7th grade teacher sees connection between the shift from concrete to abstract thinking and 'tween-age conflicts

7th Grade Drama 'Tweens: What's It All About?

The Impact of Brain Development on the Lives of 7th Graders

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As a seventh grade teacher/advisor in a K-8 independent girls' school, I have been intrigued by the amount of drama that surfaces in the lives of seventh graders. This drama occurs not only in their academic world, but also in their personal relationships. Seventh graders are transitioning from the world of concrete thinking to abstract thinking, and I believe that this shift in thinking skills not only impacts them academically, but affects their friendships as well.

Much of the research on the ways brain development affects children academically and emotionally still refers to the work done by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who began his work in the 1920's. Piaget identified various rungs on the developmental ladder as individuals climb up to the highest stage which he calls the "Formal Operational Stage." According to Piaget, children generally begin to transition into this stage around the age of 12 (seventh grade). Before that time, the frontal lobes of the brain are not developed enough to handle more abstract thinking and analytical skills.

Piaget theorized that children from the ages of 7-11 are in the "Concrete Operational Stage." In this phase, children are very literal - referring to actual physical objects, or events in their thinking. They tend to be egocentric, often bringing topics back to themselves, are comfortable memorizing facts, and tend to see and focus on only one solution to a problem. Academically, students can take in information, but aren't as easily able to reflect deeply about it or to generalize from one situation to another.

This concrete approach to the world continues until around the age of 12 or so. At that time the child's mind starts to work on a higher level of abstraction, Piaget's "Formal Operational Phase." This shift is contingent on a physical component, the development of the frontal lobes of the brain. The frontal lobes enable skills such as taking initiative, analyzing the steps of a problem, generalizing from one situation to another, planning ahead, and discussing various solutions. As development continues, children start to see the implications of their actions, and can brainstorm more potential solutions to problems.

With the onset of abstract thinking, students begin to depend less on the visual, concrete world, and how it affects them. Rather, they begin to look outside themselves and their physical world to see that other people may have different viewpoints, and everything is not as simple as they once thought.

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Anyone who has spent any time around seventh graders knows that friendships play a key role in their lives. In *Field Guide to the American Teenager*, author Mike Riera states, "If children, roughly eleven years or younger, were asked to whom they would turn if they had a problem, most would respond, in order, parents, teachers and friends. If a teenager were asked the same question, the order would be completely reversed – friends, teachers, and parents."

I have noticed that as the year progresses, the topics and depth of our discussions change. If this happens in advisory groups, it is likely to happen among friendship groups, too. In addition, the types of activities friends enjoy may change. Seventh grade students have told me that when they were younger (6th grade and below), much of their time with friends centered on actual events such as play dates, skating, etc. They say that now they don't necessarily make solid plans other than just getting together, or possibly connecting online or on the telephone. The level of intimacy increases. They talk about events or conflicts at school, teachers, actors, musicians, books, music, and, of course, their "crushes." I suspect that now they don't require "concrete" events to feel a connection with each other. They are not interested in only themselves, but find it intriguing to discuss others as well.

Unfortunately, this development isn't necessarily linear, and these fluctuations can create the "drama" we often see in school. Children can be developmentally ready to reach into the abstract in one area, but not so ready in others. One day students may need to retreat to the "concrete" to get a break from their newly complex world, thus yesterday's events may be perceived differently today. A parent told me a story about a huge argument her daughter got into with some longtime friends. When she asked her daughter what the argument was about, she said it was hard to say, and she wasn't really sure anymore.

I think the developmental shift may be part of the reason why it was unclear. One day the cause of a conflict seemed clear and defined. The next day, the reason became fuzzy, although the feelings of discomfort and hurt remained. Often girls avoid dealing with the conflicts, and hope they will just go away. Sometimes one of the girls tries to express her frustration to her friend(s). I believe this can work if both parties are at the same developmental place, but it can become a problem if a more concrete-thinking child can't see how her behavior may contribute to the situation, and therefore is unable to negotiate a compromise.

Another parent mentioned that one day her daughter was distraught about a conversation she had with a teacher, but when her mother brought it up a few days later to see how her daughter was feeling about it, her daughter not only denied the importance of the confrontation, she denied ever having the feelings she shared on that day. I don't think her daughter was lying. I think she viewed it differently, being caught in a developmental shift.

