

Why 5th?

One of the questions we at Orchard House often are asked is why we begin at fifth grade. Why not sixth? It's a good question and one that brings to the surface many important parts about Orchard House. We, by mission, are committed to providing a multifaceted education. The hallmarks of this are providing an outstanding academic education and fostering the growth of our girls into their authentic selves. We are not interested in creating an identifiable Orchard House girl or cookie-cutter type student. We are deeply interested in bringing the best of each girl forward. We want each girl to grow from her strengths and, as she does so, come to discover, believe, trust, and feel confident in herself as an individual. We also want each girl to understand she is part of a community and can take an active and even powerful role in strengthening the larger community.

What does this have to do with fifth grade? Developmentally fifth graders (usually around ten years old) are at the pinnacle of the childhood continuum of healthy individuals. Fifth graders are usually happy in themselves, engaged, positive, enthusiastic, and strong as individuals. They are temperamentally even, hard workers, and believe they can accomplish almost anything. Emotionally and intellectually fifth graders, by nature, have abundant confidence. Because the age of the fifth grader is such a naturally authentic time of life, one can glean a lot of personal information for future passions, interests and enthusiasms. There is even a saying that if you want to see what your child will be like as an adult, see what he or she is like as a ten year old.

Sometime in the sixth grade year (or around eleven), girls begin to feel the force of adolescence from all directions. Their chief developmental task moves from developing a sense of competency (the work of upper elementary school children) and becomes figuring out themselves and how they fit into the world. Along with the identity work of middle school students comes the greatest physical growth spurt since they were two, an emerging sense of sexuality, many cultural messages of how girls and women are supposed to look and act, and the role of friends and peer group opinions becomes increasingly important. This time becomes a loaded time for even the heartiest of girls. Parents often say of their sixth graders, "What happened to the kind, happy, open girl I had in fifth grade? It's like a switch was turned on at my house." Although sometimes challenging from the parental point of view, their daughters are entering a healthy, new, and critical phase of development -- truly becoming themselves.

Orchard House begins at fifth grade because we want our girls to connect to the middle school experience with their best selves forward. How wonderful to have one's best self as one's educational baseline. We take the natural enthusiasms of the fifth grader and connect them to the rest of the school community. When our girls become sixth graders and enter into the massive and confusing layers of developmental tasks and physical development that go with that age of middle school, often referred to as "the muddle in the middle," they have already established themselves as students with a presence in their school community. Their confidence, interests, learning styles and needs are a recognized part of their learning environment. As the girls begin the physiological changes that go with growing up, along with the developmental tasks of identity formation and individuation, their school is already established as another home for doing so in a healthy, supportive manner.

Our initial decision to begin Orchard House at fifth grade was based on research. But our experience working with girls offers the best proof for our four-year program. Ideally, the Orchard House educational experience begins from a point of strength in the fifth grade; it honors and respects the changes and challenges that usually fall within the middle two to two-and-a-half years of the sixth and seventh grades; and it ends with remarkable eighth graders. Our eights and our graduates are our best testaments to our school and the appropriateness of the many decisions that comprise it. Our girls feel at home at school; they are deeply cared for and respected. They are also held to high expectations. Beginning in fifth grade helps us all do the best we can by the girls. The foundation for a healthy adolescence is laid. The girls by nature help lay it.