

Observing the Six-Year Change

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This article is written from the many observations that I have made over the past thirty years during my work in early childhood. For twelve of those years I have had the privilege of working in mixed-age kindergarten settings where some of the children are going through their “first puberty.” I have had much to learn from the “sometimes mystifying and formidable” older child in the kindergarten.

Much has been said in the Waldorf movement about the nine-year change. But what about the six-year change? It is obvious that sometime around the age of six children undergo another transformation. As kindergarten teachers, we need to support each other to accompany the older children in

the kindergarten through this very profound and overwhelming period of transition. By understanding what the child is undergoing during this time, it is much easier to respond with the inner attitude of “I see you are going through transformations. I love you *and* these new changes and I will help you to find your way.” Of course, this would never be spoken to the children directly. However, if we as caregivers can be prepared *inwardly* to see and meet the behaviors that characterize this transformation, then the children and parents are more at ease in our presence. Then the children have a safe place to test out their newfound need to push for a boundary, we are braced to meet them and the parents can have trust that we truly understand their children.

Sometime between the ages of five-and-three-quarters to seven we begin to see that the children are asking for something more from us in addition to our continued working out of imitation. Let's look at some of the developments that naturally occur at this time. These developments lie behind the changes in the child's responses to his world. Taking interest in what's happening for the child will help us to know what is the best way to respond. There are two helpful diagrams that I share with the parents. The first is the flow line showing the three-year ego incarnation times.

GRAPH 1



We know that each of these ego incarnation cycles is accompanied by varying degrees of antipathy on the part of the child. This antipathy is necessary because it helps the child to separate more and meet the world on his/her own. The six-year cycle marks the time when the child's etheric begins to separate more from the parent. The parents and the children feel this "pulling apart" whether it is at a conscious or unconscious level. Some parents suddenly want to homeschool as they feel their children separating from them. Some children react by not wanting to come to school. They may one day cling to the parents' legs and another day tell their parents that they want to come into the school by themselves. "Please stay in the car, Mommy. I want to go in by myself today."

I'm reminded of the morning that Iza came to school carried in her Dad's arms. Iza was a child who had very creative and imaginative play and her love for the kindergarten was obvious. We had begun to see the change in her outwardly for a couple of weeks because her usual calm and elaborately costumed dress-up play had been replaced by a frenzied need for movement. We were pretty sure that she was experiencing some aspects of the change because her limbs and torso were

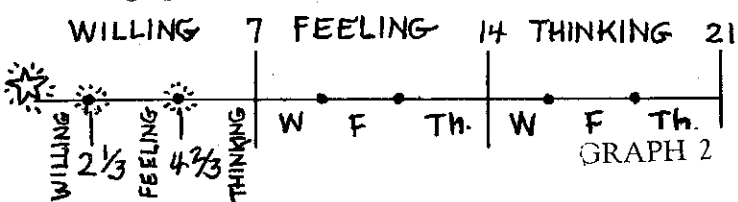
stretching and growing also. But we were not prepared for her appearance one morning in our play yard with her head buried in her Dad's shoulders. "I don't want to go to school. Everyone is so mean to me," she said.

At that point the father was prepared to withdraw Iza from school. I winked at him, sent Iza off to pick flowers with a friend and we talked some more about what we both were experiencing with Iza's behaviors. The next time we looked, Iza was playing happily with her many friends and father went home grateful for the realization that Iza was showing him how she was experiencing some of the new kinds of feelings that were awakening in her as she felt the change coming. It is not uncommon that children will experience a regression before they launch into their new independence. A few days later, I overheard Iza saying to some friends, "You know what? I just pushed my Dad away today! I said, Daddy you get out of here."

Every year I begin to talk to the parents about the six-year change at the beginning of the school year. I tell the parents to expect great changes in their children and I explain this in detail at our first meeting. It is very helpful to have already developed this rapport with the parents before their children begin to show behavior and body changes. Although there are many usual body and consciousness changes to look for, each child tends to have their own unique way to display this. It's important to open up the channels of communication with the parents so that both teacher and parent can take comfort in shared observations. When the children have passed through the change, especially if they have been met with loving firmness, there is the possibility that they can re-enter their surroundings transformed and in a more peaceful state. Children need their teachers to develop this rapport with their parents.

