



Hanging On For The Ride

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During an assembly at school one day, I was watching three middle school girls perform a song. Although they were the same age and had matching outfits, the similarities ended there, since they displayed three very different body types and three very different ways of projecting or not projecting their voices and self-identities into the room.

In my 7th grade science classroom, more differences are often evident, even to the casual observer. There are different levels of self-confidence, different levels of conceptual understanding, and different levels of comfort with taking risks. If you were to listen in on student-parent-teacher conferences or watch athletic events, even more variety would be revealed. And yet all these students under observation would be in the same grade! Variety is the challenge and the spice of teaching this age.

The 7th grade year is one of intensive and far-reaching change. Major transitions occur in all areas of the student's life; waves of academic, psychological, social, and physical changes inundate our students and through them, their teachers, their parents, and everyone else in their lives. Self-concept (who I am) and self-esteem (what I think of who I am) emerge and evolve, and students continue on their quest for discovering their own identities and where they might have a meaningful place in their family, their school, and the greater communities around them.

One of the defining characteristics of 7th grade students is a pervasive narcissism, a total preoccupation with the self that evokes both awe and exasperation from surrounding adults. After describing several other aspects of students this age, I will spend some time holding up this narcissism and examining it from several angles, including the idea that it may actually serve some purpose and is not just nature's way of torturing parents and teachers.

Physically, 7th graders exhibit a huge range of appearances and skills. One boy might look like the captain of a high school water polo team while another still bears striking resemblance to his 5th grade picture. Often the tall boy will grow 5 or 6 inches over the summer, while the short kid gains maybe an inch. Obviously these differences can be dangerous for fragile self-concepts, as they create abundant teasing opportunities. The huge physical gamut extends to the girls as well, and sometimes causes even deeper issues. Whereas the largest discrepancies in boys tend to be found in height and physical prowess, the most obvious differences in girls are sexual. Some girls are completely flat-chested, while others are cup size C and sporting substantial cleavage. Some have curvy hips and others don't. Dress codes become more difficult when a shirt that looks elementary-school innocent on one girl is practically X-rated on another of the same age.

The mere physicality of the body certainly pushes its way into the mind of most 7th graders. Science classes about human systems are very popular, and students ask lots of questions. They are both fascinated and repulsed by the "grosser" aspects of themselves (peeing, burping, sweating, etc.) and appreciate straight answers by unflappable teachers. Their own bodies are laboratories for exploration, and they gravitate to

any activities which involve physical movement, from orienteering practice, to role playing, to walking around campus looking for a flower about which to write a poem. They often have to drink and pee a lot, or at least they need to leave the classroom under those pretenses. Perhaps the need to have a mental break or to have some physical activity is the real reason. I have had multiple students, mainly boys, who apparently needed to go to the bathroom about 5 minutes into every assessment I gave, and only then could settle into their work.

Academically, by the time the end of the year rolls around, most 7th graders have at least started the transition from concrete to abstract thought, and many of them have been operating in this new mode of thinking for several months. Different kids pass through this transition at different points during the year, and doing different types of activities. Some discover it during investigative science labs, others while doing math or history, or creating short stories. Regardless of the means to abstract thought, the end is the same: a student whose mind is starting to explode with new questions and new ways of seeing the world, both around and inside of him or her. Watching this transition is one of the great joys of teaching this grade, and it influences more than just their academic performance. 7th graders start to think differently about their families, their friendships, and world issues, often being able to truly self-reflect for the first time.

While abstract thought is developing, however, students often have a hard time drawing connections which are obvious to adults, especially adults in schools. “What do you mean we have to write an essay (or do math problems) in Science class?” “I don’t see what math has to do with real life.” “Why do we have to study other people’s religions?” “Do we have to use spelling and grammar and all that stuff even though this is a History paper?” 7th graders often have a hard time merging ideas from different parts of their day, and yet they seem surprised and delighted if teachers point out the connections. One of the coolest results from a recent collaboration between myself (a science teacher) and my English teaching colleague was to ask the students what a certain root word or prefix meant and to watch the pause-revelation-exclamation phenomenon when they realized they just learned that next door. Neato.

