



# **Working With Children at Different Stages of Development: A Tool for Senior Corps Volunteers**



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*Working With Children at Different Stages of Development:  
A Toolkit for Senior Corps Volunteers*

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## I. Introduction

Children of the same age may resemble each other in certain respects but they also differ from one another in many ways. A combination of physical, emotional and environmental forces plays a role in every child's growth. As a Senior Corps volunteer tutor, you can support students most effectively when you recognize important characteristics of their development.

This tool describes children in three age ranges: five- to seven-year-olds, eight- to ten-year olds, and 11- to 13-year-olds. Each section includes characteristics typical of that age group along with suggestions for volunteers. Note that a suggestion about working with an eight- year old may also apply to an 11-year-old. Since each child is unique, there's no substitute for understanding the individual child(ren) you work with.

For more information about child development and tips for interacting with children of different ages, contact LEARNS at (800) 930-5664 or (800) 361-7890.

## II. Five- to Seven-Year-Olds

**In general, children in this age group:**

- Are very active; need frequent breaks from tasks to do things that fun
- Need rest periods—good quiet activities include reading books together or doing simple art projects
- Like to talk and are rapidly increasing their vocabulary
- Have difficulty making decisions
- Are very imaginative and involved in fantasy-playing

Respond to the shifting interests and short attention spans of five- to seven- year-olds with patience and flexibility. Observe your tutee's energy level for cues about when to shift gears. Stimulate interest by starting a new activity, taking a five-minute break, stretching, or taking a walk down the hall.



Provide opportunities for the child to express himself and for you to express your interest in him. Share something about yourself and then ask the student about himself. For example, *I had a delicious chocolate milkshake today. Chocolate is my favorite flavor. Do you like milkshakes?* Ask the child if anything good or bad

happened at school that day. The more open-ended a question is, the easier it will be to continue the conversation. Some openers might be:

- *I bet your teacher reads stories to your class. One of my favorites is The Cat in the Hat. What are some of your favorite stories?*
- *I love all different animals. My favorite is the cheetah because it can run very fast. Are there any animals that you like?*
- *I know lots of kids watch television. What are some TV shows that you like to watch?*
- Offer your ideas but focus most on what the child says. The goal is to encourage the child to speak. A good prompt is, *That's interesting—tell me more.*

Solicit your tutee's own ideas for writing or drawing. Provide some suggestions, if necessary, to spark his thinking, but avoid guiding him through every step of the process. Give explicit praise to reinforce his efforts:

- *I noticed you corrected yourself when you realized that sentence didn't make sense. Good readers are always checking to make sure their reading makes sense.*
- *I see you looking at the pictures to help you make a prediction about what will happen next. That's a great strategy.*
- *Nice job sounding out \_\_\_\_\_!*
- *I can tell by the way you were reading that you were really paying attention to the punctuation.*

### III. Eight- to Ten-Year-Olds

**In general, children in this age group:**

- Are capable of prolonged interest
- Are eager to answer questions
- Want more independence while knowing they need guidance and support
- Exhibit wide discrepancies in reading ability
- Show interest in people; show awareness of differences; show a willingness to give more to others but also expect more
- Often idolize heroes, television stars, and sports figures
- Spend a great deal of time in talk and discussion



Recognize eight- to 10-year-olds' increasing independence by offering choices in your tutoring sessions. Providing choices promotes independence, responsibility for learning, and personal investment in the activity.

The language you use when offering choices is critical. Avoid asking yes-or-no questions unless you're willing to accept *no* as an answer. If you decide to work on a phonics game in the session, present it to the child as a plan rather than a choice: *Now we're going to play a matching game* versus *Do you want to play this matching game now?* There are many instances when it is appropriate for you to decide the content and sequence of a lesson.

Invite children to make suggestions and share their feelings about the work you do together. Look for ways to integrate your tutee's personal interests into your lesson. If the student is very interested in dogs, bring some books about dogs that are on the appropriate reading level. If your tutee lives with his grandmother, read books about other children who live with their grandparents or ask him to draw or write about his grandmother. When discussing a child's personal life, however, be aware that some subjects may be uncomfortable. Watch and listen closely; use your judgment as to appropriate subjects for discussion and those that are better left alone.

Choose your words carefully when offering praise or suggestions for improvement. Since eight- to 10-year-olds can be very critical of themselves and others, convey your support clearly and consistently. For example:

- *I can see you worked very hard on writing this story. Let's reread it together to hear how it sounds.*
- *You seem pretty tired this afternoon. Would it be helpful to take a short break and walk to the water fountain to help you wake up a bit?*
- *This is an interesting book but it may still be a bit of a stretch for you to read on your own. It's a good one to read with a grown-up right now and someday you will be able to read it independently.*

Positive and honest feedback is important and, as with children of all ages, it is best to give explicit praise to reinforce the child's good behavior or performance.

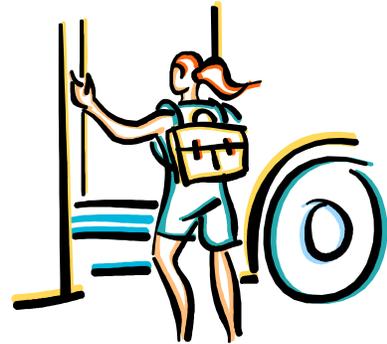
## IV. Eleven- to Thirteen-Year-Olds

**In general, children in this age group:**

- Need help with organization—thoughts, schoolwork, writing
- Have more interest in current events and social issues
- Love to argue and can begin to see more than one side of an issue
- Feel challenged rather than defeated by *reasonably* hard work
- Tend to be perfectionists; if they try to attempt too much, may feel frustrated

- Can be both playful and serious
- May have bad diet and sleep habits and, as a result, low energy levels
- Enjoy testing limits; may exhibit a know-it-all attitude
- Are very concerned with what others say and think about them

Eleven- to 13-year-olds are at a challenging crossroad. No longer children but not yet adults, they waver between a growing need for independence and a continuing need for support. Collaborate with 11- to 13-year-olds so they feel some control over what takes place in your tutoring sessions. While you still need to establish and maintain your role as the authority figure, you can accomplish this while giving students choices and asking for their suggestions about how you spend your time together.



By this age, children may have experienced frustration with their academic experiences. Eleven- to 13- year olds often lack interest in subjects of classroom study and they may not get enough exposure to compelling books at the appropriate reading level. Ask your tutee to bring reading material that interests him and make time in each session to read it together—it may be a book, a magazine, a comic book, or even a shopping catalog. Make an effort to introduce new texts and ask librarians and teachers for assistance in your search.

Show your enthusiasm for language, reading, and writing. Find ways to share your own reading material with your tutee—a newspaper article, a favorite book, or a piece of mail you received. Organize projects that integrate language skills in diverse ways, such as reading, writing, exploring computers and the Internet, storytelling, painting, sculpting, drawing, and writing descriptive paragraphs or stories to accompany the artwork.

Eleven- to 13-yearolds may have diminished self-confidence, which hinders their willingness to take risks in their learning. Be supportive by honestly sharing some of your own challenges and successes. Cite examples from your own life or the lives of others and you can also find well-written books that tell inspiring personal tales.

Developmental characteristics adapted from “Child Development Seminar.” *Volunteer Education and Development Manual*. 1991. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.