

The Class 6 Child

Children in Class 6 have turned or are soon turning twelve, and twelve is the beginning of a new phase for them – puberty, or what Steiner called Earth maturity. The last big upheaval for these children was when they turned nine and became disconnected from the paradise that is early childhood with its strong connection to the natural world. Since then their feet have become firmly planted on the ground and they have become aware of their separation from the rest of the world. They are now their own individuals, awake to their surroundings.

Their imaginative, pictorial thinking has been changing with the ability to form abstract concepts. They have become almost doggedly rational in their thought processes as they try to grapple with more intangible ideas. As twelve-year olds they have two new challenges - their bodies and the demands of their social and school interactions.

Class 6 children are becoming fascinated with how things work, why things happen the way they do and what the laws are that govern their world. They no longer accept things just as they are, nor do they accept the sovereignty of adults. They like the chance to debate thorny issues such as justice and loyalty. Their thinking is still very practical however, so the cause and effect of history, human motivation or observable scientific experiments suits them well.

To have practical experiences of the world is important for them as they try to make it their own. They love acquiring new skills and proving to themselves how competent they can be. They learn much from the lives of other people and are captivated by the struggles experienced by others. They benefit from learning through biographies how other people have overcome adversity- it's nice to know it is possible, in what must seem to be an increasingly scary world, to live honourably. The Class 6 child is searching for meaning in their own existence, and ways in which they can contribute to the welfare of the Earth and humanity. This interest brings them not only a stronger awareness of social issues, but its flip side is the interest in clothes, money and the need to conform to adolescent culture.

It is normal for the change from childhood to puberty to be a trying time for children and for those around them. It is a developmental stage however and if they don't go through it now, they will experience difficulties later. This can be a time of rifts between parent and child, teacher and student, friend and friend. They can become knowing in their divisiveness and need a sense of consistency from the adults in their lives. They are experimenting with what it is to be them and their new-found skills of logic. They need space to express themselves and their personal feelings and to exercise their own judgments. We have to work towards them coming to independent conclusions and being self directed. They need to have their thinking challenged as they will often take things literally.

What we mustn't do is take anything these Class 6 children do or say personally! They need to deviate from the path and we need to moderate their excesses. They need to assert themselves, find the boundaries and push against them. We need to hold those boundaries steady for a little longer and make sure that when they transgress we condemn their actions, not

them as people. We can no longer appeal to them to be good for our sakes, and we should avoid giving way to subjective emotion. Now is the time to change tactic and resort to reasoning, to explain the cause and effect of a situation. If in doubt it is better to under react rather than over react. They are likely to be defensive and intense. They are hungry for experiences, for strong sense impressions. It is easy to arouse their disgust or their craving for more. They will start to express everything as likes and dislikes. They are hungry for noise, visual stimulus, smells and extremes in taste. They are developing a strong instinctive desire for pleasure.

Sometimes they still yearn for the paradise they have so recently lost and in many ways, they really appreciate being confined in childhood just a little bit longer. They realise that they don't have much longer as children and are more often than not actually hugely grateful when you insist on their retaining their childhood a little longer.

Steiner designed the first Waldorf school curriculum to sit comfortably with the picture he derived of child development through spiritual, scientific study and the observation of children. The Class 6 curriculum is designed to fit with the need's peculiar to the twelve-year-old. It tries to compensate, as they mature, for their poorer inner life and to re enliven their imagination. It awakens them to the wonderfully factual world of phenomenally based science- they experience how heat rises, see the effect of light being broken by a lens, move iron fillings with magnets record the weather, touch and hold the physical earth and learn secrets from beneath the ground. Class 6 is also a Roman year with all that entails- world dominance, the move from ancient to modern history, the need for laws and debate. The Romans were administrators and organisers, they were industrious, and aggressive. They have much to teach us especially if we are twelve.

The children have opportunities to debate life issues this year as they begin weekly philosophy lessons. They have already experienced how working with their will and their hands they can transform wood in woodwork classes to take on a useful and pleasing shape. This ability to transform things is a very human attribute. They learn to work for others as well as themselves making dolls for the next Class 1 children, fundraising for good causes and taking more responsibility around the school. They develop a sense of the necessity for the bigger picture, for going beyond themselves. We want them to become more empathetic and compassionate -it is often stories that can bring this about. They begin to realise that life is unpredictable and goes up and down but if they are going to be able to go forth in the freedom to be a fully functioning human being they need to retain the image that life is ultimately good.