With the advent of abstract and reflective thought comes the subjectivized reality characteristic of the adolescent mind. What they imagine becomes real to them, which leads to intense self consciousness. I am so focused on my body that everybody else must be, too. Many students find it startling (and rather freeing) when I point out that each student spends about 95% of his or her time thinking about him or herself, which leaves almost no time for thinking about what’s going on with anyone else. So even though you are convinced I am looking at/thinking about/evaluating you, chances are I am not. 7th graders often develop or refine the idea of an imaginary audience (“Everyone is looking at me.”) and the idea of a personal fable (“No one can understand me, no one has ever felt the same way or had the same experience.”). These internal constructs signal the start of recognizing the separateness between self and others. More thoughts on this later.

7th grade is also a time of shifting sands on the social front. Old friendships sometimes seem stale or boring, while exciting newer ones become very deep very quickly, only to fall away a few months later. Most students have an awareness of the increasing complexity and fragility of the social scene. Cliques, gangs, and powerful social leaders arise. One student remarked that “all it takes is one popular person to not like you” and you are on the outside. Other students have a noticeable lack of awareness and suffer from missing social cues or engaging in off-putting behaviors such as bragging, straying too far off topic during a class discussion, or making cutting remarks like “that’s so dumb” or “that’s so easy” when other students struggle or ask questions. Along with recognizing the more complex social scene at school, 7th graders can also start to realize this type of thing in other settings, including high schools and the world of adults. One student who had tired of the extensive and exhaustive high school admission process common to private middle schools remarked that applicants just had “to go and smile like we care.” He had realized that a certain amount of the interviewing and application process was basically schmoozing.

7th graders claim to want to be true to themselves socially, but if someone else is too different or is different in the “wrong” way, there can be significant social consequences. Students will say “everyone should just be

themselves”, but there is a double standard and danger if “yourself” is too different. Therefore, a student has to find the right balance between distinguishing him or herself, but not too much and in just the right ways. One girl remarked about another, who often dressed a little uniquely, “She tries to stand out, like by what she wears.” If the adventuresome individual is a member of the “in” crowd, this is a compliment. If she isn’t, then the comment is more of a judgmental put-down.

Along with the increasingly complex social networks and unspoken agreements comes the increased jockeying for position. Much of these social negotiations take place outside the classroom, on playgrounds, in lunch lines, in after school on-line chat rooms. I once walked behind three 7th graders on a hike, and witnessed the very obvious attempts by a student of lower social status to insert himself into the conversations of the other two students. The boy of lower status found himself walking just barely a step behind and in between the other two, and I watched him repeatedly push himself forward and between the other boys, speaking loudly on their topic of conversation. He was physically and verbally jockeying for position. This went on for the entire hike (about an hour), and must have been exhausting.

Similar plays to advance social status can also be seen in the classroom. Students speaking louder than one another, interrupting one another, or trying to gain status by physical posturing or by gaining proximity to something else (the popular girl, the dangerous lab equipment, the most comfortable seat) are all examples of jockeying for social position. My classroom has nine tables, each for a pair of students. In one section of only 17 students, the (popular) girl seated by my seating chart at a table by herself was called “loser” by another boy in the class - jokingly, but not really. Her isolation was perceived as undesirable and was somehow translated into a personal failure on her part, even though I was the one who created the seating chart. Observations such as this one often inform my future decisions; I need to make sure that whoever has the table to him or herself can handle the social consequences. Putting an already socially challenged or isolated student at a table by himself would probably not be the wisest decision on my part, and I should be prepared, regardless of the social status of the student, to help offset the possible negative social impact by intentionally pointing out the advantages of having one’s own table (more space, never has to move for a test or quiz when I ask them to spread out, no one bothering their stuff, etc.).

7th graders often feel the need to explore new self-concepts. Students of mine often come in one day with completely different colored hair, or a totally different style, or distinctively different clothing, and my job is to notice but not make a big deal of it, remaining interested but steady. Their peers will give them plenty of drama and more or less acceptance, usually based on the social position of the experimenter. My reaction demonstrates that I notice the student, and offers acceptance without playing into the drama of the age group.

