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UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD—

FROM 6 TO 12

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UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD— AGES 6 TO 12

By CLARA LAMBERT

THE “forgotten years of childhood” are the school years between the nursery and adolescence. Reams have been written about schools, programs, schoolroom management, I. Q.’s, failure or success in learning the three R’s, and problems within the classroom, but very little about what makes the six-to-twelve-year-old tick. Possibly this is because Johnny and Mary have lost the charm of babyhood and have not yet acquired the bloom of the “teen-ager.” Children of this age are not so lovable as they were at three, nor so exciting as they are in adolescence.

The inner world of six-to-twelve-year-olds is hard to get at. They are elusive and at times baffling. Because they get about the neighborhood, talk a lot, and are beyond babyhood with its complications, because they are in a “plateau” phase of growth, these years of their development seem to have been by-passed by investigators.

The sketches covering the ages from six to twelve which follow do not attempt to answer specific problems in home management. They are not sketches of problem children, but the problems of children as they grow. The parent who cannot cope with a

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problem may need help from guidance specialists. So often, however, parents are relieved of some of their worries when they learn that behavior which they thought was abnormal or "bad" is merely "six-year-oldness" or "seven" or "eight" and so on. They are relieved to know that their Johnny or Mary is no worse than the neighbor's children and that they need not harbor so many fears.

LIFE BEGINS AT SIX

A MOTHER comes to feel that she understands something of the problems of an infant. She is with him almost constantly during his earliest years. He is dependent on her to a greater degree than he will ever be again.

At six, however, a change takes place. The child is now shared by teachers and companions. Less time is spent with his family. His experiences can no longer be held within the bounds of his home. School brings the first break with his home ties.

To the adult, watching the parade of sixes out of the home along the road to growing up, this group appears not to have a care in the world. It seems that the job of the six-year-old is to grow in stature and understanding as fast as possible so that he may be ready to cope with adolescence and maturity.

To the teacher, sixes are first graders who must be taught the mysteries of numbers and letters in order to pass into the second grade. She knows that they will present problems. They are obviously individuals. Nevertheless, to her they are first and foremost a *group* of six-year-olds who must fit the curriculum. The inner world of the six-year-old seems to be strictly private.

And what of the six-year-old? He shares with all the other six-year-olds a few experiences. He has lived about the same length of time. He has lived with a family. He has lost and grown a few teeth. And he speaks the same language. But he may be thin or fat, short or tall, near-sighted or astigmatic, curly- or straight-haired, well or badly coordinated, freckle-faced or clear of skin, healthy or handicapped by allergies or diseases of the heart, muscle, or mind. He may be an only child or one of many, the child of divorced parents or an orphan with one parent. He may be the child of very young or middle-aged parents. He may live in a house or an apartment or his family may be sharing quarters with others. He may come from the

crowded sections of a city, the spacious environment of a suburb, or the isolated environs of a farm. He may be a "war child" who has moved from one part of the country to another, or a child who has experienced the security of permanence. He may come from the poorest or the most comfortable economic classes. He may be black or white, red or yellow. His religion may differ as well as his nationality background. His individual



response to six years of living varies according to his own pattern of development and the impact that these experiences have had upon his emotional life.

As each child passes over the threshold of his home on the way to school for the first time he carries on his back an invisible pack of troubles. Some packs are no larger than a fist. Others are so heavy that they halt his progress. The pack belies the observation that the six-year-old is as carefree as the wind.

At Play

How does one ever get a peep into that pack of troubles to understand the child of six or over? One of the most rewarding ways is to watch his play. The play life of a child between the ages of six and eight is a mirror reflecting his inner life. At

play he exposes the workings of his personal life, tackles problems of relationships, and tries to solve them. Children who cannot or do not play find it more difficult to make adjustments to their friends, to their families, to school, and to the world.

Unfortunately, he rarely plays freely in front of adults. His tenderest feelings and gravest doubts are dramatized away from the eyes of parents or teachers. The adult is often forced to take on the ignoble role of eavesdropper if he wishes to get a glimpse into the child's inner world. A wide range of play, such as games, "shows," and sports, is carried on in the presence of grown-ups, but the dramatic play which is the key to the child's emotional life is difficult to observe.

Because play has so often been thought of lightly as one of those things which children must experience before they settle down to the serious business of growing up, it has not received the attention which other aspects of child life have demanded. We know very little, therefore, about this important phase of child development. In the past twenty-five years psychiatrists have told us many things about problem children whom they have treated through "play therapy." Some of the stories can help parents and teachers understand the meaning of dramatic play, but by and large they have thrown scant light on the everyday life of the child. When one parent was told about the power of play, be it noisy, messy, disjointed, or destructive, she replied, "It can't be too good for them. They enjoy it too much."

At Home

The six-year-old's mother notices that his use of "shock" words increases. The words he tosses about are usually the toilet words that were of such great interest during the years when toilet training was at its peak. At six, he resorts to the common or non-technical forms. He loves to bandy them about like little firecrackers to see how high he can make the adults jump.

It seems to her, too, that no sooner does the child enter a room than disorder follows. Laces on shoes are either untied or close to it. The six-year-old's general appearance is untidy or even soiled. Boys' shirts have a hard time staying inside the trousers. Girls' blouses have a way of ballooning out in baggy fashion. Mother discovers that he is defiant about routines. His answers, "So what?" and "You can't make me," are threats to parental authority and sound like echoes of his three-year-old

negativism when he first learned that an explosive "No" made his mother sit up and take notice of him as a growing boy rather than as a baby.

She may discover, much to her horror, that the six-year-old pilfers. She cannot quite get herself to say "steals" because so often the six-year-old is surprised when he is accused of theft.

He is evasive or he may lie when he is faced with an accusation which may bring punishment. It is no wonder that so often in first readers the story of Washington and the cherry tree is a starred number.

He cannot always be kept to his promise. Typical of this trait is the story of a child who, when accused by his mother of breaking his word, answered, "But I have lots of unbroken words left."

She is aware of his greediness for things, his possessiveness when he gets them, and his carelessness after they are his.

He seems ready for a tug of war on big or small matters with his brothers or sisters, grandparents, and parents. This behavior is the earmark of the six-year-old: revolt from the reins of love and responsibility by which his parents hold him.

