "fair", that quality which research is showing has a place deep in the human psyche, even in economic life. Elevens also love and thrive on competition, which sets up a very different atmosphere in the group than the cooperation

[Elevens] are regular gossips.' 'In response to the questions which we, the examiners, ask when we interview them, they will tell us anything, far more about family and family problems and activities than we bargained for. As one teacher of eleven-year-olds commented, "When I get through teaching this class, I'm going to retire and live on blackmail."'

and need for equality clearly preferred by Ten and Twelve.

Consequently 'there is a lot of "messaging around" amongst peers. Quarrelling and making up are frequent with girls, and even the 'boys do more quarrelling with friends than they used to.' Elevens have a tendency to 'stir up interactions symptomatic of immature social explorations, teasing, taunting, brief embattled tussles, mock hostility, mock conciliation, and interludes of warm friendship.' This too may reflect their need for movement and their frustration with static-ness and stuck-ness, which may motivate them to poke and prod and stir others into movement and reaction.

Gesell observes that 'There can also be painful plotting, scheming, including and excluding. Eleven clusters into small groups. There is nothing casual here. They may come together with intent as much for evil as for good.' 'The group may suddenly dissolve to exclude certain unwanted members. Then the nucleus reforms and may or may not allow the excluded one or ones to re-enter its confines.' This is an image of very mercurial movement but also of potential harassment!

Individual power and bullying

The interactions between Elevens and others may need closer observation. Elevens also struggle with peer pressure: balancing wanting to belong with the need for independent judgement and doing what is right. It is again a time when adults need to understand the child's powerful need to 'belong', but also to develop the balance to this - a value for 'difference' and 'individuality', as we suggested for Nines and Tens.

There is a natural openness to understanding the value of being able to act as an individual at Eleven. They themselves want to be treated as individuals who are unique and valuable in their 'differences.' Adults can emphasise that respect for every person is needed and that difference brings richness (to the family, the peer group, the school, the community). Elevens may also need encouragement to pay more

attention to the consequences of their own actions. If they can be made more aware of their effect on others, they may also be aware of the negative effect of their group's behaviour on others, and of bullying behaviour.

It is a time to encourage them to use their personal power constructively as a bystander in stopping bullying behaviour in others. They are entering into an age towards the end of this year where the 'will' wants to manifest. Will is about power - ideally over oneself, one's thinking, feeling and doing. However they need to be taught the difference between legitimate power, which empowers themselves and others, and illegitimate power, which amounts to bullying and disempowers others.

See also *Preventing Harassment. Preparing firm ground.*

School and thinking

At school, Elevens' thinking shows many Mercurial qualities. They are quick and sharp seeing, but also critical and demanding. Their thinking is detailed and factual. Many Elevens are still excited about learning, and show even more enthusiasm for new ideas but their attention span can be short and they are less organised than at Ten. At Eleven, their strength of will is for the present moment, not for a prolonged period. Perseverance is not their strength at this time. It is probably more helpful if the tasks given to Elevens are shorter and re-defined into smaller bits.

While Elevens' behaviour at school is often better than at home, it definitely has its challenges. Gesell describes this: At school Elevens can be 'very restless and active,' 'very fatigable, show uneven performance, have frequent illnesses.' Many become 'careless,

forgetful, boisterous, they start day dreaming, dawdling.' There is much interaction among the children in the form of 'notes, spitballs, teasing, chasing, hitting.'

Neither do the teachers escape Eleven's scrutiny. 'Though Elevens don't want to be held with an iron hand, they do prefer a tough teacher, one who can challenge them.' According to Gesell's Elevens, they want their teacher to be, in their own words, "smart, firm, fair, humorous, understanding and she must not yell."

A teacher who does not recognise Elevens' increasing need to be given more say may face growing resentment and rebellion in the class, which then can be difficult to manage. But Elevens' own words also tell us that they need to be given firm boundaries, and guidance in

how to respect and care for each other, for social problems often arise at this age.

