



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## **A Parent Guide for Middle School Years, PART 2 THE THINKING 'TWEEN**

The intellectual or cognitive development of 'tween-stagers is 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 stimulates, encourages, is non-threatening, and provides opportunity for new experiences – primes the pump of readiness and interest.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) explained how the thinking self evolves through four stages. Each stage requires the ability to reason through and understand relationships at increased levels of complexity.

- Stage one, (birth – age 2) is a **sensory-motor stage** where children learn through what they can see, touch, hear, smell and taste. During this time they develop the motor skills to push, pick-up, kick, etc. Memory develops.
- During stage two (ages 2-7), the **pre-operational stage**, children identify objects but that process requires no logical-thought. They separate items by color, size or shape. They think in terms of “black and white,” and judge by a single clue—usually spatial. They have no notion of rank or value. By the time they enter elementary school they begin to understand relational concepts but are still incapable of operations (number, cause-effect, time, space). They require concrete, specific, literal, and simple directions.
- Stage three, **concrete operational thought**, spans ages 7 – 13. Around ages 7-8 thought becomes more logical, reversible, flexible, and complex. Children become able to manipulate categories, classify systems, group objects by a hierarchical value and make logical inferences, that is, conclusions reached through “unseen” evidence. Pre-'twens, ages 8-10, need concrete experiences to solve problems. Though they still lack the ability to hypothesize about abstract concepts, they can mentally reverse actions, be interrupted and yet return to an earlier part of a story, and they can state a preview summary before detailing a story.

### **TRANSITIONAL TIME IN 'TWEEN THOUGHT**

Students enter Middle School as stage three thinkers and during grades 6, 7, 8 they transition from stage three to stage four, **formal operational thinking**. They expand from logical thinking to abstract thinking. Logical thinking based on concrete, “black and white” information yields to the ability to think without needing to see or to manipulate objects. There is a gradual shift from *inductive thinking* (reasoning from specific to general) to *deductive thinking* (reasoning from general to specific). They begin to question and dispute, debate, and argue. They develop *lattice-group* structure, i.e., the ability to network ideas and recognize connective links. They enjoy *nesting*, i.e., classifying relationships between smaller parts and their all-inclusive whole. They form hypotheses and test them in a mature, scientific manner. They can think through new problems, moving forward and backward, taking into account as many or as few qualities as seem relevant. They are able to understand and use

complex language forms, i.e., metaphor, proverb, sarcasm, and satire. They can construct theories and make deductions without having had previous direct experience. Observation, comparison, and comprehension of others becomes important to 'tweens.

### PROACTIVE PARENT PRACTICES

- Provide practice in summarizing. This can be as simple as asking a child to recap what occurred thus far in a TV show that you are viewing.
- Give practice in value clarification: (1) choosing from alternatives with awareness of pros and cons, weighing consequences, and brainstorming alternative solutions (2) prizing; being proud of the choice; owning the decision, and (3) acting with consistency in the matter under discussion.
- Engage in deductive reasoning, i.e., solving puzzles and mysteries, and predicting endings to stories.
- Use examples to support ideas. Require children to support opinions with examples.
- Establish a democratic climate in the home where children have input to rules and decisions.
- Give ample opportunity for children to explain their thought or reasoning. Caution: An explanation is not an excuse!
- Support *nesting* and *lattice* development through (1) outlining skills, (2) word-mapping, a strategy of connecting main ideas and sub-divisions by making a graphic design, and (3) value clarification scenarios.
- Work with properties of space (length, weight, volume), time and speed.
- Engage children in exercises that involve the critical thinking skills of application, analysis (separate a general idea into individual parts), and synthesis (combine individual parts/ideas to create a new whole).
- Because 'tweens are aware of social reciprocity and equality they develop concepts of fairness and justice. Engage them, therefore, in discussing issues of social justice and in outreach to the less advantaged.

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