At School

The teacher sees him as one of a group of many children. She knows that six-year-olds as a group do not have a long span of concentration. They begin to wiggle and to squirm at any provocation: a loud noise, a bird on the classroom window sill, or water spilled on the floor. They laugh or talk out of turn. Some sixes find it difficult to fit into a group and sit at their desks dreaming. The teacher knows from her records that their IQ's differ. Their speed of learning varies from slow to quick. Their skills are not equal. Some children hop, skip, and play ball with ease. Others are slow. A few talk and chatter well, but most of them find it hard to put into words what they feel. Some of them are babyish in their responses and need her support in everything that they do. Others seem able to carry on by themselves when necessity demands. She knows that they tire easily and that she must keep giving them new things to do in order to hold their attention.

Some of them will love her, some will dislike her, and some—who have had unhappy relationships with others—will be suspicious. One small boy expressed these feelings about grown-ups by saying "They are nice to you to get you to do what they want,

and then they smack you down.” She knows that among them are aggressive leaders, willing followers, shy observers, creative artists, deep thinkers, and a few who are not taking part in the new life because their thoughts are at home.

She knows that being six means being weaned from home in mind as well as body. Some of her sixes will be tearful for the first few days of school. Some will be joyous and eager to soak up all new experiences. The tears or quick adjustment speak worlds about the child and his background. All of them require a show of affection from her and real interest in their tales about themselves, their parents, their sisters and brothers, their pets.

You Cannot Make Him Fit Your Pattern

Long before the baby is born, most parents have a picture in their minds of the kind of child that they are going to have. At six he may be a complete disappointment because he is so different from the dream child that they have created, and they give love or withhold it in proportion to the degree that the child fulfills their expectations. At six, too, he may fill them with anxieties about the outcome of his behavior. What with all the publicity about juvenile delinquents, maladjusted young people, and neurotic adults, their fears seem justified.



Parents begin to press and push at the child to make him fit into the picture they have painted. They want him to be superior to their neighbor's child. Mother would like him

to be a good student, have high moral principles, be polite, responsible, and well-adjusted. Sometimes mothers hold up as an example an older brother or sister, or sometimes, a younger one. Sometimes it is father, aunt, uncle, or cousin who is the paragon to be copied. A young Chinese student once observed, after spending several years in America studying schools and children, "American parents say, 'Johnny, get A's for mama's sake.'"

The unending pressure is felt when the six-year-old begins to read. The teacher pushes him, too. What is more, he feels that all the other sixes are pressing. In a frantic mood, he declares that "Everyone pushes me." Gradually he conforms, however, wherever and whenever he can, because to be out of step with his schoolmates is worse than being pressed.

Some of His Worries

His play life and his talks with his friends reveal more of his worries and his view of the world than he otherwise tells. He is not always sure that he is loved, no matter how much attention he gets. He knows that often he does not love the other members of his family, and he feels guilty about it. He is jealous of anyone who comes between him and his mother. Many six-year-olds have come reluctantly to school because they have left a newborn brother or sister at home alone with mother. The six-year-old makes it his business to notice how people who visit his home greet the baby. Visitors often pay more attention to the newcomer than they do to him. Even his father has that fault. Some six-year-olds find themselves wedged in between a baby and an older brother or sister. They resent the "model" older child as well as the "cute" younger one. Mixed feelings of love and hate find their way into his attitudes toward his schoolmates. He may fight, cry, tease, or bully them when all the time he is really wanting to do these things to his brother or sister. He justifies his behavior when his mother or teacher scolds him or asks him why he cannot do as well as his brother or sister, or carry on like his cousin. His actions may even be compared to those of an aunt or an uncle whom he knows the family does not like too much. He wonders, "Why can't I be me instead of me like someone else?"

If the six-year-old comes from a broken home, his feelings are even more mixed. He often feels unwanted, unloved, and a burden. He may be envious of his more fortunate schoolmates who come from homes where both father and mother are busy being parents. He may find it difficult to play with other boys and girls because these feelings come between him and them.

There are other emotions, too, which color his inner world. For instance, he wonders about death. By the time that he has reached the age of six, he has had some experience with death. He has seen dead birds, squirrels, dogs, or cats on the street.

Living as he does, in an automobile age, he is, perhaps, frightened by the warnings of his elders about crossing streets. "Be careful. You might get hurt or even killed!" He asks questions about this strange state. "Are the dead asleep?" If someone has told him that death is like sleep, and the child is an apprehensive child to begin with, he may not wish to fall asleep lest he die. In the biography of the young playwright, Tennessee Williams, there is a passage which describes a young child's reactions: "One night it occurred to him that falling asleep was akin to dying so for months he fought off sleep each night, holding his eyes open and staring at the windows with terrified intensity."

There are lesser fears, too, which add weight to his pack. Most six-year-olds dislike or fear change. They need regularity. When they are away from home, they may be overcome with a sudden fear that, maybe, for some reason or other, they may find no one at home on their return. Once when a child was singing "Lady bug, Lady bug, fly away home. Your house is on fire, your children may burn," a six- or seven-year-old within earshot of the jingle began to tremble and then to cry. No amount of questioning could pacify her. Finally, an older child led her to her mother. As soon as she caught sight of her home, she ran as fast as she could to the security of her mother's arms and poured out her fears. Children of this age may not like even minor changes such as rearrangement of furniture or shifts in accustomed routines. They do not seem to have a firm enough grip on reality or a sure feeling of continuity in life to accept differences in the familiar ways. An illustration of this is the delight they take in old stories read and reread.

Sex Curiosity

At six, too, they are both curious and worried about sex: physiology, sex differences, and masculinity or femininity. They are ashamed of being called "sissies" if they are boys, or "tom-boys" if they are girls. Boys spend time talking about muscles and strength, and girls discuss the place of the female. They are conscious of their parents' attitudes on the different roles of the sexes, and they develop definite feelings about the advantages of being a boy rather than a girl, or vice versa.

They reveal their state of mind by the numerous figures of the human body which they draw. At a younger age, they drew primitive nude figures but as they grow older, they dress the

figures in clothes. Their interest is centered, nevertheless, in what makes the sexes different and what men's and women's roles are.

