

⌘ THREE ⌘

LAURA

Exploring Social and Creative Potentials in a Six-Year-Old's Life



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY ISSUES

Primary Issues:

- Social learning theory
- Social cognition
- Need for approval
- Play and cognitive development

Secondary Issues:

- Parenting
 - Development of social skills (empathy)
 - Friendships
 - Sibling relationships
 - Gardner's multiple intelligences
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CASE

“My mom, dad, big sister, little sister, and puppy” is the way that six-year-old Laura describes the members of her family. Laura is the middle child in a family of three girls who live with their parents in a suburban community in the northeastern United States. Her parents are both professionals who

work outside the home yet manage to devote a tremendous amount of time to family life. Laura's mom describes her marriage as a strong partnership in which both partners share the responsibilities and support of family life. "I can't remember the last time we [husband and wife] fought, so there is not much conflict in the house." Both parents stress the importance of education and the building of self-confidence in their girls. When purchasing their home, they selected the location partly because of the reputation of the school district. Laura's parents hope that their family and marriage will serve as models for the girls. They want their girls to recognize the importance of being full partners in a relationship built on respect, love, and commitment.

Laura describes herself as being "nice . . . and having lots of friends." She also says that she is a "sharing [person] and [is] good at skipping, running, . . . and gymnastics" and also feels "bad when other kids get into trouble at school." She is aware that she is the middle child in her family. However, the role of middle child does not seem to bother Laura at all. In fact, she says, "I am the middle one. I'm the big sister and the little one [sister], so I'm the one in the middle. I have a little sister to take care of and I [have] a big sister to take care of me." Laura's mom also describes her as the middle child, "but a much-awaited child. I had three miscarriages before her . . . she is kind of a treasure to us and she knows it." Laura's older sister Courtney and her younger sister Sarah are twelve and four. Laura shares a bedroom with Sarah and does not seem to mind it. However, she looks forward to the day she "turns seven when I get my own room." She is anxious to "decorate my own room like my big sister." All of this is news to her parents, who are currently not planning on a room change for the girls.

Laura feels close to her sisters, her parents, and her extended family and especially her grandfather, to whom she has a very special attachment. She says she is closest to "my mom and dad. My dad wrestles with me and my mom reads me bedtime stories." Her favorite books are by Dr. Seuss, and she especially loves *The Cat in the Hat*. Laura believes that her parents are special "because they love me." Laura speaks of her little sister Sarah with great affection. They enjoy playing games together which often involve pretend play. Her pretend play is enhanced by her strong imagination. In fact, according to her mom, Laura's imagination is "endless, just unbelievable . . . if you give [Laura] two rocks, she will play for hours."

One game, which Laura describes as her favorite, involves Laura "playing a puppy and Sarah playing the owner." In the game, "she likes to put me in a

pretend cage . . . which is the couch.” Laura thinks that Sarah is “a good owner [because] when I start howling and getting really, really sad, she lets me out.” Laura says that Sarah’s favorite character is Winnie the Pooh and that “she likes to watch the *Book of Pooh* on the Disney channel.” Laura proudly announces that her favorite television show is *Scooby Doo*. She “loves” *Scooby Doo* because of “all of the monsters,” who don’t scare her at all. Laura describes Scooby Doo as a “dog who finds out [about] mysteries with his gang.” She especially “likes the way he talks and says scooby doo be doo.”

While Laura and Sarah are close, they sometimes have sibling disagreements. For example, Laura describes a time when she and Sarah were playing with Barbie dolls. “We were playing with Mermaid Barbie. We kept fighting over it because we both wanted it. Then we found the other mermaid and that settled it.” “They are best friends” is the way Laura’s mom describes the relationship between Laura and Sarah. “Sarah is much quieter than Laura, but they get along just great.”

Laura speaks with just as much affection when she describes her older sister Courtney. Courtney is in the seventh grade and she likes to “play with us, tickle us, and play tricks on us.” Courtney has a best friend who lives next door, who “she talks to a lot on the phone.” In fact, according to Mom, Courtney has a good relationship with both Laura and Sarah. “They idolize her. Everything she does, they want to do. She likes *NSYNC, so they like *NSYNC.” Mom believes that overall Courtney is great with the girls. However, in the last year or so “she has backed off a bit.” As a seventh grader, Courtney has made it clear that she needs some space of her own, especially when her friends are over at the house. Mom believes that both Laura and Sarah will simply have to get used to this change.

Laura also likes to invite her neighborhood friend, Angela, over to her house to play. “We play in the basement and we like to play babies.” Laura plays the mother and Angela plays the baby because “she [Angela] really likes to play the baby and I’m a good mommy.” A good mommy means that “I tuck her in at night, walk her, and see [watch] her.”

Laura has a best friend too. She describes Rose as having “kinda brown skin, short black hair, and about this tall” (pointing to a height significantly above her own). Laura and Rose became friends in kindergarten, where “we got along together, so we became best friends.” Rose attends the same elementary school as Laura, and “we sometimes play on the playground at school.” At times “she [Rose] runs away from me and that makes me feel bad.