In addition to distinguishing themselves from their peers and from their former, younger selves, students often want to be different and differentiated from siblings. At one parent-student-teacher conference with a boy who had a “star” older sister, a passing reference was made to her, and I, being new to the school and never having taught or even heard of the sister, remarked offhandedly, “Oh, you have a sister?” The mother told me later this comment made a huge difference in her son’s relationship with me since he was always compared to his sister by other teachers. He thought it was great I didn’t even know she existed. Kids often choose a different realm than siblings for their own pursuit of excellence: one’s an athlete, one’s a musician; this one’s good at math, this one’s good at poetry; etc.)

These students not only explore new appearances and avocations, they also will try out different stereotypical adult behaviors or roles: the nurturing caretaker, the taskmaster, the sensitive male. One boy in my dance club was constantly falling on one knee to ask his partner to dance, even though all the students present were there for that specific purpose and it was a structured, choreographed piece. Perhaps in observing this behavior elsewhere, he identified it with older, more mature, more confident males, even though it appeared rather silly (not to mention potentially annoying to his dance partner) in this specific context.

In the midst of physical, social, and academic change, 7th graders need adults to be ports in the storm. They need parents and teachers to provide continuity and consistency, and one of the best attributes of a 7th grade teacher is to be authentic. All children need authenticity, but 7th graders, who are seeking after their own identities in new and very purposeful ways, are especially appreciative of adults who are themselves and who are comfortable with themselves. They see through false praise, ill-prepared lessons, and white lies with amazing acuity.

By being authentic, teachers provide the steady, even line that runs across the tumultuous graph of a student's emotional state. 7th graders are notoriously moody, both the boys and the girls, and the shifting social scene adds to the frequency and severity of the highs and lows. The more a teacher can maintain a solid, consistent, and clear set of expectations regarding behavior, academic performance, and interpersonal interactions, the better. Even if kids feel their world is unraveling at the seams, when they come into my classroom they know where they sit, that they will get clear instructions about the week's work, that I expect them to be civil to one another, and that I will be fair in listening to all sides in dealing with any sticky issues.

The art of listening and the practice of being just, or fair, are very important. There are always times to make exceptions and to not make exceptions, and it is usually an extremely valuable learning experience for the student if your thoughts leading to a decision are clearly explained. The students want reasons for everything, then they tend to go along with you. They need to feel genuine respect from you and are very aware of perceived unfairness. Generally, if reasoning is explained, they're ok with whatever the decision turns out to be.

Our students live in a world of extremes, a world that is just starting to show them snippets of what is in between; there is a lot of black and white, with the occasional mind-blowing gray thrown in. With the extremes go the dramatics. It's quite common to have one student be very hyperactive and "up" one day (or hour) and despondent, "it's the end of the world" the next. Their language reflects these extremes: "loser," "you suck," "Oh, my God, I'm gonna fail!" "That's the [hardest test, funniest thing, etc.] that I've ever seen!" Due to general sensitivity and the wide range of their emotions, 7th graders tend to panic easily. They need calm adults to remind them this is not the end of the world, that they really can do this task, that they should wait and see how they do on the NEXT quiz before freaking out about failing the class.

Many people who work with this age group routinely comment on the line the students walk between the blossoming of their eventual adulthood and the end of their own childhood. The students themselves are quite aware of this transition and the emotional struggles that often accompany it, and usually are quite willing to engage in open discussion on the topic. They still sleep with teddy bears but want to wear lipstick and revealing clothes. They love playground equipment for small children but want to tackle the most dangerous ski runs. They are sometimes torn at times of intense emotion by still wanting you to envelope them in a bear hug but being afraid of how that would be perceived by their peers. Some cling to the vestiges of babyhood through their patterns of speaking and their immaturity of thought, while others forge ahead with sophistication and maturity that makes the world around them raise its eyebrows. There is no magic formula for dealing with this duality; each student must figure it out on their own. As for teachers, we need to walk the line with them, intuiting where they are at any given moment, and letting them know that that place is okay to be, and that we will help them when they need help. They need and want us to treat them like adults, but also to realize they are still kids. They want to know pretty much everything, but they also want to know that they are not expected to handle everything on their own.