They have been told, "Boys don't play with dolls" or "Girls shouldn't play with guns" or even "Boys play baseball," "Girls play house," and "Girls don't wear overalls." They know that fathers go out every day to a job or to an office where they work to earn money which supports the family. But many children know that mothers, too, go out to work. The picture of the masculine and feminine roles becomes blurred. The blurred picture creates confusion and even worries in the child who is trying hard to understand people in the world about him. Questions are not answered to his satisfaction. Most six-year-olds know that mothers give birth to babies and that fathers can not. Yet mothers work to earn money as well as fathers! Where is the difference? Children pursue this interest by asking "Can I marry my sister when I grow up?" or "Why can't I marry my mother or father?" The answer is often more puzzling to the child than the question because of the emotional reaction of the adult. Children wonder about marriage and dramatize it over and over again in play life.

Fears

Common fears such as fear of the dark, thunder, or lightning, the doctor, inoculations, illness, and pain are managed more easily than those relating to the interpersonal or personal life of the child. He may worry because he is a "fraidy cat" as much as he does about the thing which makes him afraid.

Many six-year-olds worry with their parents about making ends meet. Strikes, lay-offs, high cost of food, clothes, and shelter are discussed within his hearing, or if not, the child tries to listen to grown-up conversation, particularly if it has any emotional overtones. They sense anxiety in the voices of their parents. Because they have lived so short a time they have very little experience to give them the comforting knowledge that "This too shall pass." Their intense living in the present makes the worry about money matters disturbing.

Friends

The theme of the six-year-old's school life seems to be "I want a friend of my own choosing." Here among his companions in the first grade is an opportunity to find one. He has been in

competition with brothers or sisters and has had some ruffled or pleasant feelings as a result. He has played with the children of his mother's friends or those who happened to live on his block. The time has come for him to exercise his own choice.



He can pick out of this group the child who supplements him, who answers a need of his growing personality. Sometimes his mother does not approve of the boy or girl who has been elected. Frequently she thinks in long-time terms: "What kind of person is this friend going to be?" The six-year-old's friendships at this period are fleeting. His best friend today may be forgotten tomorrow.

There is the story of a little boy who asked his mother's permission to bring a friend of his, Tommy, home to lunch. His

mother was pleased that Johnny had made a friend. When Johnny arrived with his friend in tow, she discovered that Tommy was a little Negro boy. She said nothing to her son at the moment. Later on, she took the occasion to mention to him that he had not told her that Tommy was a Negro child. Johnny thought for a moment and then answered: "Next time I bring a friend home, I'll notice."

His mother may not have meant that she disapproved of Tommy but the remark itself may have made Johnny wonder about the way grown-ups think. Johnny liked Tommy. That fact was enough for him. Tommy did something for him. Tommy was more sympathetic than his brother. He was exactly his own age. He gave Johnny a feeling of being a "pretty swell kid." Tommy was a friend of his own choosing.

Mothers very often do not realize how important it is for the growing personality to have this close relationship with a child outside the family circle. They may remark, "So-and-so is dirty" or "So-and-so has no manners" or "So-and-so makes an awful racket." In their eagerness to safeguard their child from any influence which may seem harmful, they create doubts in the child

about adult judgment. Questions like "Who is so-and-so's father?" or "Where does he live?" suggest lack of insight on the part of the questioner to the child who hears them. A child may sometimes choose a friend of whom his mother or father disapproves as a gesture of rebellion or as a way of throwing off the cloak of protection which seems to be smothering him. More often his choice is one to satisfy his ego.

The child's friends are, perhaps, his most important acquisition. Our children today are often lonely. They often do not live for long periods of time in one community. In the country children travel from miles around to consolidated schools and have little opportunity to exercise their friendships except at school. Children in the suburbs may live far away from their friends and see them only by appointment. City children who live in congested neighborhoods may not be able to visit back and forth because of traffic difficulties.

The way he makes friends, his choices, and his emotions as he learns about life in a group leave deep impressions on him for all time. He becomes aware of leaders, of followers, of economic distinctions. Within the classroom, he finds a kind of caste system which he must accept. He learns that there are smart or dumb "kids," slow, medium, or speedy readers, "sissies" or "tomboys," non-conformists, aggressive, or quiet pupils. Competition enters here. The child wants a place for himself. He wants admiration. How to achieve it?

For good or ill, these experiences within the classroom and playground, the attitudes toward success which he catches from classmates and friends, have far-reaching influences in his life.

He may find that the other children laugh at him because he is too fat or too thin. When he gets up to recite or respond, he is acutely aware of his size and shape. This fact is enough to make him withdraw into himself or become belligerent or aggressive. He may lisp or stutter to his own embarrassment. A mature and successful professional man told a group once that his drive for success in life was determined by a pair of squeaky shoes which he wore to school on his first day there. The children laughed at him everytime that he moved. They tortured him about the shoes. He was small and thin, too, which gave the group additional ammunition. He never forgot. The undercurrent of his life was a need to forget the sound of those shoes.

At this very early period in school life, the six-year-olds begin

to develop ideas of what is fair and what is unfair. They define what adults call good or bad. They begin setting up "fair practices" which they apply to their teachers, parents, and to themselves. It is a way of building protection.

The child is not as carefree as the wind! Why does he appear that way? Fortunately, his cares come to the surface to make him unhappy for short periods only. The six-year-old does not retain his moods for long stretches of time. He fluctuates between long stretches of high spirits and activity and short periods of thoughtfulness. There is so much in the world around him that detracts him from his own problems. His attention may at all times be focused on what he thinks and feels, but he constantly identifies himself with others through play, so that many of his troubles are changed beyond recognition and often solved.

More space in this pamphlet has been given over to the six-year-old than to any other group because so much of what happens to him happens to sevens and eights and nines.

THE SEVENTH YEAR

SEVENS and eights are like the six-year-olds with some variations. At no time is a child completely his chronological age. He is a mixture of his past age, plus his present, with foreshadowings of things to come. The growing pains change with time or take on different intensity or even hit different parts of the developing organism. By having lived twelve months longer than the six-year-old, by having experienced more and more contact with the world and people, by having thought, having talked, and having played for a longer time, changes have occurred. He is not growing so fast as he did at six. He can even wear last year's clothing. It takes time to grow!