I have to get my friends and my cousin to help me get her back. They're like in second grade." When Rose runs away, Laura will sometimes play with several of her other friends. Laura says that this often causes Rose to "get mad." "When I try to explain to her that I don't like it when she runs away, she backs up and runs again. Sometimes, I just have to leave her alone."

Laura has a large circle of friends and is very popular among the students in her first grade class. Her mom describes her as "very social and . . . always being invited to birthday parties." In fact, her mom believes that one of Laura's greatest strengths is "her people skills. She is awesome . . . and she can get along with anybody. She goes out of her way to be friends with kids. We did have some little friend thing [difficulty], . . . but she seems to be working through it." Her mom goes on to describe her as a "social butterfly." Laura's first grade teacher, Ms. McCarthy, agrees that Laura is very social. Ms. McCarthy says,

she has a lot of friends and would never single any student out or make anyone feel uncomfortable. She never has any negative encounters with other students. She would never exclude anyone. For example, when [Laura] is playing a game and the game only allows two players, I have heard her say to another child who expresses an interest in playing, 'you can play the winner.' She is very aware of the feelings of others. She plays with all kids.

This play sometimes even includes boys. In fact, Laura says that she and her friends sometimes "chase boys." When she and her friends catch the boys, which is a source of great pride, they "try to give 'em cooties and then put them in a soup. There is a tire on the playground and we pretend it's the soup."

Her playfulness and outgoing personality spill over into the classroom. Ms. McCarthy feels that Laura is "such a friendly kid," and she expects her to be a class leader. In addition to her strong social skills, Ms. McCarthy believes that Laura will be at the "top of her class." Academically she is an average to high student now. Ms. McCarthy believes that her "reading, writing, and math are very strong. In fact, she can read very well and is in one of the top reading groups." Ms. McCarthy believes that Laura has "no real weaknesses" and says that she is a "wonderful student, is anxious to learn, and a quick learner." Ms. McCarthy describes her as "always motivated and always wanting to do her best." She believes that besides Laura's natural academic abilities, her strong family support and her strong verbal skills contribute to her overall success. Ms. McCarthy points out that Laura "never turns her nose up" at any classroom

activity. She is “always ready to work.” Ms. McCarthy feels that Laura’s strong work ethic comes from the family support she receives. Despite the fact that both parents work full time and Dad does some traveling,

they are both there for [Laura]. Mom volunteers a lot. She will come on field trips. I can always count on her for support. If something is not right with Laura, [Mom] will give me a heads up.

Ms. McCarthy says that Laura’s favorite subject appears to be art. Her enjoyment of art became apparent during a recent classroom activity that involved working on the “wh” sound. Laura decided to draw a picture of a whale. “She put a lot of detail into her whale. That is what she does. If she writes a sentence or a story, she wants to draw a picture and wants to finish it with great detail. Her pictures are remarkable and distinctive.” Laura’s interest in art is echoed by her mom. “She loves anything having to do with art. She is very good.” In addition to art, Laura has demonstrated significant singing talent. In fact, according to Mom, her music teacher has indicated “she has never heard a kindergartener with a voice like hers.”

Laura describes some childhood experiences that make her happy, sad, and angry. She, in fact, has a clear idea of the things that she likes and the things she dislikes. For example,

the things that make me happy is when I get something I want or when people give me surprises or presents. What makes me sad is when Rose runs away from me. And the thing that makes me angry is when somebody takes a toy away from me and they don’t give it back. It also makes me sad when people say they don’t want to be my friend. Once in kindergarten, Rose said she wouldn’t be my friend anymore [the difficulty Laura’s Mom was referring to]. I started to cry and went over to my cubby. Then Rose came over and said I’m sorry . . . then I stopped crying and we hugged and were best friends again.

As was the case with many children, and of course even adults, the events of September 11, 2001, evoked many different emotions in Laura. First, Laura describes the events as “planes crashing into buildings because there wasn’t any lights on the buildings to tell them where they [the buildings] were.” Laura thought about all of the pain and hurt caused by the planes. “I felt bad because when other people get hurt, like when someone is crying, I will follow the crying and ask what is wrong. I was worried that people would get hurt or die.”

In addition to the events of September 11, Laura became worried about divorce when the parents of a close friend separated. Laura's mom says "at least once a month" Laura would ask her a question about divorce. For example, once Laura asked, "You [meaning Mom and Dad] would never get divorced, right? And Daddy would never move out of our house." Mom characterizes Laura as being very concerned that this could happen in their home. Both of Laura's parents took time to reassure her that her family would stay together.

Laura's sensitivity is a source of some concern for her mom. Mom is afraid that "it is so easy to break her heart" and it is "very easy to hurt her." She has a "strong desire to please others and really wants everyone to love her." Mom's concern about Laura's sensitivity caused her to make a special request for a particular first grade teacher. She was worried that Laura would have a difficult time with a teacher who was too rigid or harsh. While the school discourages parents from making teacher requests, Laura's parents made a strong case for Laura being placed with Ms. McCarthy.

