Middle Childhood

Kid's Collections: The Road to Organization and Future Planning

Remember when you were nine or ten years old and you had that elaborate doll collection? Or maybe it was baseball cards . . . or trains . . . or model cars . . . and so on. If you did have a collection of some sort, you'll also remember that you used to spend hours arranging and rearranging the treasured item in a number of ways including organizing by color, size, order of favoritism, etc. You would view your collection over and over in its various organizations. Each item would have a specific meaning to you, and the space occupied by the item would also have some implication as to the degree of importance or appreciation you had. There was something very soothing and absorbing about spending hour upon hour adding to your collection, rearranging it, looking at it, showing it to others, and thinking about it as you drifted off to sleep. Even as you think of it now, you can remember the sense of satisfaction and excitement your collection provided for you. Why was that?

Collections serve a multi-faceted purpose for kids during their childhood. This is especially true during the latency period. Latency is a fancy term for the developmental phase that takes place between the ages of six and eleven. During this stage, the primary task for the child is the development of cognition. In other words, it is the period in which there is significant brain development with corresponding leaps in the ability to think, process information, learn, and participate in formal education. There is, in essence, what could be called a cognitive explosion during this time. Moreover, because a child's energy and attention is needed primarily for the expansion of thought processes during these years, affective (or emotional issues) take somewhat of a backseat. That doesn't mean that your child doesn't have emotional conflicts during this period - all of us who have kids in this developmental period know better than that. It's just that emotional tasks are not front and center as are cognitive tasks.

So how does the child manage to deal with emotional and affective issues during this time? Very simply, through play and fantasy. Children build a fantasy life in which conflicts can be worked out indirectly through stories, games, and daydreaming. As they get older, they learn to verbalize directly their emotional experiences, but at this stage play greatly aids in the process and offers a safe bridge to more adult problem solving. In addition to the creation of a very active fantasy life, children also use the defense of obsession-compulsion. Now many of you know of this more as a syndrome (OCD) that requires specific therapeutic intervention. We are not speaking of that particular syndrome, but rather of a type of activity that has as it's underlying character the use of obsessions and compulsions. This is a healthy, necessary activity that begins in latency and is used all throughout our adult life. Kid's collections are the essence of this activity during childhood. Through the repetitive collecting, adding and deleting of the treasured item, and the arranging, rearranging, observing, thinking about, planning for continued development, and maintenance of the collection, a child is able to subdue some of the emotional conflicts that confront them during this age. And at the same time, the child is developing and honing those skills in organization, planning, discrimination, and self-sustained gratification that are very necessary to all of us as adults in our endeavors to participate in higher education, to work, run households, and generally plan

for our futures.

So, as you think about the special collections(s) you had as a child, you can not only remember the satisfying feelings that went along with placing those baseball cards in various configurations by teams, players, rookies, and so forth, but also realize that your present day ability to organize your office or your home, set up files on a computer, or prioritize tasks at work are all related to those skills you developed while maintaining a collection. As a parent, you can help your child by promoting and supporting his or her desire to collect something from the most simple to the very elaborate. Collections are a part of healthy latency development that serve as a bridge to the adult world of organization and future planning.

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD START A COLLECTION

When to Begin a Collection

Your child has some interest in collecting items around the ages of four to five, however, you will notice that they lose interest in one group of items after a short time and move on to something else. Usually, around ages six to seven, children begin to show interest in longer-term collections. You can begin as soon as your child seems to enjoy saving several of any item, and then expand on the type and elaboration of the collection as the interest increases and/or your child reaches the eight to ten year bracket.