Another trait often remarked upon by older generations when speaking of middle schoolers is their "attitude," often perceived to be one of disrespect. Each generation has its own retroactive amnesia regarding that period of its own life; we certainly never spoke to our parents that way or listened to such awful music. We forget to check back with our own parents, who may disagree, and undoubtedly these kids will grow up to say the same things about their own offspring.

The general air of disrespect that I am most familiar with in students of this age stems from a wariness of the unknown and a general need for self-protection. It can be seen immediately in a classroom where students walk in expecting to see their regular teacher and find an unknown substitute instead. Although we, as adults, may tell the students that any substitute deserves the same respect that we would as their regular teachers, the kids don't buy it. To them, respecting means creating a little vulnerability within one's self, which is scary. It means believing that the person being respected is worthy of the respect and will treat them respectfully in turn. And yet the students don't know the sub. How can they be sure this person will be fair, will create a safe space in the classroom, will respect them and their boundaries and needs? Better to be skeptical than to be embarrassed or hurt. This skepticism many times manifests itself as an air of disrespect: the passed notes to stay connected with friends, the attempts to make fun of the sub, the "testing" designed to see if this new person is, indeed, worthy of their respect. These displays almost always come from a group of kids, where complicated social dynamics and untold personal insecurities are at play. Upon personal or private interaction, the new adult often finds the same disrespectful collection of students to be individually polite, appropriate, and responsive.

One of the most noticed characteristics of 7th graders is the almost complete self-absorption, the view, consciously or unconsciously cultivated, that the young person himself or herself is and should be the center of all focus, thought, and action. They seem to be unable or unwilling to look outside of themselves in many situations. Although some kids this age will recognize or admit having this trait, and others will even claim to be past it, they are unaware how far their narcissism extends because it is such an integral part of who they are at this point in their lives. They see nothing strange about doodling their own name all over their homework assignments, writing "I (heart) me" on their binders, or of suggesting to pregnant teachers that their own name would be a good choice for the new arrival. Why not?

This self-absorption often limits the way they view interactions with others. A student reprimanded for saying something mean or hurting another student's feelings might respond, "But I didn't mean it that way," unable to get out of themselves enough to see that it is how the other person perceived the comment which made it hurtful. They are quick to say "But that's so dumb," or "This is really easy," not thinking for one second that others might find "that" rather meaningful or "this" particularly difficult. Students tend to believe that my experience is the experience. (A belief which is held, rather paradoxically, at the same time as the belief that "No one can understand what I'm going through.") While a lot of educational institutions have strong community service and service learning components in the middle grades, and while these programs often have a significant impact and a lasting effect on the students, many of the lessons and benefits of such programs are more or less lost on the kids until a later time in their lives. They may claim to have a new understanding of the less fortunate or of the environment, but then they continue to mock those without the "right" clothes and to resist taking the recycling out. Everything is all right unless it demands personal energy I'm not ready to give yet. This is not to say, by any means, that schools should discontinue these programs at the middle level. On the contrary, even though students may not be able to fully recognize the impact on themselves as they participate, many do reflect on these experiences later, when they have more ability to step outside of themselves. Important seeds are often sown in middle school even if the sprouting takes place years later.

7th grade narcissism also manifests itself in the academic classrooms, where subjects are often described as stupid or boring unless they feed the individual's specific interests and passions, or unless the lessons can be tied directly into the lives of the students. Studies of the human body or of popular music prompt insightful questions and rapt attention, as do research projects or biographical readings chosen by the student him or herself. Model activities, games, and other opportunities to display particular skill or knowledge are welcomed, because they become about me and what I can do or know. Lessons on the Roman Empire are really cool if I just visited Italy last summer. French is fun to learn if my uncle lives in Paris. Decimals are pointless (excuse the pun) until I realize they help me calculate my grade on the test. Et cetera.

