

The Six-Year Transformation :: Discovering Waldorf



Donni

The Six-Year Transformation

By Michelle Brightwater

The six-year transformation or change is an amazing and tumultuous time in the life of your youngling (and for you!). This time is referred to as the "first puberty," which gives a great deal of insight into the kind of behavior you might expect during this time. Although it is called the six-year change, it usually happens between the ages of 5.5 and 7 years. This developmental shift is not simply the next step in a linear progression, but rather a full transformation into a different being. It is likened to a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. Everything changes for your child...physically, intellectually, socially, emotionally. Her body is changing, her consciousness is changing and her connection to the world is changing.

Let's start by getting a clear picture of the changes happening, then we can move on to ways to meet and to support our dear one as he works his way out of that cocoon!

Physically, your child is GROWING. His limbs will stretch, he will lose his "baby fat" and those sweet dimples in his hands. He will develop actual wrists, a waist and a neck. This means he will be hungry and may have growing pains. Leg aches, joint aches and even tummy aches are par for the course. He will also lose his baby teeth and grow his adult teeth. This is an uncomfortable and exciting process. At our meeting, I showed an x-ray of a child's mouth and jaw at this age and it is full to bursting with new and old teeth. Looking at this photo invokes a pang of compassion...it shows the crowded, shifting space of your dear one's head! Even his heart rhythm changes during this transformation. All of these physical changes result in your child feeling "funny," uncomfortable, moody and sometimes even in downright pain. And the physical changes are just one element of this developmental shift. Please hold your child with tenderness and compassion, feed him healthy, nourishing food and make sure he gets good rest. His body is working hard and building!

Intellectually, a new world opens up to your child. Until now, all of his life forces have been focused on developing and building the body. The internal organs are not fully formed at birth. It takes until around the age of seven to complete most of this formation. Once this happens, the life forces are freed up to work on developing the feeling realm and the intellect. Your child will suddenly view the world differently, she will understand more. She will see that adults make mistakes and have more pointed questions about the world. This induces a painful time of the loss of the magic of early childhood. She used to swim in a sea of self-centered fantasy. She was very connected to the world and to you. Now she has a more emerging sense of herself as separate and individual. This is exciting and powerful, as well as terrifying! You will feel her separating and this is a bittersweet time for parents. We want our children to bloom and grow, to spread their wings. But ouch...separating from us can be hard to take. Be strong and have courage to allow your young one to go forth and to become the fullness of being she has come here to be!

This new perspective sets the stage for a new round of limit-testing. Everything looks different, so he needs to find the boundaries once again. Don't be surprised if he tries out new things—inappropriate language, arguing, outright refusal, disrespect, running around in a frenzy, telling white lies—the sky is the limit. Again, this is the time to be strong without alarm. If you hold the boundaries with love and understanding, he will find his center again. We need to approach the six-year changer with the attitude that we have compassion and understanding of what is happening, and that we are here to hold him, to be in charge and to love him unconditionally. We know his heart is still made of gold and that he must try things out to find his way. We will remind him which way to go and help him to get there.

Although her intellect is beginning to bud, she is still not ready for full academics and intellectual explanations. Your dear one still relates to the world best through story and creative pictures. Let her dwell in the magic and wonder of early childhood that still remains for her. First Grade is just around the corner!

Your child's play used to be inspired from the outside. He used to see an object and it would become something in his mind's eye and he would play that. Now his play is inspired from the inside. He creatively imagines what he wants to play and now seeks objects to become the scene he sees. He will spend more time setting up his play than actually playing it out. Since this shift means that all comes from within, there are times when he cannot find the inspiration. You will start to hear "I'm bored." This is ok, in fact it is good! This is a big sign of First Grade readiness. Let him sit with it and struggle to find his inspiration. If he gets too distraught or moves into a frenzy, bring him into your work. Children at this age need real, meaningful work to help organize their energy and motion. Let them help chop vegetables for dinner, set the table, take out the garbage with you, sweep, scrub walls, pull weeds, hammer nails, repair things...whatever you are working on. Your cheerful, purposeful, competent action and energy will guide and ground him. Usually after a little time working with you, he will find his way back into play with his frayed edges smoothed.

Up until now, your child has been a being of pure will. Her will has helped her to learn to walk and talk, to be a human child in this American culture. She has been centered on doing. With the six-year transformation, she shifts into the next seven-year stage of being focused on feeling. She will begin to become more sensitive to the words and actions of others. She suddenly realizes and notices more in this capacity. An off-handed comment that she would have scarcely noticed a few months ago now really hurts her feelings. Many children will say things like "everyone is mean to me," or "no one likes me." This is an emotional time akin to adolescence. She is developing feelings, empathy and compassion and can be very sensitive. Please take these statements with a grain of salt. Have compassion for your tender one, but know that things are almost always not as bad as she feels in that moment. This is an important time to keep the communication flowing with your teacher. Check in. One day an incident or two can feel like the weight of the world and the next day, life is beautiful again. Also, please do your best to keep your rhythm. Even if your child says she does not want to come to school, know that this passes once she enters the classroom. You can let me know when your child is having this kind of morning and I will let you know how the day goes. Having all of these new feelings is hard at first. It's a great feat to learn to sort through them, to identify them and to make sense of them. Your rhythm is a great comfort and scaffolding.