First Collections

Start with something simple like stickers, shoelaces, or miniature characters or animals. Once your child begins to accumulate a few of the items, help him establish a special place for keeping the collection such as a shelf in his room, a box, or some area that will not become cluttered with other toys or items. Stickers, for instance, can be stuck on a board on the wall or in a sticker book. Baseball cards can be saved in special plastic pages that fit into notebooks or in boxes made especially for sports cards. Sometimes a whole bookcase or set of shelves is designated for a more elaborate collection such as miniature dolls or model cars. Current fad collections such as beanie babies or Pokeman cards are very popular and come with special holders or booklets for housing the collection. The idea is that the collection should occupy a special place that is always within view and accessible to the child. This encourages organizational skills, learning how to take care of something over time, and protecting one's accumulated work towards an ongoing goal.

Elaborate Collections

These are the collections for the older child. They include baseball cards, marbles, dolls, stamps, shells, action figures, model cars and planes, coins, trains, etc. These collections often can be kept by a child into adulthood and then passed down to other children in the family. In the case of baseball cards, they may be traded or sold in adulthood. Some adults may even develop a business out of such a collection. The importance of this collection is that it is far more elaborate than the collection of a six-year old. The categories, levels of organization, and differentiation and assignment of value to items are all quite sophisticated and require greater cognitive skill. Again, the collection should be preserved in a special place, and further should be exempt from handling by the parent(s) unless the child invites your participation. A parent should never throw away any part of a child's collection. The sense of control and privacy afforded by the collection is a necessary part of the

collective process, and one that will foster your child's growing sense of independence coupled with responsibility and maturity.

When Do Kids Behave Consistently

Imagine this scenario: You've just instructed your six-year-old not to go inside anyone's house without first coming and asking for your permission. Next thing you know, you're standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes and you look out the window just in time to see your child enter the neighbor's house across the street with her little friend of the same age. You think to yourself, "What is wrong with that child? Didn't I just tell her not to do that?" Yes you did, but for some reason it didn't completely take. Extending this scenario a little further, you go to the neighbor's, gather up your child, and take her home to question her about her misbehavior. She looks at you a little blankly at first, and then a little sheepishly, and says something along the lines of "I forgot" or worse yet, "You didn't say not to go in Jane's house, you said anyone's." This makes you throw your hands up in despair and wonder if you will ever get your daughter to the point where she can remember the right instructions in the right situations. The answer, of course, is yes. The bigger question is "when?"

This brings us the subject of this article, which is the child's attainment of what has been called behavioral constancy. Behavioral constancy simply means the capacity to know and remember what the rules are, and to then be able to apply them appropriately in the correct situations. In other words, the child can distinguish right from wrong and know how to actively use the knowledge when necessary. The difficulty for the six-year-old child

above is that she knew what the rule was, but was not able to apply it in all the situations for which it was appropriate. If you consider that behavioral constancy involves two distinctly different skills, it is easier to see that the second of these is far more complex and sophisticated than the first. The second skill requires the ability to abstract from one situation and apply the same thought and action to a similar situation that is comparable. This certainly is much more involved than simply remembering by rote the exact rule given for a single situation which is spelled out ahead of time, and herein lies the problem for the child younger than approximately eight years of age.

Around ages five to six, children begin to be able to recall rules that have been given to them by parents both verbally and through reinforcement as each situation occurs. What stands out in this process for parents is the amount of repetition that seems necessary in trying to instill these rules. A second aspect of this process is the internalization by the child of what is deemed right versus wrong based on the parent's value system, and the guidance they give the child in trying to clarify these values in various situations. It is sometimes a very frustrating process because parents feel sure that after explaining a particular rule or value over and over, it seems impossible that children continue to forget or be unable to apply the rule when the situation arises. The problem is that very often the child simply does not have the cognition (mental ability) to make that leap between remembering the rule and applying it correctly. They are not yet using logic, but simply are remembering verbatim what they have been told. In the case above, Jane's house was not spelled out as being off limits. It's not that Jane wasn't part of the more inclusive "anyone", but more that Jane's name didn't match the name "anyone". These young children are very concrete in their understanding. However, at about eight years of age there is a cognitive shift that allows the child to begin to think somewhat abstractly. The brain actually goes through a process of maturation that increases the skills for thinking logically. The child can begin to differentiate between situations a little more, and can actually apply abstract ideas to concrete situations. If mom says don't go into anyone's house without asking, then Jane must be classified as part of the all-inclusive "anyone", and therefore her house is also off limits. Secondly, the child can now begin to assess his or her behavior in interactions and examine how particular behaviors effect others and as well as oneself. The emphasis shifts from merely trying to restrain the child to now successfully engaging the child's cooperation. So, when you're in that six to seven age range, and you feel like the repetitive parrot that says the same thing over an over, take heart - you will soon see the emergence of a more logical, thinking, little person that you can actually begin to reason with and engage in cooperative behavior.