Another concern voiced by Laura's mom has to do with her small size. Laura is "much smaller than the other kids," something of which Laura is quite aware. In fact, Laura's little sister is beginning to pass her by. Laura's doctors have reassured the family that Laura is just petite. This, however, doesn't keep other children from teasing her because of her size. In fact, in kindergarten teasing about her small size became a bit of an issue for Laura. Laura's kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Doyle, was keenly aware of this situation. One day she decided to create a new class club. The club was called the Little Bodies, Big Brains Club. Mrs. Doyle made Laura the president. Mom says, "I can't tell you what that did for this child [Laura]. Laura's self-confidence was clearly improved by this experience." According to Ms. McCarthy, this self-confidence was clearly evident when Laura arrived in first grade. Her self-confidence is strong and is cultivated in this nurturing classroom, in Laura's home environment, and in other areas of the school community. Recently Laura won the "super kid award." The award was given out by Mr. P., the gym teacher. Mom says that Laura was so excited about this award that she could not wait to share the news with her family and friends. The award is only "given to people who work hard," says Laura and it is given by the "very funny" Mr. P.

While she speaks fondly of Mr. P, her cute nose scrunches up when she talks about her music teacher. "People call her the crazy lady because sometimes it seems like she is going crazy." Despite this characterization of her

music teacher, Laura says she likes her because “sometimes she is silly and teaches us the heartbeat.”

Laura’s ability to perceive what both adults and children think and feel is also evident in her description of Ms. McCarthy. Sometimes “Ms. McCarthy gets funny mad and sometimes she gets real mad.” When she gets “really mad she yells, like when kids don’t follow directions. I feel sorry for them [when they get yelled at].”

However, her empathy for classmates does not diminish her liking for Ms. McCarthy. The affection felt by Laura toward Ms. McCarthy runs both ways. In fact, it takes Ms. McCarthy only a few words to sum up her opinion of Laura. “She has it all.” Laura sums up her feelings for Ms. McCarthy by paying her the ultimate compliment. Even at this very young age, Laura is clear on what she wants to do when she grows up. “I might want to be a dance teacher or just a regular teacher . . . probably first grade.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Using evidence from the case, discuss Laura’s social cognition. Specifically, address the development of her sense of self, self-perceptions, and her beliefs about relationships as well as the development of her “theory of mind”—her awareness of others’ intentions, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings.
2. Agree or disagree with the following: “Laura’s parents are excellent parents.” Provide support for your position, applying what you have learned about the developmental effects of various parenting practices, environmental factors under the control of parents, and the like to the specifics of Laura’s case.
3. Laura’s mom describes her as “very social.” In fact, her mom believes that one of Laura’s greatest strengths is “her people skills. She is awesome . . . and she can get along with anybody. She goes out of her way to be friends with kids.” Laura’s mom also describes Laura as having a “strong desire to please others” and really wanting “everyone to love her.” Discuss the positive and negative effects of such an orientation on Laura’s future social and cognitive development. Use research to support your discussion points.

4. Discuss the various social and cognitive developmental effects of Laura's place as the "middle child."
5. Discuss Laura's interactions with Rose. What do they reveal about Laura's development?
6. What if the school administrator refused the request made by Laura's parents for a particular first grade teacher? In what ways would you suggest they deal with a teacher who lacks Ms. McCarthy's warmth and creativity?

APPLYING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. Discuss the factors in Laura's life that have contributed, in your opinion, to Ms. McCarthy's assessment of Laura as a child who "has it all." Use evidence from the case and information from your course and various theories of development you have studied to support your opinion.
2. Laura's teacher and her mom talk about her imagination and fantasy play. Discuss the role that these have played in her cognitive development. Use the cognitive development theories of Piaget and Vygotsky to explain your answer.
3. Based on the case, speculate on what Howard Gardner might have to say about Laura.

Also see "Connecting Across Cases" question 1, in the Introduction to this book.

CLASS ACTIVITY

1. Speculate on the "case" Laura's parents may have made for Laura's placement with Ms. McCarthy, and role-play the conversation between them and school administrators.

RESEARCH SUGGESTION

1. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has caused psychologists and educators to expand their definition and understanding of intelligence.

Likewise, it has reinforced for some the belief that existing measures of intelligence are only measuring a limited range of abilities, focusing on verbal and mathematical intelligences. Research ways of assessing other types of intelligences, as proposed by Gardner's theory, and/or develop a lesson that might tap one or more of these abilities.

READINGS AND RESOURCES

Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*. New York: Norton.

An examination of the importance of imitations, play, and dreams to children's movement from sensory motor schemas to conceptual schemas.

Hubbard, J., & Coie, J. D. (n.d.). *Emotional correlates of social competence in children's peer relationships*. Retrieved June 12, 2004, from www.udel.edu/psych/fingerle/article1.htm#Abstract

This article provides an overview of research on children's social competence and friendship problems.

Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

This book provides a basic overview of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and its educational implications.

