

The School Years - Ages 7 to 11 - Cognitive Development

By Mike Witzky

In a previous article, I discussed the changes in physical development that occurs during the school years. Physical development is especially noticeable when you compare a first grader to a sixth grader. The differences in cognitive development is even more striking. Up to this time, the toddler is learning many things for the first time. As we know, the early years are filled with rapid learning of new information, from understanding language to navigating their environment. By the time they enter the first grade, they have mastered the essentials of language, coordination and simple social interactions that make them ready to venture out into the new world of “elementary school.” But, when you look at the difference between a first grader and a sixth grader, you can quickly see the amazing growth in cognitive development that takes place in those few short years.

Between the ages of six and eleven, children become much more accomplished at thinking, learning, remembering and communicating. This is tied to the way a child’s cognitive or thinking and reasoning changes during these years. To understand this change, compare it to the way a toddler thinks. A toddler is learning things for the very first time. They learn what things are and can name hundreds of different things. Many can say the alphabet, identify numbers and even read words. In the next stage of cognitive development, the child begins to understand how these ideas fit together to form more complex relationships. Letters form words, words form sentences, numbers can be added together to form other numbers, and things begin to become more logical. Beginning with these simple, logical constructions, children rapidly move into more advanced reasoning. Evidence of this growth includes the simple fact that most sixth graders can figure out which size of popcorn is the best buy, can be taught to multiply fractions, can memorize a list of fifty new spelling words and can use sarcasm appropriately – virtually beyond every first grader. During this stage of development, there is a greater regard for authority figures and less challenging of adults that will be the hallmark of the adolescent.

Because the learning at this age is more factual and understanding the logical relationships between ideas and objects, the child sees the world in black and white – right and wrong terms. This can be seen clearly in the sixth grader who condemns smoking and who, in the seventh grade, is found behind the garage with a cigarette from grandpa’s pack. Or the child who graduates from the DARE program parroting the evils of drugs, and in one short year, begins to experiment with these same evil substances.

As parents, if we understand how learning is taking place with our child, we can establish a relationship with them while they still think we know what we are talking about and are willing to respect our opinion. This means that we take time not only to explain things to them, but also listen to them and help them reason out various problems for themselves. This is most important as the child gets closer to those early adolescent years because it is during this period that they will begin to move into the abstract thinking that is typical of adult reasoning. This means that they will take everything they have learned and begin to put these concepts together in various ways to create alternative solutions to problems.

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This is called moral reasoning and can be seen in the following story. A baby is dying and a druggist has medications that can save the baby's life, but it costs \$2,000, ten times what it costs the druggist to make. The father, desperate and unable to come up with the money, breaks into the druggist's store, steals the medication and saves the baby's life. The dilemma that this story reveals shows the difference in thinking that differentiates a child's cognitive ability and that of an adult. When we talk about the adolescent in upcoming articles, we will better understand some of the conflicts in thinking and behavior that this dilemma can create as they struggle with some of these very difficult concepts. In my next article, I will look at psychosocial development and explore more of the moral reasoning of the child at this age. I will also discuss in several other articles some of the psychological problems, like hyperactivity and bipolar illness, that arise in children.

If you think your child may need professional assistance, please go to the "*Find a Service Provider*" section of the BHG Web site <http://www.bhg.org> to locate a behavioral healthcare agency in your county.

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