

Six—An Important Year

by

Astrid Sunt

Translated by Anniken Mitchell

The human being goes through one of life's big transformational processes during his seventh year. It is well known that, from a physiological standpoint, it takes seven years to renew all the cells in the body. That means that the seven-year-old you have in front of you is not the same child from a physical perspective that was carried under his mother's heart. The child has worked through and renewed his whole organism. The inherited body is outgrown and put aside. We can see this quite clearly in children's drawings. The pictures often contain houses or a car or a boat with a person in it. Or the theme has a certain border around it. The person in the picture stands on the ground, and the child, so to speak, has moved into his own house and taken fully hold of his own body. Castles, forts, and jagged mountain ranges, together with as occasional less clear or more varied theme predominate his drawings. It is important for the child to express these phases freely through drawing and not have any particular agenda from a pedagogical adult perspective.

It is quite striking how the body's outer proportions shift during this phase as well: the face becomes longer, the nose grows out, the cheeks are not as round any longer, the change of teeth happens, limbs and fingers are elongated, and the round little belly of the younger child disappears. The gaze is not as lively as before. These outer changes also have clear motor consequences for the child as well. This is often a period during which the children are a little more clumsy. It takes time to master a new body! The milk glass tips over, the chairs tip over, and often anger and frustration are not far behind. The child's sense of self is a little vulnerable. A harmony that was present in the five-year-old is no longer felt. Some children feel short periods of chaos, but the path to play and enthusiasm is still short as long as the right inspiration is present in the environment.

Spontaneously the children begin to compare themselves to their friends in the same age group. As five-year-olds they were still the strongest, the cleverest, the toughest, and at least either mommy or daddy was that! Now, as six-year-olds, they are more vulnerable and they are not as comfortable. They look carefully at the friends who can tie a bow or do a cartwheel or draw a horse, or at the friends who are good at finger knitting or kicking a soccer ball, or who understand all the rules about how to play a board game. A sense of melancholy can set in: “I don’t know anything.”

The differences in development are more visible for the child in a homogeneous age group than in a mixed age group. The absence of possibility for joint play with younger children, wherein the six-year-old can stand out more, can lead to a painful sense of self and a place that the child might have to struggle with for a while. Instead, if we have a mixed age group in the kindergarten, the older children have a positive role to play and tasks and privileges that fit their level of development. The older ones are looked up to and also imitated by the younger ones who also benefit in terms of having a relationship to the older children. Children who have not had the experience of playing with older children during the kindergarten years are not as well prepared for later school experience. During the kindergarten years the little ones take joy in and look forward to their turn to be the big ones! So when finally that year arrives—with its puberty sense of vulnerability and instability as well—slowly a new sense of awareness about time and space awakens. The life in kindergarten takes on a certain form—one thing follows another. The recognition of the repeating variations in everyday life and yearly celebrations awakens a sense of joy and a carrying force that now the big six-year-old can master! In a homogeneous age group in the Steiner/Waldorf kindergarten, the pedagogy works much the same way as in a mixed age group. The children’s relationships to each other will vary according to the individual children’s development and personality. The adults will encourage the more resource-strong children to take care of and support the ones who are less developed. (A lot of respect needs to be awarded the teachers who are dealing with these large groups of children.) What happens is that the core group of children that complete the kindergarten years together will fall away whereas in a mixed age group there is a sense of continuity.

The pedagogical principle during the first seven-year period is imitation—the spontaneous copycatting through which the child gains knowledge of the world. These are our tools in the kindergarten, and that is how it needs to be. We can see that the children from five-and-a-half years old slowly turns toward a sense for authority, and they are more open to verbal information sharing. In

reality this is still by imitation and is just the first stadium toward the next life stage, a necessary transition phase which often happens between the seven-year periods in life. For this introductory period, which actually stretches all the way up towards the nine-year-old, we are not going to misuse or prematurely start intellectual teaching but encourage and nurture playful stimuli of wonder and inquisitive attitude.

At the same time this is a period with a careful but visible transition from a “want” existence to a “should” existence. The clothes should hang on the little hooks, the table needs to be cleaned up after the meal time, you need to say thanks for the day, the tasks need to be completed, the flowers should be watered, the little knapsacks packed with lunch, the light needs to turn green before you cross the street, and so on. We are now approaching the seven-year period between seven and fourteen wherein the fundamental pedagogical principle is authority. In this way our pedagogy builds on the real knowledge of the way the human being develops.

There will usually be a period of boredom during the seventh year. “I have nothing to do.” This is often interpreted that now the child is ready for school. The child may want pre-made toys, grow a little more dependent on popular collection objects, and so on. In this phase there is a change in the child’s consciousness. The child has worked through his own inner organs, and according to Steiner the forces that have been used for the transformation of the body are now free and available as forces for memory. Memories for life can be created as a little looking glass into one’s own childhood. The child’s consciousness is now reflecting over many little happenings and over the large questions in life. The child asks a lot of questions and really wants our honest thoughts and feelings in the answers. The child can hold onto a thought, an idea, a play, a plan, over longer periods of time. In this year the children can come to kindergarten with a clear inner picture about what and how the play will happen and what they will make and be able to hold onto and be able to remember. Together the six-year-olds can develop projects that can take place over longer periods of time. They talk among themselves and experience how an idea can grow in a common fantasy world and take physical shape. Cooperation and friendship can grow through free play.

During the first seven-year period, Steiner says, the foundation is built for our courage for life, trust in the feeling that the world is good. In order for the child to thrive, this sense of trust, a sense of clarity, a sense of what is going to happen that day, comes first, and then secondly an experience of being heard and seen and understood and recognized for who she/he is, a sense of being loved.

It Is All about Values

The Norwegian experiment to start children in school at age six was not very successful in terms of making better students; what is then the medicine from our minister of education? Yes, more school, more learning, more hours at the desk, fewer adults to give nurturing, and more measuring of quantity (referred to as quality), less possibilities for quality. This is not building a pedagogical policy on real knowledge of the human being, but rather stubbornly holding onto a prestigious idea with no basis in reality.

Matti Bergström, Finnish professor, neurologist, and brain researcher, indicated during our big debate around school reform that the age for starting school should rather be pushed further up than down. Finnish children still start school as seven-year-olds, and they score the highest in Europe in terms of school readiness. If we put children in a kindergarten too early in terms of intellectual learning, we are hindering their capacity to develop their own abilities towards problem solving and good judgment later in life. “We will end up with value-handicapped people,” says Bergström, and he supports this perspective through his research. He has found, among other things, that the brain stem, which is already developed in the embryo, is the seed for creativity, and the outer brain is the seed for structure and information and does not develop until puberty. In his book *The Student: The Last Slave* (Semenadium, Verlag Sweden, 1991), Bergström writes about the schism between the children who are forced to start early and those who start later: “When the society finds itself at the developmental stage in the direction of the information society, the children are already on their way to build a new society that means a value society.”

As far as I am aware, nobody has been able to make a connection between early information gathering and our capacity as adults to be able to utilize and control this information. A local bank was recently advertised on the web page: “Create a culture of winners.” Is that what we truly want? If somebody wins, then somebody out of necessity has to lose. The goal with the Steiner/Waldorf pedagogy is to not create winners, but to create a foundation for every child to develop him- or herself into a free human being with a capacity to find his or her ethical values and life task.