What children like Iza teach us is that the change happens on many different levels. It is a very profound physical phenomenon, but the effects also ripple into all aspects of the child's development. We know that in each of the seven-year cycles there is a period of more

developmental emphasis on willing, feeling and thinking. Within these cycles there are also times where little seeds of willing, feeling and thinking are cultured and developed for future developmental phases. Below is a line graph to show this.



Running the risk of oversimplifying a complex topic, this can help us to see a number of things. If you look at the graph at the place around the period of five-and-three-quarters to seven you will see that the child is experiencing a great deal at this time. We see the will of the feeling life coming from the future and the awakening of ideas is shown by the thinking/willing aspect. For the first time since birth, thinking and feeling are strong presences in the child's biography at the same time as willing. Of course, the nature of these capacities does not yet resemble that of the adults and older siblings in her life. Few of us understand what the young child faces in his experience at this time. It appears that willing, feeling and thinking are operative all at the same time with a double dose of will! Again, please know that these capacities do not manifest in the child as we experience them in the adult.

Working with the Imagination

Many adults are tempted to approach children using intellectual reasoning now but what the child really needs is for us to attach to his lively imaginations. In fact, Rudolf Steiner in Lecture Two, page 35 of *The Kingdom of Childhood* goes so far as to say we can "ruin" a child if we speak to him in intellectual ways instead of in pictures at this time. In Lecture One, pages 27-28 of *The Roots of Education*, Steiner also says, "We are often particularly gratified if we can teach a child something that he can reproduce in the same form several years later. But, this is just as though we were

to have a pair of shoes made for a child of three and expect him to wear them when he is ten. In reality our task is to give the child living flexible ideas which can grow in his soul. We must ourselves partake in the inward activities of the child's soul, and we must count it a joy to give him something that is inwardly flexible and elastic; and just as he grows with his physical limbs so he can grow up with these ideas, feelings and impulses, and in a short time he himself can make something else out of what we have given him." In Lecture One, pages 30-31 of *The Kingdom of Childhood*, Steiner says that children at the change of teeth need "soul milk" from us now and "you must take the keenest interest in what is awakening at the change of teeth. . . You must allow the child's inner nature to decide what you ought to be doing with him."

One six-year-old expressed to her parent, "Mom, everything is different. You and Daddy are different. The trees look different. Even Harlequin the cat is different now. And Mom, it's just like I don't even know how to play anymore." Another child expressed, "Everything is boring. It's boring at home. School is boring. I'm going to run away to the Fairy Mother's house." If we are lucky enough to hear these things as teachers we can know that these children need our attentiveness and support.

Physical Changes

This can be a confusing and very serious time for children and they certainly don't feel in control. Their body is changing, their consciousness is changing and their connection to their world is changing. Let's look more closely at some of these changes.

Physically, we know that the etheric body is actively working to penetrate and fashion the child's body. The child is trying to make his body his own and to break away from the ties of heredity. When the etheric has penetrated the hardest substance in the body, the bones, then it is free to move on to its new work. Although, in the past, educators have paid much attention to the release of the milk teeth

and second dentition as a signal for this readiness, now we are being advised to pay more attention to the appearance of the six-year molars as a sign that readiness is coming.

The activity of the etheric also shows itself outwardly in the movement of the children. They tend to have more frenzied gestures, race around and steadfastly seek out movements. We could say that they are doing their best to assist the etheric in its work. As teachers we need to meet these changes with warmth and the attitude that "this too shall pass" and then provide opportunities for the movement expression to happen. For this we must hone our powers of observation. The children are not unlike bubbling pots. A child who, from the beginning of the school year, has shown calm and careful eating habits at the snack table all of a sudden is not able to sit still at the meal and we begin to wonder if she is going to fall off the bench. We also notice that the child's limbs begin to stretch and their waistline, wrists and neck become apparent. Baby fat begins to disappear and, along with that, dimples on the hands and face. The older children love to challenge themselves with obstacle courses, long adventure walks, skipping, working with real tools, purposeful work and running games. I have found traditional games to be an ideal tool at this time to help the children socially and to support their need for organized movement. Doing things for others—helping the farmer to clean out stalls, feed his chickens, herd the lambs; picking up scraps of litter on Mother Earth on morning walks; taking apart the grain grinder to clean it; cleaning and oiling outdoor tools; building paths, fire pits, gardens—all of these things can help to channel the will that we have nourished throughout all of the early years into purposeful moral activity not frenzied, erratic behaviors. I have found it effective to have one or two children everyday be the "kings" and lead our morning walk. I begin this practice when the class understands about being "all together" on our walks. If the leaders run on ahead and leave the others way behind then I beckon them back to the group with my bell and they wait for another day to

lead us on our walk. At the present time, the children in my class are spreading "soil that the worms made in our compost pile" on the playground for the lower grades' children. "The big children are going to be so glad that we're doing this," is something the children say over and over everyday. We have a responsibility as teachers to help the children to find worthy channels for their activities and ways that we can assist them as their etheric completes its task of penetrating the body.

