



Eleven-year-olds are, in a sense, electrified. As adolescence begins, cognitive structures in the brain are rewiring themselves at the same amazing speed with which the body is beginning to transform. Relationships with peers and adults are turning topsy-turvy. At home and in school, academically and socially, eleven-year-olds are busy engaging whole new worlds with a sense of outward boldness, yet inward tentativeness. Their lives crackle with the energy of change as they begin to establish a sense of physical and emotional identity.

Both girls and boys grow increasingly self-conscious about their changing bodies. Some boys grow rapidly taller; many struggle with clumsiness in athletics (as well as at twelve and thirteen). Many girls also experience a physical growth spurt, begin menstruating, and become more emotionally sensitive and volatile. Changing bodies affect some girls' willingness to continue in individual activities such as dance, gymnastics, or swimming. For both boys and girls, bones tend to grow faster than muscles, and complaints about aches and pains are common.

This is a year when students become much more devoted to their classmates and peer groups. With their growing interest in peers, eleven-year-olds do well with collaborative work. They're likely, though, to challenge, debate, and argue with each other as they practice the art of social negotiation, which will help them form strong affiliations and friendships as teenagers and young adults.

Cliques—common among girls at this age—offer further practice in social negotiations. It's important, of course, for adults to step in if elevens' nascent skills at forming bonds inadvertently lead to bullying.

Eleven-year-olds generally love being physically active outdoors but often spend a good deal of time arguing about team effort and the interpretation of rules. Elevens often focus on their own personal skill development in a sport and constantly compare themselves with the best athletes. Some will drop out of competitive sports around this age as competition gets increasingly serious and the skills more difficult. Teachers and coaches can encourage participation by focusing on effort rather than perfection—by recognizing students who try hard as well as those who score.

Elevens also do well with projects and service learning, especially when their ideas are incorporated into the assignments. Tackling new and demanding skills in research, such as footnoting, finding and assessing online sources, creating bibliographies, and using scientific notation, feeds elevens' increasing cognitive strengths. So does exploring brand-new areas of knowledge, such as foreign languages, music, and forms of artistic expression. Elevens would rather learn new skills than hone old ones, yet revision and final-draft excellence in their schoolwork is a source of pride. Still, they tend to be easily frustrated and to voice that frustration in complaints, even as they continue to relish the challenges of their new learning.

Besides learning new school skills, eleven-year-olds also thrive on opportunities to learn life skills in the real world. They might

interview the fire chief, take notes at a town meeting, or write letters to a corporation or an international humanitarian or environmental organization about an issue that concerns them. And they can do these and other assignments with a good measure of responsibility and independence.

## 11-Year-Olds at Home

- ◆ Stay up late and have trouble getting up in the morning; one way to ensure adequate sleep is to set limits on use of electronic devices
- ◆ Might have more behavior problems at home than they do at school, and you might hear from teachers about positive contributions in school even though this doesn't match what you see at home; it's important to continue setting clear limits and remember not to take things personally—your empathy and sense of humor will help elevens cope with their rapid physical and emotional changes
- ◆ Might have a hard time managing time and getting homework done, but it's helpful to leave homework consequences in the school's hands; check in with your child and with teachers, but don't try to manage too closely, as this is an important developmental struggle for adolescents as they learn to take independent responsibility for work

Strong believers and powerful advocates, eleven-year-olds speak passionately about their ideas, opinions, and allegiances. They also challenge adult judgments they once accepted. Indeed, these students are busy questioning and challenging all of their assumptions about the world, often awkwardly and sometimes in ways that may seem off target or downright rude. Yet elevens are often surprised that adults take offense at their challenges, and they are easily hurt and very uncomfortable when corrected in front of classmates. It's important to remember that their challenges and apparent disrespect are signs of their immense cognitive and social-emotional growth, of awakening powers that they do not yet know how to handle.

Along with challenging adults on nearly every topic, students at this age will likely respond to adult questions and directives with eye rolling, deep sighing, shrugging, and other postures that may seem contemptuous. Yet these responses are just outward signs that the eleven-year-old is practicing distancing—a way to establish physical and social safety when feeling uncomfortable or threatened. This distancing is an essential part of growing up, and who better to practice with than trusted teachers or parents?

In fact, elevens very much need solid connections to trusted adults who can see through their seemingly rude behavior and realize that feelings and relationships are seldom clear or simple for them. “Communication at a distance”—teachers responding in writing to students’ journal entries, parents leaving a note at the bedside—enables adults to respect elevens’ need for independence while continuing to build strong relationships with them.



*Eleven-year-olds love to explore different perspectives;  
their work is often complex and invites conversation.*

This adult balancing act of staying close but not too close recognizes and honors the very “in between” nature of students in their eleventh year. They’re ready to spread their wings and take short flights from the nest, but they’re often less sure of themselves than they sound, sensitive and easily embarrassed as they take their first clumsy but momentous steps toward establishing independence and identity—the chief task of adolescence.