Building cohesion and preventing divisiveness in the class community

More time has been spent on school in this profile because there is something in the nature of Elevens that can bring a divisive element into the class community and everyone should be aware of this. It seems to involve a somewhat infectious 'blame game'. If there is trouble in the class, one child may be blamed, with resultant cries of "If this child was not in the class, this would not be happening". Or "If that child's mother would just get her act together..." Or the parents blame the teacher. Sometimes the class teacher blames the specialist teacher, or the specialist teacher blames the class teacher. Maybe Administration gets entangled in it all too. It is sometimes a time of volatile parent meetings, as everyone comes to terms with the new dynamics—the dynamics of having so many Elevens in one place at one time!

What can be done? We adults, teachers and parents alike, at school and at home, need to model what Elevens need to observe: respectful listening to others, and trying to find a place of compromise through understanding, not blame. Though at Twelve it will very likely all settle down, Eleven provides a valuable educational opportunity and the lessons are learnt all the better when they can be reinforced at school and at home!

There are two particular areas where help is often needed in a class of Elevens. The first, as has been indicated already, is the need for the beginning of democratisation of the class room. Their need for wanting a say, wanting to be listened to, can be met in discussions, in class meetings to decide things that are appropriate for them to decide, where they can be given a say. This is a good time for teaching formal ways of communicating in a group. Procedural rules teach them fairness, about respecting others, giving everyone a say. Talking circles

with a talking stick, which the person talking holds, while others respectfully listen, is a good way to introduce this. Within the circle, the communication is given a form, within guidelines for safety, allowing the building of the trust that is so important in this process.

This is also an opportunity to introduce the idea of responsibility and respect for others which goes with independence and the democratic ideal. It is a way of making clear to Elevens that this is not a "free for all." The teachers themselves have big responsibilities which are not negotiable, for children's safety, for accountability and so on. The children need to understand this. Elevens can talk about how they themselves also have to be more responsible at Eleven than when they were in Kindergarten, for example. This introduces the idea of non-negotiable and negotiable rules in the class room and makes the rules easier to accept.

The second area where help is often needed in a class of Elevens is in helping them to become aware of the importance of each individual in a community, our inter-dependence. At this age, when competitiveness and a certain self-serving interest amongst peers predominate, they often need help to see the value of each person's individual gifts to the class community, and to value each class member individually. This is what they are looking for, for themselves, but they often seem to need help in giving such recognition to others. Games which help identify each individual's qualities and contribution can help counter the ruthless criticism of Elevens and make them more appreciative of diversity in a community, while making the class more cohesive.

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Of course teachers can also work with the natural interests of Eleven to help them to grow. One delightful example of this: a movement teacher, recognising Eleven's love of chaos, gave them an exercise to design a rhythmic movement sequence that could confuse an

Sexuality and sex education readiness

It is clear that hormonal changes are already under way for most Elevens. These come on slowly and it can be two years between when the breast tissue in girls starts to change and first menstruation occurs. Similarly with boys though their hormonal changes begin up to a year later than in girls. The interest in breasts at this age occurs in both. By the end of the year when the physical growth emphasis is in the lower body and genitals, an interesting change comes about regarding their attitude to sex. This will be very individual, so parents need to watch for this, but not assume anything.

Younger Elevens can still have considerable aversion to all things romantic: to kissing – “Arggg!”, “Yuk!” or to sexual intercourse- “My parents would never do that except when they had to, to have children!” The “repugnance factor” is what to watch for. When it changes to a shy curiosity, peeping from behind a book at love scenes in movies, creeping up on lovers to peek, then a new healthier, more adult attitude to sex and their own bodies may have been reached and they may be ready for the true sex education talk about how romantic love leads to, ideally, tender love making. That is the bit they need help in understanding. Not that “penis in vagina makes babies”, which almost all will have heard about since kindergarten these days, but an inner understanding of how people could want to do “that”. And “that” information is best coming from the parents, though schools have had to take on that task because too many parents shy away from it. But

enemy. A perfect challenge for Elevens: motivation to bring to perfection in themselves a formed movement which could effectively confuse others. They were astute enough to realise that an a-rhythmical beat is unsettling.

if you are a loving parent who wants to do the best for your child, then watch out for this new readiness for sexual information and share with them how special love making can be when it is a physical expression of human love and carried out with deep respect for the other.