The shift from concrete to abstract thinking may not play out in the same way for every child. I have observed abstract-thinking students struggle with longtime friends who want to remain a small group, and want to keep the friendship as it has always been. It is a painful process. The more abstract-

thinking girl wants to expand her circle of friends, yet she doesn't want to hurt her friend's feelings. A girl who is still steeped in concrete thinking may feel threatened and confused when her longtime friend suggests venturing into new friendship territory. She may be hurt because she is no longer the center of attention.

On the other hand, it can also be comforting to have an old friend as one enters the new world of the abstract. On class trips, I have noticed that some friends insist on sitting together on the bus ride. Once we arrive at our destination, the same two friends may separate and go their own ways, then reunite on the bus ride home. As these seventh graders try on new behavior and experience new thought processes, they still need to feel safe by retreating to the familiar world of the "concrete," symbolized by their longtime friends. Old friends can offer a respite from a scary, yet exciting new world where the rules of engagement are changing.

As children develop and begin to see more of the bigger picture, they may also become more aware and intolerant of behavior that they now consider immature, or inappropriate. When I spoke with our school counselor about this, she noted that the ability to abstract allows and encourages growth, and may bring out, or help to develop different qualities in a student. As students begin to see the bigger picture and expand their ideas, shefeels they also begin a journey toward in-dependence, beginning to have more of a sense of self. They begin to become more self-reflective, which impacts the way they make decisions and develop values. This can affect whom they choose for friends. And as students begin to see more than one problem-solving option, negotiation and compromise take on a new meaning which can impact the way students deal with tension and conflict resolution.

During those times of tension, conflict, and drama among students, immersing them in a concrete activity seems to help. My school's sev-enth grade goes on a three-day camping trip every October. Without fail, a friendship conflict develops the last night, the night of the bonfire. Prior to the bonfire itself, each advisory creates a skit revolving around some aspect of the trip. One girl gets angry because the advisory group, or one of her friends in the group, ignores her skit idea. As all of the advisories regroup for the skit performances, the student with the hurt feelings stands on the fringe of the entire group, looking rejected, sullen; often she's crying. She feels threatened, so she retreats and hopes for sympathy from others. This continues as the advisories perform the skits.

When the skits are over and

it's time to make s'mores, all conflict ends and everything is forgiven. I have observed this scene over and over. I think this ability to listen to and accept new ideas without feeling threatened is developmental, and that some members of the advisory group are on a more abstract level than others. Luckily, the playing field evens out again as students begin to roast marshmallows. Food is a great equalizer.

When more than food is called for, I've found that determining where a student is developmentally can eliminate lots of frustration on my part. It's been my experience that the more the student responds, "I don't know," to my questions, the more concrete she tends to be. For example, a student told me a story about why she'd been unable to do her homework. I called her home for another reason, and inadvertently discovered that the elaborate story she created had never happened. When I confronted her, our conversation went something like this.

Me: "Why didn't you just tell me you didn't do the homework?"
Student: "I don't know."
Me: "Didn't you think I'd figure it out?"
Student: "I don't know."
Me: "Could you tell me about your thought process when you came up with the story?"
Student: "No, I guess I didn't think it through that well."

Clearly that conversation wasn't going too well. I started to ask more concrete questions.

Me: "What did you think would happen to you if you didn't do your homework?"
Student: "I'd get in trouble."
Me: "What does it mean to get in trouble?"

Student: "I'd get a 'notice'." (Our school's disciplinary form.)
Me: "What is the worst thing about getting a 'notice?'"
Student: "I'd get in trouble at home."
Etc.

It was much easier to have this conversation, and to come to some kind of understanding when we were both on the same "concrete" level. It was a good lesson for me, and I've used that strategy over and over since that time.

I have taught grades 3-12 in public schools, private schools, coed schools and now in an all-girls school; and I have to say that I find seventh graders to be the most challenging students to understand. Having said that, I really enjoy them. One day we can talk about how to achieve world peace, and the next day we are discussing why it would be fun to go to Hogwarts like Harry Potter.

The more I have learned about the brain development taking place in 7th graders, the more it has helped me look at them and their daily struggles in a different way. I do not believe the shift from concrete to abstract thinking alone explains all behaviors of seventh graders. In addition to fluctuating hormone levels, students are undergoing many other biological and physical changes that impact them greatly. And add to that, the shifting nature of schoolwork and friendships.

So, why all the drama? It's how a 12-year old deals with all the changes happening to her. It's about the way all these changing pieces combine and interact on a particular day. Each day, this combination may manifest itself in a different way, helping to create the drama that we witness as we try to understand our students.