



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

Guide to Whole Person Development – PART 2 THE THINKING SELF

It is an understatement to say that whole-person parenting is complex! Complicated, mysterious, and overwhelming are adjectives that some parents use and understandably so! Physical development basically occurs on its own schedule with minimal parent care; but other areas of growth are far more dependent upon parent knowledge, intervention, and attention. Intellectual, emotional, affective, moral, spiritual, and social development are affected by parenting practices, home environment, and the influences of other significant adults or situations.

This newsletter is the second in a series of six devoted to explaining normal child development. Stage theories of development attempt to identify **normal trends**, in other words, **the standard, average pattern of development for a child who is without physical or psychological challenge and who experiences a nurturing home environment**. Though each stage is necessary to the development of subsequent stages, the stages are more fluid than rigid, and the age correlations suggested are merely guidelines. A variety of conditions influence maturity. And even though a child exhibits one particular stage, he/she may move in and out of the stage. This is true of many areas of growth including intellectual or cognitive development—the subject of this newsletter. Intellectual growth is measured by reasoning ability. No amount of urging, drilling, rote memory, or demanding can force intelligence; but an enriched environment—one that is stimulating, encouraging, and non-threatening and provides opportunities for new experiences—primes the pump of readiness and interest. Parents who understand their child's cognitive stage can provide repeated opportunities for the child to function in that stage while gently introducing tasks that are proper to the next stage.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) explained how the **Thinking Self** evolves. Fascination with child responses led him to explore the reasoning process. Experimentations indicated that children master four progressive stages of intellect on their journey from instinctual reactions and basic motor skills at birth to highly reasoned thought at adolescence and beyond. These include **sensorimotor** stage (birth- 2), **pre-operational** stage (2-7), **concrete operational** stage (7-12), and **formal operational** stage (12+). Piaget believed that motor abilities like lifting one's head without assistance, rolling over, walking, and manipulating objects were genetically preprogrammed in children, but that an enriched home environment might reduce the learning time. Each stage requires the ability to reason through and understand increasingly complex relationships at increased levels of complexity.

STAGE 1: SENSORY-MOTOR INTELLIGENCE

Birth—Age 2

(Not described in this article.)

STAGE 2: PREOPERATIONAL THOUGHT

(Pre-Logical Thinking)

Ages 2-5: (Not described in this article.)

Ages 5-6: The child begins intuitive thought and primitive reasoning. Reduces egocentricity and increases social

participation. Begins to separate mental from physical reality. Notices multiple properties such as form, color, and utility. Thinks in absolutes and “black and white.” Asks limitless questions. Judges by a single clue, usually spatial. Thinks in one idea at a time. Preoccupied with parts. Poor conservation skills (recognizing that quantity does not change merely because a container shape changes). Gets stuck on appearances; does not comprehend arrangements by size, number, and spatial classification. No notion of valuation (i.e., money), rank, or relativity.

Suggestions: Be patient with questions. Expose child to recognize other points of view. Play conservation games, i.e., equal amounts of liquid, beads, or clay filling two differently shaped containers.

Ages 6-7: Begins to understand multiple points of view and relational concepts. Gradually able to conserve but not capable of operations (number, cause-effect, time, space). Still unable to reverse actions mentally. Mutual responsibility and group solidarity are beyond comprehension. A lie is judged by the degree of disobedience involved and its size; motives, intended purpose, and underlying circumstances are not considered.

Suggestions: Give concrete examples and specific, literal directions. Encourage artistic expression. Speak of intrinsic values in external realities, i.e., patience needed to produce a cake. Introduce child to the concepts of motives, intentions, cooperative learning, and team activities. Value effort more than result.

STAGE 3: CONCRETE OPERATIONAL THOUGHT (Logical Thinking)

Age 7-8: Thought becomes less intuitive and egocentric and more logical, reversible, flexible, and complex. The child begins to theorize. Develops mental structure of grouping, the ability to manipulate categories, classification systems, and hierarchies into groups. Makes logical inference—conclusions reached through “unseen” evidence.

Suggestions: Provide exercises in cause-effect, situation-outcome. Actively explore physical environment. Encourage questions.

Age 8-10: Needs concrete experiences to solve problems; lacks ability to hypothesize about abstract concepts. Able to reverse actions mentally, to be interrupted and return to an earlier part of the story. Can explore several options without immediately adopting any one. Descriptive body movement accompanies speech. Able to state a preview summary before detailing a story.

Suggestions: Provide practice in summarizing. Engage in solving puzzles, mysteries, predicting endings to stories. Brainstorm alternative solutions and consequences associated with scenarios.

This newsletter summarized cognitive theory and the stage-growth characteristics of elementary school-aged children. Contact DrPatMcCormack@aol.com for parallel information related to ages birth—5 and 14—18. May this digest report support your efforts in the whole-person development of your child.

Ages 11-13: Demonstrates the ability for conceptual thinking in combination with a concrete image or performance of the thought process while reasoning out, explaining to others, or trying to comprehend a problem; gradual shift from inductive (reasoning from specific to general) to deductive mode of thinking (general to specific); aware of social reciprocity and equality; develops concepts of fairness and justice; able to solve problems by generalizing from one situation to a similar situation; solve problems haphazardly, using trial and error.

Suggestions: Group problem solving; peer teaching; justice issues; democratic climate in home and school where child has input to rules; use examples to support ideas; teach outlining skills, word maps; demonstrate/illustrate parts of the whole; give practice in clarifying values; debate, give ample opportunity for child to explain thoughts.

STAGE 4: FORMAL OPERATIONAL THOUGHT (Abstract Thinking)

Ages 12-14: Develops lattice-group structure, the ability to network ideas, recognize connective links, combine hypothetical propositions to apply to future events. Enjoys nesting, classifying relationships between smaller parts and their all-inclusive whole. Able to deal with abstractions, form hypotheses, solve problems systematically, engage in mental manipulations. Begins futuristic thinking. Able to understand and use complex language forms, i.e., metaphor, proverb, sarcasm, satire. Can construct theories and make deductions without having had previous direct experience. Can think through new problems, moving forward and backward and taking into account as many or as few qualities as seem relevant. Observation, comparison, and comprehension of others becomes important.

Suggestions: Support nesting and lattice development through (1) value clarification types of scenarios where child ranks choices, considers alternatives, weighs consequences, and brainstorms alternative solutions and consequences associated with given situations; (2) outlining skills; (3) word-maps; (4) classifying ideas according to kind, form, and utility. Engage child in deductive reasoning, i.e., solving mysteries, predicting endings to stories, solving puzzles. Work with properties of space (length, weight, volume), time, and speed. Engage child in exercises that involve application, analysis and synthesis skills.

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