It was at this age in the past that many boys already had their little collections of “Playboy” pictures hidden away in the garage. With pornography so prominent now, you can guarantee most children, but boys particularly, are going to be exposed to it even more today. (For more on the effects of pornography see the profile for Fifteens.) This exposure makes your task even more important to bring images of love, tenderness, respect, and intimacy back into the picture of sexual intercourse. When you see this new interest, instead of aversion, towards kissing, cuddling, and sexual touching, start thinking about the values you want to share about sex; talk to your partner, read books if you need to. Then create a private space for talking with your child and go for it. This is one of the biggest challenges for a parent to do well.

Remember, however, that this sex education is not a “once off” matter; ideally you are preparing the ground to be able to talk about sex and related matters naturally, normally, comfortably, any time time matters arise in the family over the next ten years as your children move out more and more into the world, and explore their own relationships. This does not mean that the intimacy of relationships should

not be respected. But it does mean that any more objective subject, like contraception, STDs, pornography and even objective questions about lovemaking itself, can be broached without embarrassment, as a matter of course.

Dealing with demands for independence

Eleven's most pressing need is for feeling some degree of independence and freedom. This is not new, for we have seen it at every stage wanting freedom and power. However it becomes even more essential to recognise it in Eleven, in preparation for adolescence. Gesell researchers give an indication on how to meet this need at Eleven: 'The child of this age needs to be motivated from within rather [than] demanded of from without.' 'The child must do his own growing. But the parents can provide the atmosphere which is conducive to good growth.'

As we have already seen in dealing with Eleven's work reluctance, when they have some say in how things are done, it creates a space for them to *step forward out of their own initiative*, rather than being *forced from behind*, which encourages defensiveness. Creating the space for such initiative to be shown is one way of providing a growth-promoting environment.

Another involves having trust in them. Eleven's do not like to be reminded about what they are in their worst selves, but need to be recognised for who they are in their best selves, who they can become, in being true to their best selves. When we give them such recognition, we give them our trust. In this way we help them to build a healthy sense of self and their own trustworthiness. They will make mistakes but our trust in them supports their being able to learn from those mistakes and do better next time.

Curiosity about all things sexual also makes it again important to teach children protective behaviours to keep them safe from sexual abuse. (See Freda Briggs' books for help on keeping children safe.)

An example of this is to be found in how we can work with Eleven in the area of independent excursions, like going to the mall, where they may be keen to go without you. As mentioned in the profiles for Nine and Ten, increasingly we need to give children the opportunity to do things on their own, in small steps, within the safety of well understood guidelines, emergency procedures and protective behaviours. Of course, in the past, Eleven's would have been off with a friend or two to any wild place they could find (creeks and local rubbish dumps were popular) where the only limitation from their mother was "Be back in time for dinner!" Few have this freedom now. But an eleven year old *can* do many things with their friends alone, even in crowded public places, when such times are prepared and supported with the appropriate 'safety nets' in place. (Again, see Freda Briggs' books/talks on '*Teaching Children to protect themselves*.' These will remind you of the issues to be thought about.)

Part of the preparation for this freedom is to talk about our concerns and responsibility for their safety and ways to reduce risks, to keep them safe while being independent. We can talk about the ways we, as adults, keep ourselves safe, and maybe even when we did not do it so well when we were young, and how we could have done it differently. But we can also talk about when we were courageous and adventurous; children need to hear that too. Your Eleven's need to understand that your concern is about preparing for the future, when they will need

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wisdom and courage, not holding them back in the present because of fear. This needs to be an ongoing conversation, well into high school, and even beyond that, when they might be adventuring locally or overseas. Assessing risk and knowing about safety strategies increases awareness and confidence. Like talks about sexuality, it is an ongoing sharing.