Changes in the Classroom

As their body stretches and grows and their appetite increases, children begin to give us clues in their play. They often try to build furniture up to the ceiling or outdoors, they want to climb onto the roof of the shed. A child is fortunate indeed to have an environment where the teacher can help him to find ways to meet this need to stretch upward while, at the same time, maintaining healthy boundaries. In one school setting I visited, the children were provided with a sturdy rope that the teacher threw over a strong tree branch. The children raised and lowered each other up and down out of the tree while the teacher attentively watched. We can see this stretching experience in other ways, too. In their drawings we can see ladders and zig-zag lines. The children are showing us their experience of the change of teeth and the stretching of their torso and limbs. Of course, along with this time come complaints of tummy aches and joint pains.

At a more invisible level the children are also working to establish their dominant side and to be able to comfortably cross over the vertical and horizontal midline. Clapping games like *Hot Cross Buns*, *Pease Porridge Hot*, *A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea*, or bringing crossover gestures into circle time can assist the children. Symmetry and balance begin to appear more in the children's drawings as their rhythmic system is more stabilized. The figures in their drawings are also often drawn standing on the earth. They can skip, balance, and hold a tune more easily.

Emotional and Social Changes

Probably the most individual differences are seen in the emotional and social changes that a child undergoes at this age. Some children respond with more bravado while some inwardly ferment their six-year-old brew.

One of the most common responses I've witnessed is the need of the children to be the boss. Parents, teachers and their peers are no longer safe from being corrected at every mistake. This, coupled with the arrival of a sense of time (before, after, etc.), can show itself at circle time when the child speeds up the verse to be finished before the others or slows down her walking during the morning walk so that she can arrive way behind the others. Going along with what everybody else is doing is no longer an unconscious priority. Some children love to play at being different. With their friends there are long conversations about who is "first boss." We hear the children say over and over again, "But I want to be the boss!" or "I know. You be first boss, you be second boss, you be third boss. I'll be fourth boss and I get to say what we do!"

We need to remember that the children's consciousness is changing from a state of being where they unite with the objects of their play to a state of being where they have an imaginative idea about the play that they want to implement. As mentioned above, this can be a frustration to the children and they may become listless or watchers in the play for a while until they can find their way with this new capacity. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be a graceful transition time if the children do not become too anxious. However, if the teacher feels that it has gone on long enough, then bringing the children (hopefully one at a time) to help with the teacher's work can be enough of a jumpstart to propel the children back into the play. From that perspective of doing the work and watching other's play the children can often see something interesting that they want to join. It's often the play of the younger children that encourages the older children to re-enter the play.

Often the older children also like to help set up the creative activities and arrange props for dramas or puppet plays. They can also be invaluable in assisting with doing things for the younger children: tying shoes, holding hands on walks, threading needles, assisting with handwork projects etc. It's also always a thrill when the older children can get to the point in the course of the year where they can make the bread, prepare the soup or clean the kindergarten all by themselves.

Tying the finger-knitted ropes into all sorts of lines, cobwebs, and telephone wires is often a sign of the presence of this new "thinking." The arrival of these picture imaginations in their consciousness propels the children into a real need to have the experience of their idea being played out. We need to assist these children to develop useful social skills so that this need can be fulfilled. As I write this, Gabriel comes to mind. Gabriel was a capable, hardy and fiery boy. He had a passion for leading the play but was very able to play cooperatively. Somewhere around six-and-three-quarters, he began to grow quite bossy with the children. Daily he would try to organize the whole class into his play. Most of the time the children would ignore his bossy ways but this did not deter him. I watched him one week desperately trying to herd, cajole, and manipulate the class into his game. All week I observed Gabriel desperately struggle to be "first boss." Then, on Friday, with great satisfaction, he constructed a corral with a fence that raised and lowered and, one by one, he captured the interest of his peers and he was able to herd the ponies, donkeys, pigs, and cows into his corral. The look of conquest on his face was palpable.