The seventh year, all things being equal, may be one devoted to settling the place of "authority" in the seven-year-old's life. His question, "Who is the boss?" or his accusation, "You think you're the boss!," or his direct statement, "I'm boss!," show that the seven-year-old is making up his mind about "bosses" in general.

The seven-year-old still carries his little invisible pack of troubles. He is still searching for a friend. He is still being pressed by home and school. He knows that his mother is proud of him if he reads like a nine-year-old, that his father is pleased if he

plays games or solves puzzles like a ten-year-old, and that his teacher praises him if he is like his older brother. Again we see reactions that suggest that parents love and measure him by comparison. But no matter how hard he is pressed to be older than his years, he has lived only seven.

Rebellion

He has had a year's experience at school. He can now anticipate what is going to happen there. At six, while the school experience was still new, he did not greatly question the authority of the teacher. He accepted her. At seven or perhaps eight, he tries her out or explores how far her authority reaches. He does such things as stretch his foot out into the aisle to trip a school-mate, hum, whistle, or rustle papers to distract the teacher. He may straggle in line, be late coming in from recess, annoy his neighbor, wave his hand when he has nothing to say, snap rubber bands, or throw bits of paper. Part of this behavior is attention-getting and part is a way of finding out what teacher can do to him. At six he used "shock tests." He uses "endurance tests" now.

When his mother discovers his little peccadilloes, she is often amazed. She tells the teacher that the seven-year-old is much easier to handle at home. Sometimes, however, the seven-year-old is not bold enough to try his strength against that of the teacher and he becomes "ornery" at home. The swing of the pendulum of behavior from adjustment in one spot to rebellion in another indicates that the pressures squeezing him into shape are unequal. In extreme cases, children play hookey or become truants, defying the authority of both home and school.

Ordinarily, there is more noise than substance to the seven-year-old rebellion. Parents and teachers, however, are frequently upset by this threat to their authority. They have visions of children who grow up to be law-breakers! It is only when the relationship between parents and children or school and child is unsatisfactory that the rebelliousness is a threat. The child who feels loved is more eager to be good and to stand in high favor with his parents and teachers than to be "bad."

Name-calling

Proof that sevens are merely exploring the field of relationships is the fact that they are not quite ready for real, honest-to-goodness, bloody fights among themselves. The seven-year-old

more often than the six-year-old resorts to name-calling as a weapon of defense when he plays with other children. Epithets such as "She stinks" shock parents and teachers when they hear them for the first time coming from the mouths of usually polite children. Names like Fatso, Skinny, Bug Eye, Four Eyes, and so on, are common.

Children at seven are very curious about sex and sex differences. Sometimes the curiosity results in aggressive sex play. Little girls may take off their clothes to examine one another. Boys sometimes try to pull down little girls' panties if they show beneath the dress. If they do not go quite this far, boys often call attention to the offending garment. Among themselves there is much discussion about how babies are born, and much wondering about how the baby comes out of the mother. One seven-year-old remarked: "When I was young, I thought babies were cut out of the mother. Later, I thought the baby came out when the mother went to the bathroom, then I thought the baby came from the 'belly button,' and now I don't know." The confusion indicates how often we avoid the problem of giving honest sex education. Girls and boys of seven still play together quite happily and find satisfaction in each other's company.

Tall Tales

Seven is the age of tall tales, although these are common to children of all ages. Sevens seem to need more adventure in their lives than sixes. The life of the child in our society lacks satisfying first-hand adventure even though it is full of "bought" excitement. The child sees a world of movement about him. He loves it, but he does not make sense out of the confusion. He sees cars, trucks, and buses whiz past, but he has little understanding of where they come from or their destinations. He sees his father or his father and mother go to work, but he does not see them at their jobs so that he does not share this important experience. Births, marriages, and deaths are no longer part of intimate family living. Babies are born in hospitals, grown-up relatives or brothers and sisters are married at church or at some place more spacious than the average home. And the dead are whisked off to funeral parlors as quickly as possible. The child, no matter what his age, is tantalized by the stir of excitement and emotions which these great events create, but he is not close enough to them to fulfill his sense of adventure or curiosity about life. Even

the great events of the world at large rarely touch him directly unless war comes. A synthetic world of adventure is his: radio programs to listen to, movies to attend, comic books by the score to read, trade, and reread, and books of every type. In this make-believe world, geared very much to the present, to the "here and now," the child finds substitutes for adventure. These stories which he reads, sees, or hears, spur him on to make up some of his own. The tall tale is an exaggeration of something real, or an imaginary experience, or even a kind of bragging:



"I saw a million airplanes in the sky," or "I met a fat man as big as our house," or "I knocked down two boys." When tracked down, the tale may sound like this: "I really saw two planes." "I met a fat man." "I bumped into two boys."

These tales are not lies or evasions of truth, but are reflections of emotional needs: to be big, strong, brave, free, independent, powerful. Because the seven-year-old is not ready for fist fighting—because he may still feel inferior to some children or unwanted by others—because his skills at games and at play are in the making—he makes up for his inadequacies by reading of things he would like to do but cannot, as well as by putting his inner wishes into stories of his own.

Oddly enough, at the same time that he goes off into an imaginary world of power and strength, he is demanding more and more realism in his toys. One glance at a toy shop makes an adult believe that he is seeing things out of a nightmare—from atomic bomb toys to engines that pour out real smoke, to dolls that cry, wet, and feel like babies, to replicas of American antique furniture for dolls, to elaborate electrical train systems.

Paintings often reveal this see-sawing between fantasy and reality. Boats, houses, and familiar scenes come to life in poster paints or crayons alongside fantastic designs, characters, animals, or places that exist only in imagination. Sevens also love caricatures and the grotesque. They paint and draw them.

One of the most exasperating forms of seven-year-old behavior

both at school and at home is that he seems not to hear when he is spoken to. He develops deafness to scoldings and commands. But it may not be altogether his fault. Sometimes parents catch themselves in the midst of a series of commands and questions delivered in staccato voice: "Hurry. You'll be late for school." "Have you your rubbers?" "Get your rubbers!" "Your father is waiting for you!" "Did you finish your breakfast?" "Wash your face!" "Do you have to make so much noise?" If the flow of words were recorded and played back to parents, it would make them put their hands to their ears to shut out the sound. The tirade is a combination of guidance and nagging, with emphasis on the nagging. Children learn to shut out the voices. They do not hear. If a seven-year-old feels too "hollered at," he may choose to show how he feels about the world by deciding to run away. He packs a sandwich in preparation. He may even leave a sad note for his mother to read. After all this preparation he usually ends up at a friend's home or in the park. He regrets his move to sever his family ties and returns. This little drama, half carried out as it usually is, is a bid for love and understanding. He is showing the same feelings as are expressed in the jingle: "I'll go out in the garden and eat worms."