There are countless examples of this 7th grade narcissism - just ask any teacher or parent or coach or mentor and you'll get a rapid fire list of their favorites. There is also plenty of adolescent psychology literature

describing it. No one, including many of the kids themselves, denies it is there. But not a lot is said, as far as I can find, about why it's there, or for what purpose, other than frustrating adults. Several expert theories hint at a reason, but I'd like to go out on a limb and stake a claim that this narcissism is a necessary developmental step between childhood and adulthood, and that if it were to disappear, we should be worried. Perhaps we halfway acknowledge this already; society at large seems to be forgiving of self-centeredness in children, but becomes markedly less tolerant as the individual reaches adulthood. Think of all the first dates which became only dates because all one person could talk about was him or herself.

Many researchers have suggested that moderate levels of disturbance in adolescence are healthy and lead to higher functionality later on in life. A stable childhood followed by a moderately unstable adolescence, generally leads to the individual being "better off" in adulthood, more able to cope with the ups and downs of life. Rather like the old "he may as well get used to not always having his way" that starts (or should start) in toddlerhood. Their assertion fits with Erikson's model of identity formation, where the child must recognize differences between him or herself and others, which leads to an inner conflict regarding identity, and then on to individuation, or the development of one's own individual identity. The struggle leads to a greater understanding, and therefore more maturity.

I would argue, in addition, that the narcissism under discussion serves to both isolate and insulate a young person going through these stages. The student sinks into herself as a step toward understanding her own nature, and also as a protection against the terrifying certainty that she is growing up. If I just think about myself, then what others do or say won't be as bad (even though it usually feels that way anyhow). I will disappear into the depths of my own personality so as to dull some of the pain of separating from my parents. The young person focuses, perhaps unconsciously, on developing a sense of self which will then enable him or her to cope with individuation. One researcher suggested that "to achieve a sense of self, early adolescents must psychologically separate themselves from their parents and the family unit" (Caissy, p. 73). What I am suggesting here is that instead of separating to find themselves, they find themselves in order to separate.

The distancing of 7th graders from their parents is often disconcerting to both parties. I have had many parents make comments like "she used to tell us everything and now she never talks to us", and many students remark that they wish their parents would back off, saying "sometimes [parents'] questions are just so annoying." On one hand the parents are feeling shut out, and on the other hand the student is feeling suffocated. It's a tricky line to walk with families, but teachers can play a vital role in encouraging a dialogue between parents and students, and perhaps suggesting to each party a new way to approach the other. I urge parents to really listen, and then pick up on hints of tidbits the kids drop. Don't push conversations, just throw out little pieces of bait yourself. Often kids will bring up something a parent mentioned a week or two earlier, now ready to engage in some exchange of ideas.

I also encourage kids to have some mercy on their parents, who are often desperate for information and inclusion. If students are tired of their parent asking "What did you do in school today?" upon picking them up at three o'clock (or more seemingly intrusive questions like "Who did you eat lunch with today?"), I tell the kids to be preemptive. Think ahead of time about what you don't mind sharing, get in the car, and before the door closes, volunteer something. Even just a random comment about how the math test went or something funny that happened at recess. Nothing deep, just enough to shock the parent into listening and not prying. Kids come back to me with amusing stories about how these little tactics work, and so do parents at conference time.

Research also shows that successful identity development seems to happen best with a balance of connectedness and separation, not a severing of ties. Parents still play a very influential role in the lives of middle school kids, even if they do feel shut out and the kids do resent their various intrusions. Teachers often are invaluable sources of perspective, urging students and parents alike to hang on for the ride, even when they want to give up and let go at times.

Variety, change, instability - all useful words to keep in mind when thinking of 7th graders. They are a fabulous group to teach. Their eyes and minds are opening to new academic and social possibilities, and they are eager for enthusiastic, fair, and consistent interactions with the adults in their lives. We are privileged to watch them run ecstatically toward the future, and we provide the safe places for them to hide when it all gets too scary. They are not children and not adults. We allow them to be some of each. And underneath it all, we love and we accept and we guide. There's nothing like it.

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