Sometimes, children can become stuck in their play as this new capacity for picture imaginations floods in. They love to play the same game over and over again or take most of the play session to set up scenarios. It warrants careful observation to see when the child is served by the imagination or when it could be helpful to move it on by a simple introduction of a complementary idea. Freya Jaffke explains this very well in an example she

gives on page 68 of *Work and Play in Early Childhood* where she describes helping the stagnating play of a group of six-year-olds by suggesting that now the animals in the circus needed to eat. It took only one sentence well placed by an observant teacher.

Some other common things that we may encounter in the child's play at "first puberty" are the tendencies to wrap presents and give them to others, playing at getting married, getting drunk, whispering to others to do naughty things, making up teasing rhymes about others, playing at being a "teeenager," playing dogs on leashes (master and servant), making money, theme play like restaurant, store, hospital, airport, and much more. There is also a tendency for the children to want to pair off and choose a special friend. Playing at exclusion becomes a pastime. Of course, it is important to meet all of these behaviors and themes with the matter-of-fact attitude that the right way of the world will be upheld. We'll still be remembering our kindergarten ways. "The big teachers say that the children need to know their kindergarten ways before they come to Grade One." Even though the child has these experiences and impulses flooding into him, he still needs to rest in the security that the world is a safe and moral place and there are others that will help him to make it so. Again and again, I have experienced the gratitude of the children when I have met their pushing of the boundaries with loving firmness. Often they will come and sit on my lap, take my hand or hug me. They want to press up against this comforting boundary and, on some level, they are grateful for its consistency and availability while they are trying out their newfound, confusing state of being.

Awakening Ideas

Sooner or later during the school year the children begin to have conversations about God and infinity. What a privilege it is to overhear these precious communications. If only we could keep alive the power of these wonderings! The most recent conversation I

overheard about infinity happened when two children were discussing it around our snack table. "Infinity means 1068!" said one child. "No," said another. "It just means keep on going." We can begin to see that the children are no longer so bound to the present and they can feel the future coming to them. Some children are able to relay their dreams. One mother told me about her daughter's dream. "Veronica dreamed that the kindergarten door opened and everyone in the class, even the teachers, got wings! We all flew down the hallway together opening up the doors of the big school and looking around to see what was inside." The past also becomes more retrievable in their memories. They begin to tell their parents the stories they have heard in kindergarten; we see them looking out and away as they imagine the stories at story time or as they imagine what their bedroom looks like when we ask them about it. One child said to her mother, "I don't need to go to Grandma's house anymore. I can see Grandma whenever I want to."

One gets the impression that the children delight in stretching their capacities in many ways. They love to play out some of their favorite games and circle verses by going through the motions silently. It exercises their developing capacity of hearing the words inwardly. I love to play a game centered around the Wynstones verse "Little Brown Bulb." The children delight in circling around two or three other children covered up in a blanket representing Mother Earth. We mouth the words to the verse silently, going through the gestures of King Winter roaring and Lady Spring tiptoeing and then we see if our friends hidden under the blanket can "peek up their heads, throw off their nighties and jump out of bed" at the appropriate time. One day as we were playing this game, I forgot one of the lines. One little boy looked at me ponderously and said, "That wisdom must be coming up your legs and making your head so big that you can't find those words." I thought, "Does this sound like what we'd expect to hear from a six-year-old? Is he describing my condition or his own?" We can learn so much from the

children if we develop a relationship with them so that they know we are interested in hearing what they have to say.

In closing, I would like to encourage all of us to acknowledge the grandness of this change that happens for the children somewhere between five-and-three-quarters and seven. Please truly listen to and cultivate the eyes to see what is happening for them. Make your own observations and take interest in the older children in the kindergarten. As teachers in mixed-age kindergartens we are a bridge for the children when they are passing through this truly amazing transformation. We are a bridge from the age of imitation to the time when the children have a growing need to see the world through the eyes of a beloved authority. Perhaps if we are able to respond to their activity at the time of first puberty with healing deeds and imaginations, then this is one way that we can fulfill our task as

educators to work with what Steiner called moral imagination. We can be instruments to help guide the children in building a moral foundation. We must accompany the children in such a way that the powerful will that we have nurtured in them has a proper vessel in which to germinate and grow. It is an honor always and a trial sometimes.

The interest that we take in the children enables us to connect to their imaginations and endorse their attempts to stretch into these new horizons. Taking up and embellishing their interests is perhaps one of the most powerful tools we have. We are doing the world a service when we can take courage to be lovingly present at this threshold for these children.

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