

Emotional and Social Changes

Probably the most individual differences are seen in the emotional and social changes that children undergo at this age. Some children respond with more bravado and 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, and so on), can show itself at circle time when the child speeds up the verse to be finished before the others or on the morning walk when the child slows down her walking 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 they have long conversations about who is "first boss." We hear the children say over and over again, "But I want to be the boss!" "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!" And often their playmates and those who stand as authorities in their life will hear, "You're not the boss of me!" A matter-of-fact response is needed then. "Teacher knows the rules of the land," or, as I have said to my own children, "That is my job. Your angel asked me to be your helper." Children benefit immensely by being met directly at this time, and a neutral, informing tone of voice can reassure them that the boundaries are still in place even though their whole being is in upheaval. What a relief this is for them!

Another aspect of this time of transformation is that the children's consciousness changes from a state where they unite with the objects of their play to a state where they have an imaginative idea about the play and they want to implement it. Freya Jaffke explains this by saying, "the stimulus for play no longer comes so much from external objects, but it comes now more and more from inside. This means that now the child has an inner picture, a picture from her imagination of past events, and she can bring these up in her play independent of place, time or people."⁸ 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 child back into the play. From that perspective of helping the teacher 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. Sometimes the older children like to help set up the creative activities and arrange props for dramas or puppet plays. They can also be valuable in assisting the younger children—tying shoes, holding hands on walks, threading needles,

8 Freya Jaffke, "Stages of Development in Early Childhood," 11.

helping with handwork projects, etc. It's also 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 fingerknitted ropes into all sorts of lines, cobwebs, or telephone wires is often a signal 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, Samuel comes to mind. Samuel was a capable, hardy, and fiery boy. He had a passion for leading the play but was very able to play co-operatively as well. 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. Monday to Friday I observed Samuel diligently 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.

Children benefit immensely by being met directly at this time.

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 in her book, *Work and Play in Early Childhood*,⁹ where she describes helping the stagnating play of a group of six-year-olds by suggesting that now the animals in the circus need to eat. It took only one sentence well-placed by an observant teacher to transform a stuck play situation into one that could move on with endless possibilities.

Some other common things that we may encounter in the child's play at this time that is often called "first puberty" or "first adolescence" are the tendencies to wrap presents and give them to others; playing at getting married or getting drunk; whispering to others to do naughty things; making up teasing rhymes about others; giggling; being silly; playing at being a "teeeeenager"; playing dogs on leashes (master and servant); making money; *theme play like restaurant, store, hospital, airport*; informing their friends about who they hate today; a multitude of bathroom words; 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-

9 Freya Jaffke, *Work and Play in Early Childhood*, 68.

of-fact attitude that the right-way-of-the-world will be upheld. "We'll still be remembering our kindergarten ways." "The teachers in the grade school say that the children need to know their kindergarten ways before they come to first grade." 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 consciousness.

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 begin to experience the future coming to them. Some children are able to relate their dreams. One mother told me about her daughter's dream. "Valerie dreamed that the kindergarten door opened and everyone in the class, even the teachers, got wings! Then she saw everyone flying down the hallway together, opening up the doors of the grade school and looking around to see what was inside the classrooms."

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." Some children can express the arrival of this ability to see things in the "mind's eye." Others find it overwhelming and, as it floods in and initially overwhelms other capacities, they may express, "I'm bored." Another way of interpreting "I'm bored" is "There's something new happening and I don't know how to relate to it yet."

However, once the children begin to take hold of this change in consciousness, one gets the impression that they delight in stretching their capacities in many ways. They tend to play with this just like they play out other areas of their experience. They love to play with some of their favorite games and circle verses by going through the motions silently. It exercises their developing capacity of hearing the words inwardly and letting the pictures dominate. Here is a game centered around the verse "Little Brown Bulb."

*A little brown bulb went to sleep in the ground
In his little brown nightie he slept very sound
King Winter he raged and he roared overhead
But that little brown baby stayed snug in its bed
But when Lady Spring came tip-toeing over the lee
With fingers to lips as quiet as could be
That little brown bulb peeked up its head
Threw off its nightie and jumped out of bed.*¹⁰

The children delight in circling around two or three other children covered up in a blanket that represents 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. Of course, playing this game many times and saying the verse out loud precedes the time when we can finally say it silently.

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 would expect to hear from a six-year-old? Is he describing my condition or his own?" Edmond Schoorel, in his book *The First Seven Years: Physiology of Childhood*, describes very well the process of maturation and how it moves from below upwards. He says, "The process of maturation begins in the lower pole, which is dynamic and prone to change, and ends in the tranquilizing and crystallizing activity of the head."¹¹ We can learn so much from the children if we develop a relationship with them so that they know that we are interested in what they have to say.

In closing, I'd like to acknowledge again the grandness of this change which happens for the children somewhere between five-and-a-half and seven. It's a time when the child's organism undergoes physical, emotional, social and consciousness transformations. And again I would encourage parents and teachers to truly listen to the children and to cultivate the eyes to see what is happening for them. Please make your own observations and take deep interest in the older children in the kindergarten or at home. 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. 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

10 Wynstones Press, *Spring*, 20.

11 Edmond Schoorel. *The First Seven Years: Physiology of Childhood*, 113, 123.

building a moral foundation. We must accompany them in such a way that the powerful will that we have nurtured in them throughout early childhood has a proper vessel in which to germinate and grow. It is an honor always and a trial sometimes.

If we can do this, then the interest that we take in the children enables us to connect to their imaginations and their developmental processes. These deeds of deep, loving interest then endorse the children's attempts to stretch into these new horizons. Taking up and embellishing their questions, interests and perceived needs are perhaps the most powerful tools we have. We are doing a great service when we can take the courage to be lovingly present at this threshold for these older children in the kindergarten. ♦

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- Additional information gathered through consultation with Dorothy Olsen, Dr. Johanna Steegmans, and Dr. Claudia McKeen.