

Does child think abstractly or concretely? Important to know for both parenting and therapy.

Thinking Metaphorically

Metaphors are figures of speech in which a thought, concept, word or phrase that ordinarily means one thing is used in a different way to convey a similarity. A metaphor implies a general connection. Metaphors are very useful in therapy as conversation can be engaged in with the child that initially appears to the child to be about something completely unrelated to him and why he is in therapy. This encourages the child to relax and participate in the conversation. It is only at the end of the “metaphor” that a connection is made to the child and his behavior. By then the child has already engaged in the conversation and the ending is so swift that he is left in a thoughtful, rather than a rejecting, stance. Since no one can “make” a child do or say anything different than what he wants to do or say, sometimes the best response to therapy we can hope for is for the child to become thoughtful about his choices in the past and hope that thoughtfulness affects his choices in the future.

Metaphors are more likely to be internalized by the child, and therefore a more successful therapeutic tool, when the child has moved from concrete to abstract thinking. Preschool and elementary age children are more likely to think concretely. Math concepts are concrete. $2 + 2 = 4$. Lessons are in concrete terms. Children are taught concrete concepts. The United States declared independence on July 4, 1776.

As the children get older, the concepts become more abstract. $2X = 16$. What is X? What was the result of the signing of the Declaration of Independence? Whether a child’s brain has matured to be able to think abstractly as well as concretely can be readily tested by quoting a proverb to the child and asking him what he thinks it means. If he answers concretely then his brain is most likely still in concrete operations. If he answers with the meaning of the proverb that is an indication he may have moved on to abstract operations. For example: Say to the child, “What does it mean when I say, ‘You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.’” If the child responds by talking about horses then he is likely still in concrete operations. If the child responds by saying something to the effect that you can only give people opportunities to do things, you can’t actually make them do anything, then the child is most likely able to think abstractly and thus metaphorically.

Knowing the maturity of a child’s brain is important to both parents and therapists! Parenting and therapy with a child whose brain thinks concretely is different than with a child who can think abstractly. For children whose lives have been upended by abuse and/or neglect or other trauma, how parents and therapists and teachers communicate with him must be geared to their brain development, not their chronological age. It is easy to find adults who do not think abstractly, so teens whose brains are still in concrete thinking is possible and probable, given a history of trauma.

Looking at a child’s age chronologically, it would be safe to assume if a parent told a teenager to clean his room he would be able to do it. However, if he is still in

concrete operations then the term “clean your room” is not a useful directive. Just as with a much younger child, when teaching a chore, it is broken down into small bits. “Put away your toys in this bin,” precedes, “Put away your toys”, which precedes “clean your room”.

A therapeutic metaphor about people walking their dogs works with children who think abstractly, but not with children who think concretely. For example, in working with a child who is obstinate, defiant, uncooperative and the goal is for the child to see that they can get away with being defiant but ultimately it will not make them happy and life will be one continuous struggle, the “walking the dog story” is useful.

Two women are walking their dogs. Both dogs are on leashes. The first woman tells her dog to walk quietly beside her, “heel”, and the dog does. The dog contentedly trots next to his master. She reaches down periodically to pet him. A large clearing is entered and the woman tells the dog to sit while she disengages the leash. She tells him to go. When he has run out a bit, she calls him back. He comes and gets a treat. Finally the woman just lets the dog run, knowing that he will come when called.

The second woman is constantly pulling her dog back as he lunges ahead. She tells him to “heel” and he doesn’t. She tells him to “sit” and he doesn’t. He never gets a treat as he does not follow her directives. Instead of contentedly walking beside her, he constantly pulls and tugs the leash, choking himself, while she constantly pulls and jerks him back. When they get to the clearing she must keep him on his leash as she doesn’t know what he will do if taken off the leash. He continually lunges out to the end of the leash and she continually pulls him back. He is never given his freedom as she knows that if she lets him loose he will not return when she needs him to.

The child is asked, “Which is the happier dog?” “Which dog gets more freedom and privileges?” A child who thinks abstractly will be able to make the connection from the dog’s behavior to his own and realize that while he is disobeying his mom she cannot give him any freedoms and privileges so all of his defiance is costing him in the long run. The child who thinks concretely will think it is a story about a dog.

This can be followed up with, “Which is more important to you? Making yourself happy or to making others unhappy?”

It is not always clear cut when a child’s brain is in concrete or abstract operations. During a session a mother said with exasperation, “She just gets my goat!” Wishing to know if the young girl was able to think abstractly I asked her, “What does that mean when your mother says you get her goat?” The girl replied, “It means she needs to hide her goat better!” This was a profound remark but left me confused as to whether or not she could think abstractly. Later her mother gave me another opportunity to determine whether or not her daughter could think abstractly. Mother said, “Every time I think I am on the right track she pulls the rug out from underneath me!” Again, I turned to the girl and asked her what she thought her mother meant by that. The girl gave me a look that communicated that she believed she was working with the dumbest therapist on record and sighed in resignation that she needed to explain such an obvious concept. She said,

“Well.....it means mom needs to roll over and stand up in a different place.” Did she or did she not understand the metaphor?