When Children Begin to Lie

Recently a young mother confided in me that her almost eight-year-old daughter had begun telling lies. The lies were mostly small in scope, and didn't seem to be focused on hiding anything in particular. In fact, they seemed mostly like little white lies. When this mother confronted her daughter, the youngster explained that she had noticed that some kids seem to get away with lies. She gave a few examples of other children who had either told a lie at school, or at home, and had seemingly not been caught. Moreover, in some cases these children had gotten away with something because their lies had been taken for the truth. This young daughter was puzzled by all of this seeing that her mother had taken great care to instruct her that lying was unacceptable and never really worked or gained anything in the long run. Clearly, this child was able to see from her own observations that Mom's admonitions didn't stand up to experience. So, she had decided to try it out herself and see if she could get away with a lie.

My first reaction was to be impressed by the logic employed by this young girl and her creativity at testing out the hypothesis she had formulated based on her observations. She was in fact perfectly demonstrating a significant change in cognitive capacity (ability to think) that occurs usually around eight years of age. There is a mental leap that allows children to begin to see what I call the shadings in reality. Things change from being very black and white to incorporating shades of gray. For the child, this means that what they have learned under the tutelage of the parents is now open for testing in the immediate environment. Not only can children remember what the rules are, they know when to apply them and can observe how others apply them. In the case of this youngster, the experiment was simply that. There were no other emotional problems that were instigating her newfound attempts at telling lies. She was doing research based on her new ability to look at things with a more penetrating eye.

What I am trying to get across here is that lying at this age is quite normal. It signifies creativity along with an increase in intellectual functioning. That doesn't mean that it is an acceptable behavior, but it is helpful to understand why it occurs. It is particularly helpful to parents to realize that their children are in fact developing along normal lines. That said, it is equally important that the opportunity for instruction that is provided by lying be used to further the child's capacity to think things through. Let's go back to our youngster who has noticed that sometimes children seem to get away with lying. I instructed her mother to deal with her child's dilemma about lying in the following way. First, initiate a conversation about the issue of trust as it is related to lying. In other words, point out that if she lies to her mother, then her mother will begin to question whether or not she can trust what her daughter tells her. If she can't trust her, then she will not be able to allow some of the privileges that are currently based on that trust. Secondly, ask the child to think of a situation in which someone has lied to her. How did it feel? What happened? How did it affect her relationship with that person?

This is a good lesson in empathy. Point out that even though someone may think they are getting away with lying, they really are not. By lying they are saying that they can't be trusted. They are also doing something that can hurt someone else. Moreover, they are potentially damaging their relationships with people that mean something to them. I told the mother to be sure that throughout the conversation to use very concrete examples the child could understand and relate to, and to construct the interchange in more of a question and answer format rather than a lecture. Finally, I encouraged her to use a very kind and understanding tone. This is not a situation that calls for punishment, and in fact punishment would defeat the purpose of the lesson.

When finished with this process, it is important to be sure that your youngster understands that lying is not an acceptable activity. You've laid the groundwork for assisting your child in internalizing this rule as well as

understanding why this is so, and you now have a conversation that you can refer to in the future when and if the situation reoccurs. Be sure to applaud your child for being able to use logic and to think about things in such a careful way. Invite her to come and talk to you in the future when she comes across things that do not immediately make sense.