Life with Other Seven-year-olds

He is learning more about the laws of group living at school. Group living is gregarious at this age but not highly organized. There is a leader but not a stable one. Leadership changes hands with every change in development. Sometimes the bully is the leader. At other times it is the quiet child with ideas who leads the group. Sevens are not old enough for organized, competitive games. Their skills are imperfect. They are at the peak of the dramatic play stage. Guns, airplanes, cars, blocks, dolls, paints, clay, weaving, tools, and creative outdoor materials like big blocks, sand boxes, and water are more suited to their age.

If they are pressed by over-eager fathers to play ball on a team, or learn to ride a two-wheeler before they are sure of themselves, or to indulge in any physical activity which requires coordination and strength beyond their years, they become stubborn and do not care to try at all. Some are blocked permanently. If they do carry on at a later time, they don't like the activity. The proper time for learning depends on more than age and capacity or what others do. It depends on feeling up to it.

Pets

Seven is a good age for pets. Seven-year-olds are interested in animals. They can be depended upon to take over a small portion of the responsibility. Pets give them, above all, exercise in love. At seven they are not quite firmly established in the family. They are still in the stage where they believe that love can be refused them by their parents if they are not good readers at school or if they are destructive or unruly at home. Just as the continuous search for a friend indicates their need to find someone who likes them for themselves alone, so the love the sevens get from pets belongs to them solely.



There does not seem to be too much difference between the sixes and sevens on the surface because so much that concerns the six-year-old still concerns the seven-year-old. The seven-year-old sloughs off some of his six-year-old worries and adds a few others. The seven-year-old who cannot rid himself of some of his troubles may slide back to an age which he remembers as being more comfortable and secure. He shows his state of mind by wetting himself, thumb-sucking, nail biting, masturbation, or tantrums. His behavior is a warning. The pressures are too great.

AGE EIGHT

AN eight-year-old is still carrying his pack of worries but he has adjusted himself to the load somewhat. He now knows what school life is like and what to expect of it. He knows about where he stands in school and has begun to accept it. He has begun to accept, too, the authority of school life with its rules and regulations. At this age, most children like a pretty teacher. They notice her clothes and her hair. This is evidence that at eight most children no longer think of her as a "stand-in" for mother but as a person in her own right. They discover that she may even be a friend. They know that everyone needs a friend, and many times at eight they discover that she is *it*.

Although eight-year-old humor is of the slapstick variety, the

group enjoys a teacher who can joke and laugh with them. They also respect her knowledge. They bring home tales from school which begin with "teacher said." They may even take sides with her against their parents in matters pertaining to school work. Some parents are resentful. Actually the teacher is no competitor.

The eight-year-old may have setbacks at home if another baby is on the way or has been born during the year. He may need to go through a period of demanding love from his mother and father for reassurance. He may still fight with his brothers and sisters about treatment, about possessions or privileges, but he is fortifying himself by developing interests of his own.

Collecting

Eight is an age when an allowance means independence. Playing store with fake money is a favorite of both girls and boys. Eights like to be paid for chores. They are interested in money, barter, exchange, and collecting. Sixes and sevens collect, too, but they collect in spurts and with less fervor. Bottle tops, cards,

marbles, string, pebbles, buttons, and innumerable objects become the interest of the eight-year-old. The radio programs to which he listens spur him on to eat cereal for the sake of the prize or the mask which comes with the box. Value is less important than numbers and quantity. Some eight-year-olds are interested in organizing their collections, but for the most part, the



things which they collect merely mess up their rooms.

Eight, too, is the time when girls experiment with their mother's lipstick, toilet water, hair "fixit," curlers, nail polish, and all the other gadgets of the boudoir. Boys and girls take a puff or two on cigarettes.

Curiosity

Boys of this age often compare the size of their sex organs. The boy who is made to feel inferior by his companions will not undress in front of other boys, go swimming, or expose himself in

any way. He may become withdrawn and worry. Eight-year-old girls who are dramatizing family life by putting on their mother's high heels, old hats, and carrying their purses, often stuff the bosoms of their dresses to make their appearance more realistic.

Eight-year-olds who come from overcrowded homes and who have lived too closely with adults are aware of sex life and off-color jokes which travel around from group to group. These eight-year-olds like to show off by telling what they know to more sheltered children who are curious but uninformed. They get together in little huddles and giggle, laugh, and cover their mouths with their hands. They wish to shock listeners, young and old. They want everyone to know how grown-up they are. When the newly informed children bring their information home, they discover that their parents get quite excited.

Broadening Horizons

Eight-year-olds can look back and say "When I was young." Eights are beginning to have an historic perspective. They have an increasing interest in faraway places, foreign people, and events. The eight-year-olds obtain their information both directly and indirectly. They have learned that there is a big world. The eight-year-old has had enough experiences within the family and at school to understand the relationship between his home and distant places. He now knows that the plane which flies overhead started some place and has a destination. The cars, trucks, or buses which travel past him on the road or highway are on their way from one place to another. He notices license plates, can recognize makes of cars, and identifies planes by their sound. The world beyond the horizon stimulates his curiosity. It is an ideal age for short family trips. He is not as upset by change as the six-year-old and considers a trip an adventure if he does not have to sit still too long. He tries to understand what he sees.

Books are beginning to have more meaning. Eight-year-olds can read for pleasure. The field of juvenile literature offers them a range of subjects wide enough to satisfy almost every taste from fact books about everyday things to fantasy, fairy tale, folk tale, history, biography, and special interests of every type.

Friends

The eight-year-old still searches for the special friend. At eight he holds on to his friends longer than he did at six or seven. He

can share the friend with a third child without too much pain if he has assurances that the friend still likes him best. He can play with two or three children amicably for long spells. There is still much fighting, "horse play," and yelling when they are together, but it is easier to divert them toward constructive play.

