

## The Six-Year-Old Child

Even before a child's sixth birthday, parents may begin to notice some surprising changes. Six-year-olds may exhibit a new kind of restlessness, may become suddenly clumsy or indecisive, and are often resistant and argumentative. They appear to be testing the established boundaries with new vigor. It may be more accurate to say, however, that they are really testing their new selves.

Thinking is beginning to awaken in the last one-third of the first seven-year cycle of development, (See the Introduction to this series). If we remember this and we realize how powerful thinking can be, we can imagine that the child's accustomed way of being in the



world could be thrown into chaos. The six-year-old is exploring this new capacity of thinking and trying to integrate it with what is more familiar and comfortable, and in the process, everything has to be reorganized!

Ideas are emerging and the six-year-old may strongly identify with an idea as "my idea," and ride it like a wave toward a growing sense of independence. Parents are no longer the constant center around which the six-year-old revolves, but the child is becoming his or her own center. In the same vein, six-year-olds also tend to exaggerate and want to do things that they are not yet able to do.

At the same time, six-year-olds are more sensitive and vulnerable than indicated by their outward behavior, especially when their ideas do not bear anticipated fruit. They can be silly, emotionally volatile,

easily fall apart, or have trouble completing a given task. They may need to talk about what happened to them during the day at meal times or before bed.

They need, above all, to be recognized as the same child, yet NOT the same child as they once were. They need us to see them with fresh eyes and be sensitive and understanding of the transformation that they are undergoing. This does not mean that parents should let go of their expectations and boundaries. It means that we need to hold on to them in a different way.

Because of their increased capacity for mental picturing, six-year-olds are ready for chapter books, like *Winnie-the-Pooh* or *Mother West Wind and other Stories* by Thornton Burgess. The humor and pathos of these characters and their stories are warmly

comforting and ring true for the six-year-old.

Many six-year-olds actually seem to embrace and play with the chaotic element of this developmental reorganization. This can be difficult for the rest of the family. How we respond can make a difference in how gracefully and quickly they move through this period of change.

**The main challenge for the parents of the six-year-old** is how to keep an even keel and a steady hand on the tiller of family life while in the uncharted and choppy waters of this period, often called “the first adolescence.”

As already mentioned above, unqualified acceptance of and real interest in the emerging aspects of the six-year-old will mean that he or she does not need to keep raising the “notice-me flag” over and over again. **Six-year-olds also need protection** from their self-initiated chaos. By upholding the consistency of their expectations, parents provide dependable ballast that can mitigate the child’s feeling of upheaval.

Six-year-olds will cooperate if they are given simple, appropriate reasons for doing so; if requests are communicated with a good dose of humor; if decisions are framed so that they are not an either/or or a yes/no situation. Generally speaking, direct confrontation is not usually an effective strategy. Six-year-olds need some breathing space to process the situation and to feel that they are cooperating out of their own will.

**Keeping a positive attitude**, although not easy, will help both parent and child navigate more successfully. Modeling the behavior and communications that we want our six-year-olds to choose is still incredibly important.

**Finding appropriate channels for the increased energy levels** and restlessness is also helpful. Six-year-olds are duly impressed with skills of adults in homemaking, building, crafts and gardening activities. All of the purposeful activities that were suggested for the five-year-old still hold keen interest for the six-year-old. The six-year-olds, however, are more capable and will be able to do more on their own than when they were five and will respond well if the adults with whom they are working notice their increased skills. Time outside in nature is also a healing and helpful influence during this period of development.



**The gift of parenting a six-year-old is the strengthening of one's own calm center** in order to support your child as he or she navigates the changes that herald the end of the first seven-year cycle of growth and development. You may begin to notice a calming down after 6 1/2 , as your child consolidates these changes and prepares for the new phase of development that begins around the seventh year.

### **Links**

[J. Almon, "First Grade Readiness,"](#) from *First Grade Readiness (Second Edition)* (WECAN 2009)

[N. Blanning, "Seeing the Wholeness of the Child"](#) from *You're Not The Boss of Me! Understanding the Six/Seven-Year-Old Transformation* (WECAN 2007)

[R. Ker, "Observations of the Six-Year-Old Change,"](#) *ibid.*

### **Books**

[N. Blanning, ed., \*First Grade Readiness \(Second Edition\)\*](#) (WECAN 2009)

[R. Ker, ed., \*You're Not the Boss of Me! Understanding the Six/Seven-Year-Old Transformation\*](#) (WECAN 2007)

R. Louv, *Children and Nature: Making Connections* (The Myrin Institute 2014)

M. Rawson & M. Rose, *Ready to Learn: From Birth to School Readiness* (Hawthorne Books 2002)