With this new awareness of emotion, he will see that his actions can also trigger emotions in others. Children learn that they have power. They can make someone else do something they want with a word or action. They can make others laugh or pay attention with a word or an action. Kindergarteners experiment with manipulation and exclusion, as well as with being goofy or inappropriate. It is our job to help guide this and to hold the boundaries. I let the children know that "those words hurt feelings," "we all play together in the Sunflower class," "we will bring our kind ways," "Sunflower words." This is another place where children need boundaries and love. I identify their need, name the emotions and give clear, simple words on how to be kind and appropriate and to do what is right. We find compromises and solutions. Sometimes it is hard. Your child might have to wait or share. But these are crucial lessons to learn for a healthy social environment. This is where our stories are a lifeline. When I see certain behaviors emerge, I tell a pedagogical story or faerie tale with a character engaging in the behavior and the resulting feelings and actions of those around him. The character then goes on to take the path of right action, of nobility, and goodness is restored (and he usually becomes the King.) Again, we should not be alarmed by this experimentation. We simply need to guide them to the shining path and give LOTS of patient reminders.

This is also a time of emerging sexuality. We always have a few children "fall in love" each spring. We have weddings, princes seeking princesses. One year, I had a boy find a crown at the start of each play time. He would build a house, set a table with a fine feast and then call out "I need a queen!" And he had a queen in mind. Each day, Sarah would accept and be his queen. She would sit at his table and he would serve her. They were precious! We often had to use our phrase, "we will save our kisses for our moms and dads." Your children were created to be sexual beings. They need guidance on what behavior is appropriate, starting now! Another phrase heard in Kindergartens around the world is "pants up and skirts down in the Kindergarten." Again, do not be

Just inform your dear one of the right way of being with a neutral, firm, loving tone.

When at this age also begin to talk about God and infinity. Our children are fascinated by the concept of "multiplex." They want to know the highest possible number. What is the MOST!?? They are so dear. One child said "infinity is 1063!" and another corrected him saying "No! It means it goes on forever!" They have amazing philosophical and theological conversations. Again, the world is opening up to them. Their minds are expanding.

In the classroom, I manage all of these emerging butterflies in a number of ways. Of course I bring my loving firmness. I make deep heart connections with each child and seek to understand her wholeness to the best of my ability. I hold boundaries and give lots of reminders with a neutral, informing tone. I set the example with my own speech and gestures. I tell tales. I model fine manners, joyful work, compassion for all, wonder and creativity. I give the children many opportunities for meaningful work. We use real tools to hammer and saw to build our own toys and useful items for the classroom and the community. We use our hands to help others, to give. I provide physical challenges on our walks and in our circles. We balance, climb, jump rope, play clapping games, run obstacle courses. We have special, important jobs. We serve each other. We practice our manners and "Sunflower words." Sometimes we make healing pictures for each other. We give hugs and apologies. We celebrate everything we possibly can and we give gratitude. You may have heard our "Thank You" song. We use this song to thank each other for gifts and kindnesses. All in all, we seek to have the "right way of the world" affirmed in our beautiful Sunflower classroom. It can be gritty work at times, but all is well. As we say at the end of each circle, "I dance with the flowers; I sing with the sun; my warmth I give to everyone."

This is a time of great beauty, expansion, growth, confusion, sensitivity and change. The best way to guide your youngling through this at home, is by meeting him with deep compassion, loving firmness and a strong daily rhythm. Our love and attention will see him through. Let him work, venture out to seek new challenges and be there to enfold him in your arms when he needs it. He will vacillate between going boldly out into the world with a new vision and regressing into clinging and insecurity. He needs to be held between form and freedom, just as he will in adolescence! And know that you are not alone. We are the village. We hold each other and all of our Sunflower children together. They are your nephews and nieces, your family. What a gift we all are to each other.

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Ms Michelle was Teddy's beloved Kindergarten teacher at Maple Village Waldorf School.

Ms Michelle, we are forever grateful for the beautiful guidance you gave us through these years. You were so calm and gentle as you guided Teddy along his path. We are all better people because of you, Ms Michelle. We miss you so much and look forward to visiting you in Wyoming soon.

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Blessings and magic,

Donni

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