Cops and robbers, father and mother, teacher, doctor, and actor are the characters around which some of their dramatic play centers when they play together. Twosomes can carry on games like parchesi, checkers, Old Maid, and other simple card games without too much difficulty.



Ideas and Prejudices

By the time he has reached eight, he has visited about. He has become aware of differences in the way of life that he finds at his friend's home and his own. Since no two households are run quite the same way, there are many things which he can pick out for comparison. He may say "Why don't we have red drapes?" or "Mary's mother has a freezer with lots of things in it; why don't we?" or "At Johnny's house, they have candles on the table." He pushes his point even further by stating "Johnny's mother lets him go to the movies at night" or "Mary's mother lets her stay up late when she has company." He is experimenting with a device which at "teen age" he uses to his own advantage as often as possible.

At eight, he has accepted his parents' prejudices and attitudes toward other religions, economic groups, and political beliefs. He is born with no prejudices of his own. Fortunately, he has a growing sense of fair play with his enlarged interest in the world. By learning how other people feel, live, and think, he may identify himself with them. This keeps him kindly and tolerant. At eight he is still too wrapped up in himself and his family to be angry at injustice, but his sense of fair play is being developed and it helps him accept people, children, and institutions. He can learn to accept Negroes, Chinese, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Republicans, or Democrats!

AGE NINE

EIGHT does not merge into nine as easily and readily as six merges into seven or seven into eight. Nine is a kind of red-letter year, ushering in the important pre-adolescent and adolescent periods. It is a time—if the pressures have been too great—when pent-up emotions burst out into tics. Nagging, driving, setting up of high standards, pace of school work, and extra-curricular activities are the agents which set off the fuse. The trouble which was deep down inside of him now appears on the surface in the form of twitching, blinking, coughing, or shrugging of shoulders. The movement is repeated regularly and in the same form.

The nine-year-old has a great desire to be useful and needed, and to be like an adult. Yet he scurries back, over and over again, to the protection of adults. He weeps easily when he is frustrated or feels maltreated. He has a great urge to belong to a group, club, or gang of children of his own age. He likes his own sex better than the opposite sex, although there is much secret talk about girls and boys within the safety of the inner circle of a group. It is at this age that many children join the Cub Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, boys' clubs, church groups, or 4-H Clubs. Nine-year-olds have momentarily slackened their search for a friend of their own choosing. They subordinate this desire for the greater one of belonging to something bigger and more impressive than a twosome.

Group Games

Nine is ready for loosely organized group games. His skills are fairly mature, but he cannot yet take too much competition. He is upset when he is exiled from a group because he is not as good as the next one. He may retreat from active physical group life to books, movies, or comics.

Girls do more talking at this age as a group than heretofore. They learn, as one girl so aptly put it, "the gossip way." They spend hours speculating about the people in the neighborhood. They know who is going to be married, who is going to have a baby, who fights, drinks, or is in trouble.

Intellectually, the nine-year-old "feeds on everything." He is curious about what is happening in other parts of the world, in discoveries, inventions, prehistoric animals, science, movies, books, and personalities in the news.

Self-Consciousness May Block Creative Work

Nines need help at school to fulfill these special interests. Creative activities like painting, music, or writing may seem to disappear. At this time of ferment, many children become self-conscious about their efforts and stop producing. They have high standards and inadequate techniques. Some parents are disappointed when Johnny's or Mary's gift in art or music seems to evaporate. They often say "At six you did better than you do now." It is true that talent or interest may be gone permanently, but more often it reappears in maturer form than ever.

An old saying of Dr. Caroline Zachary's holds true at this stage more correctly, perhaps, than at any other time: "When they are most unlovable, they need love most, and when they seem most un-understandable, they need understanding most."

If the inner world of the nine-year-old could be probed truthfully, it would show confusion. He knows that he is still a child, yet he is aware of the grown-up world over the hill. He is devastated by worries lest freckles, straight hair, slight physique, or glasses may prevent him from becoming the kind of person he wants to be. He has heroes or she has

heroines who are ideals. Often these people are not heroic to the adult: a baseball player, movie actress, comic-book character, or local "big shot." Sometimes these heroes are symbols of defiance against parental standards whose models may be scientists, historians, artists, or successful professional people.

If a parent says that Cousin Susan is pretty as well as smart, her own Mary takes the remark as an affront and answers, "You like her better than you do me." Comparisons at any age, direct or implied, are hard to take, but at nine, they leave a more permanent impression than at a younger age. Praising any skill or accomplishment may bring forth this retort: "You're just saying that to make me feel good" or "You just say that because you are my mother or father." In other words, parents are rather



on the spot with the nine-year-old. He needs their love and understanding but he pushes aside their approaches. Old forgotten hurts are thrown up to parents. "Remember when you wouldn't let me go on the picnic. I'll never forget it." One parent put it this way: "My nine-year-old has the memory of a puppy when it comes to arithmetic and the memory of an elephant when it comes to remembering things which should be forgotten."

TEN-TO-TWELVE-YEAR-OLDS

THE ten-to-twelve-year-olds present a wide range of development and behavior. Some children are physically developed; others are trying to catch up. Some are responsible and stable; others are immature and younger in relation to their years. Girls are usually maturer than boys. Many girls are already menstruating and have well-developed bodies.

These children make a real distinction between "our" world and "yours" — child and adult. They gang up on their elders to test their own strength. At this period, the old problem of authority and its place looms large. If authority seems oppressive, they rebel. It is at this stage that so often the anti-social group leader or the so-called bad "gang" grips the imagination of the youngster. He seems almost compelled to obey the authority of the "our" world rather than the regulations of the adult world. A good group or gang is of infinite help in shaping the ten-to-twelve-year-old's attitudes. Through a "good gang" he can be lead into constructive group living with his peers: hobbies, painting, collection of records, or service. It is an age when reading is at a peak. The technique for making and keeping friends is better understood. The ten-to-twelve-year-old has a great desire to be useful or important. He shuns "baby" ways and yearns for responsibilities. Parents and teachers can take advantage of this phase of



growth by giving him scope to plan his own programs at home and in clubs, by creating opportunities for service, by introducing him to new interests, new ways of doing old things, and by accepting him both as an individual and as a member of a group.