As young people get used to assessing the risk factors of outings they want to go on, including parties, they can consider what would make them feel safer. For example, sometimes they may feel it is okay to attend a party at night but feel unhappy about staying overnight. Children may be happy for their parent to be the 'bossy parent' who insists on picking the child up at 10 pm or says 'no' to a sleep-over when a child feels unsafe, when you have discussed it together in this way. Some children will be strong enough to say 'no' to their friends themselves, but some will not and may prefer to take up the offer of a 'parental edict'. This is a journey you can make together.

Of course, you have to deal with your own fears around their safety. Are they real fears or "neurotic fears" (unfounded in reality). Listening to the news regularly is enough to make any parent feel fear. But are the risks really as great as it seems? For the real fears you work with the risk factors. With "neurotic fears" you might have to work with trust or get help to talk them through. Healthy teenagers, and maybe even the wiser Elevens, may be able to spot the difference in your fears and may react accordingly. Parental fear is one of the biggest dangers in this area and needs to be dealt with. Not just because fear makes it more likely that things will go wrong, but because over-protective parenting based on fear is preventing many children from developing resilience and wisdom.

It is also important that children are allowed to experience the consequences of their actions and take responsibility for them. This can be painful to watch and parents may be tempted to step in to try to take the uncomfortable experience away. But resist. Your children may need support in this and that is fine, but let them benefit from learning how to deal with the frustrations, the pain or sadness of their mistakes or misjudgements. They may have their consciousness and empathy awakened by it. They may grow morally. Such experiences can ultimately lead to feelings of empowerment, resilience and confidence in their ability to cope with life and all its challenges. It is particularly important for Elevens to understand the cost of the freedoms they are demanding. Once again, over protectiveness in parenting (even with the best of intentions) does not help healthy growth.

None of this is easy for adults with Elevens, especially when the children are showing the worst of Elevens' behaviour. As caretakers of their growth, we need to respond objectively to their underlying developmental need for independence, and not react subjectively to their demands! We need to resist becoming involved in a power struggle or taking Eleven's biting criticism and attacks personally. This is particularly challenging, in part, because Elevens demand that we also look at ourselves honestly; their ruthless criticism can be unsettling in its accuracy. However they need us to be true to ourselves just as they need us to be true to them; they need us to be honest about our own strengths and weaknesses. We need to be an authority deserving of their respect and a strong model of a striving human being, even a less than perfect one.

From such a place we can give them the clear boundaries they need but with our reasons and, where it is appropriate, a chance to negotiate and bargain in a business-like way, trying to

keep emotional responses out of it. Some things will always remain non-negotiable, like safety issues and adult responsibilities and that should be made clear, unequivocally.

Elevens need firm and skilful handling. We cannot be too authoritarian or too lenient—neither authoritarian inflexibility *nor* wishy-washiness in parenting will do here. The balance must be found. They *want* an

authoritative person to be there, just as they want a teacher who can be “tough and can challenge them”, but they also need to feel listened to, respected and given some independence. Clearly the need for the feeling of freedom and independence at Eleven must be met in age appropriate ways if the resistance and apparent contrariness of this stage are to be avoided, or at least minimised.

So we have a year of very different challenges at Eleven, one that particularly asks us to grow with our child. Hopefully we can be grateful for the opportunities it offers and for the children's renewed spirit of independence, their wonderful sociability and enthusiasm, their quickness— all those gifts associated with a time with Mercury qualities. If the challenges of Eleven have been managed reasonably well, Twelve, with Venus qualities, should be much more enjoyable.

Further Reading

Bates Ames, Louise, Ilg, Frances L., & Baker, Sidney M. *Your Ten-to-Fourteen-Year Old* (A Dell Trade Paperback New York 1988) p. see 'The Eleven-Year- Old' pp. 44-76 A Gesell Institute of Child Development book. Available from www.bookstore.gesellinstitute.org

Payne, Kim John, with Lisa M. Ross *Simplicity Parenting Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure kids*. (Ballantine Books Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2009)

Other Articles of interest on the website

Avoiding trouble with elevens, twelves and teens.

Preventing Harassment. Preparing firm ground.

Sibling rivalry