Sex Worries

They are old enough and interested enough at this age to probe the "why" of personal relationships. Discussion about how they feel about their brothers and sisters—elaboration on conflicts with father and mother without recrimination—deeper exploration of the sex problem than at any other age in order to relieve themselves of the guilt feelings about sex play or sex practices which almost all children reaching this age have experienced—give a man-to-man quality to the adult-child relationship which this age craves. These years are, after all, a full-dress rehearsal of the more tempestuous years ahead.

This is the time when the forbidden sex words come into the vocabulary to insult the standards of parents and teachers. These, too, are a cover-all for more serious thoughts about sex and self—and can be explained and discussed if the pathway of communication between child and adult is open. Discussion about sex is more important than information.

Girls and boys do not share group life outside the school room, but love affairs do spring up between individuals. Precocious children at this age may begin to date and some have even copied the behavior of their older brothers and sisters by "going steady." Around this moot point, adults and children engage in many battles.

Desire for Adventure

This is the age which demands adventure actually and intellectually to counterbalance the ingrownness of "gang," family, and school. Broader horizons, more things to learn and to do prepare the ten-to-twelve-year-old for a richer adolescence.

Some children stand at the threshold of adolescence looking backward. They play with children younger than themselves. The other extreme—looking far beyond the horizon—rushes pell-mell into older behavior. These are the kind of children who are "too big for their britches" and need a restraining hand. They are not always able to handle the heavier responsibility

which their advanced actions demand. The middle group which likes being ten-to-twelve hews to the line of expectancy.

The nature of their reading is also important. If it is all comic books, that in itself tells a story about the child and his development. If it is too far beyond his years in vocabulary and subject matter, that fact indicates a child traveling fast along the intellectual road to maturity. Also, become acquainted with his dramatic play at this time—which may be centered around a school play, puppetry, folk dancing, a hobby, a collection, a particular interest like photography, or handcraft.

Children Are People

All of this adds up to “letting them grow as they be” if that way is good. It is not letting them grow like “Topsy” or like the weed in the garden. It does mean giving them a home with room for noise, expression of emotions friendly or unfriendly, a minimum of nagging, and guidance by love and understanding rather than by dictatorship or ambition.

It means, in addition, that school officials and teachers must create an atmosphere which encourages child development rather than the mere teaching of subject matter. That wistful complaint which the six-year-old expressed: “I get awful tired changing me” should be changed by proper help from parents and teachers to “I like to change me, the way I can be.” Change he will, because growing up means change. But how, with what pains, and at what a price are questions whose answers lie at the mercy of those who hold his destiny in their hands.

The most important idea which all material dealing with young children must emphasize is that *children need love to grow on*. No one, however, can tell a parent how to love a child, but one can, perhaps, give parents ways and means to understand their children as they grow—to realize that their children are individuals from the moment of birth, always responding to the environment in their own way.

To understand what to expect from a child at each age relieves tensions and puts parents in the proper frame of mind to accept the child as he is. Above all, understanding the stages of growth helps them to overcome the “keeping up with the Joneses” kind of competition and comparison of children which is so devastating to the child and to the parents. Next to love, understanding is the most important gift a parent can give a child.

SOME HINTS FOR PARENTS

THERE is no rule of thumb which you can use to bring up your children. There are no pat answers which can be given to solve the daily problems of living in a family. No one outside your home, no matter how learned or experienced, can give you fool-proof tools of child rearing.

As parents, you too have problems and rights. You too must develop confidence in yourself and your judgments. It is you who are face to face with your child in a particular situation. You cannot run to a book, turn to page 10, and learn what to say when Johnny or Mary does the unexpected. No writer or specialist can know what has taken place on Monday, Tuesday, or any other day when things put you on edge: the telephone calls which break into the day, the lost laundry, the blown fuse, the flat tire, the demands of the new baby, the demands of grandparents, aunts, uncles or friends. But you can use the wisdom of others, and the knowledge of those who are studying children, not as an infallible guide for on-the-spot emergency action, but for long-term guidance.

Here are a few suggestions to help you. They are not recipes like those in a cook book which, when followed carefully, give results. You modify them to fit the case. You try them out until you find the best way to help your child.

Know What to Expect Before Hand

Be prepared for questions about sex, "shockers," "tall tales," lies, or stealing. Since you know that at some time during these years your child will try you out in these matters you ought not to be caught off guard and resort to name calling: "You're a dirty boy! Nice children don't talk that way," or "That is nasty."

Time to think over how you feel about these things makes them easier to handle when they take place. You know that children have not invented sex to shock you, nor made up the words which are passed on from one generation to the next. You know that your child is not a criminal or pervert because he takes something which does not belong to him. Without preparation in your own mind about the meaning of this kind of behavior, your first impulse is to do something on the spot. With preparation, you put the brake on a hasty response and plan how to handle the problem.

"Shockers"

"Shockers" are best handled with humor and a light touch. Telling your child that you know all the words too and that most adults know them takes the excitement out of them. Tossing the words back at him is sometimes effective. Children do not like to hear you or other grown-ups use words which they know are taboo.

Questions About Sex

Curiosity about sex is always present. They ask about it at three and at regular intervals thereafter. Answers to sex questions pose a problem for you. You really need preparation. A simple, direct, honest answer without a display of shame, shock, confusion, or anger helps to give children a constructive attitude toward sex. It is well for you to remember that "attitudes are caught, not taught." If you feel the importance of healthy sex attitudes, if you want your children to make a good sex adjustment to a mate when he is grown-up, you make a great effort to develop healthy attitudes. Your child is quick to sense the way you feel, and he takes away with him the "feeling" rather than the words. It does require thought and schooling to answer questions naturally—but it can be done.

The answer you give need not be long-winded or technical. As one small boy put it, "I want to know in a word, not a speech." You should not tell him more than he wants to know at the moment. You know that he will come back time and time again for more. You may be sure, if he senses any distaste to discuss the subject, that he will go elsewhere with his questions.

Tall Tales

The telling of "tall tales" is your child's trial-and-error method of finding his way into reality. You can indicate to him with a wink, a knowing smile, or a few gay words that you have caught on to his "pretend game." In this way, you help him separate gradually fact from fancy—and even have fun doing it.

Untruths

When he lies to you, he may be afraid of something: losing your love because of what he has done or punishment for his act. Lies are often your child's reaction to too stern demands

on your part. He wants to be in your good graces always, and if he knows that he has done something "wrong," he may feel that the only way out is by telling a lie. He needs your help. If you relax your demands, make him feel sure of your love and understanding no matter what happens, and let him know



that you are willing to be patient with him, he will change slowly in his way of handling his responses. Anger and punishment do not help him. They merely make him into a more skilful liar. It takes time to remake the young tale teller into a truthful little citizen.

Stealing

Your child may never steal anything, but you never know. It is wise to be prepared in your mind about your own reaction in case he does slip. When it happens, your first impulse will be to punish him drastically. You can adopt a calmer approach if you are not caught napping. Usually the incident is brought about because there is not enough adventure in your child's life. Some children steal to buy friendship. They take money to buy candy to treat their friends. They may even steal because they do not feel loved. Almost every child has tried it.

A small boy told his mother, "I just escaped being a juvenile delinquent." He then related to her his adventure at Christmas time. He went with two other boys to the local 5-and-10-cent store to steal. The store detective spotted them and demanded to see their money. He had money. The detective did not detain him. His companions were taken to the office and thoroughly frightened. The boys were lonely. They lived sheltered, uneventful lives. The parents of the boy who told the story realized his position and made valiant efforts to take him on short trips, bring other children into the home, and in every way give him more things to do and more attention.

Keep Talking Things Over Together

Reading stories to your child, long after he has learned to read by himself, is one way to have little "talk fests" which lead to understanding. You must plan to be able to take time out of a busy day to read. The hour before bedtime is a period when it is easy to share confidences. It is true that there may be dirty dishes in the sink, mending to do, and a hundred tasks waiting to be tackled, but this time is a precious investment. It pays off in dividends long after your child is grown up.

At this time you have an opportunity to talk over problems which relate to your child but which come from the story. You can help him obtain insight into his own behavior indirectly. It gives you an informal, unpreachy way to guide him.

You can talk over the way he feels about his sister or brother, his jealousy, love, and even hate. You can explain to him why he does not tell the truth at times. You can relieve his fears about death, illness, money, and the other insecurities which trouble him. You can tell him stories out of your own past which show him that you, too, went through many of the same experiences which he is living through.

There are other ways you can use to keep the avenues of communication open. You can give your child a place of his own to play in, and you can go beyond this to encourage play, even though it is often a noisy, dirty, highly emotional activity.

Encouraging Dramatic Play

Through play children work out their own problems. Dramatic play is a child's way of bringing to the surface his ideas

of the world and how it works. You encourage play when you provide space even if it is a small corner of a room, when you give him a place to keep his toys even if it is a painted orange crate, and when you present him with a few simple toys and material. You can learn more about your child as he plays than you can from his words.

Sharing Experiences

You may think that you are making dramatic play possible by giving your child many toys and "gadgets." Toys are merely tools. Experiences shared with you are the fiber of play. A child who goes to the garage with his father, helps him cut the grass, paints the cellar, or works at the bench with him, has more play content than the child who has a closet full of playthings. And the girl who helps her mother in the kitchen, the garden, the laundry, or at the store is getting richer play material than the girl with a room full of dolls.



Gifts Not a Substitute for Love

A story which illustrates this point was told by a bewildered father. He was a very busy man who was seldom at home. His wife was busy managing a large estate. One day the father dashed into the store of a small-town merchant with whom he was friendly and demanded that the man help him buy a pony and a collie dog for his seven-year-old's birthday the following day. The man protested that there was not enough time. The father insisted. At the end of a long arduous day, a pony and dog were found.

The mother in the meantime had bought the child a fine solid gold ring.

The birthday celebration was really a party for the parents' friends who expressed great admiration for the expensive gifts.

The seven-year-old was found weeping. "My father and mother did not even buy me a toy." He was saying in a round-about

fashion that his parents had bought him presents which represented money but they had not given of themselves.

Don't Make Too Many Rules and Regulations

Your children want rules, laws, and regulations, but they like the "rubber band" type which can be stretched a little but not broken. You cannot afford to be spineless or afraid of your children. You must know how to compromise gracefully, be firm without rancor, be fair, and even look the other way sometimes to sidestep an unimportant issue.

Take for example the matter of cleanliness, bathing, and clothes. Don't permit any of these matters to become a tug of war to see who wins. You can come to terms with dignity so that both you and your child are satisfied. You can say, "Johnny, if you wash your hands and face when you come to the table for meals, and take a shower before your bedtime, I won't bother you the rest of the time," or "If you wear your good clothes when company comes, I won't pester you about your messy dungarees at other times."

Sometimes you make the rigid rules more with an eye on your neighbors or relatives than on the welfare of your child. Rules should be examined periodically to see if they still have meaning. Rules which seem fair to children can be enforced better than rules made for the benefit of others.

Help Children Understand Authority

Rules, regulations, and authority are confusing. There are so many authorities: God, parents, teachers, and laws. You can point out to your children that you as parents are subject to authority too! "Daddy does not drive past a red light or park any place he wishes," or "Mother can't go into her neighbor's garden to pick vegetables."

You can tell him about your "boss" if you work for one. You are not exempt from rules. If you brag about "getting away" with something, be sure your child is not within earshot. He reasons correctly: If you get away with it, so can he.

As children develop their sense of fair play, they begin to understand the need for laws both outside and inside the home. They are quick to sense abuses of authority. They distinguish between authority and force. "Just because you are bigger, doesn't make you right," is not an unfair observation.

Let Him Be as He Grows

Finally, the best guide you can use to solve problems is to let your child develop to the fullest and, as he says, "Let me grow as I be." By knowing what to expect but not expecting more than the possible you can help your child develop. You cannot give him more intelligence than he was born with, more talents than he has, or more beauty than he inherited. No pressure, nagging, force, or punishment can change him into your dream child. You can help to make the most of what he has. He can be helped to grow, not painlessly, for growth brings pain with it, but without too much damage. Accepting him for what he is and loving him too, creates an atmosphere in which to weather the storms of growing up.

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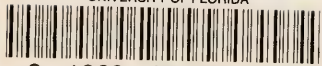
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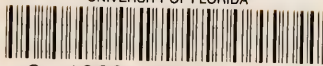
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