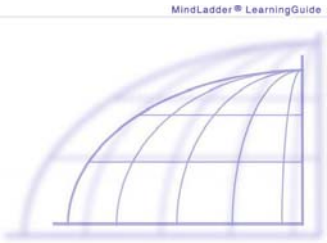

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T-9: Comparative Behavior

To compare is to examine how things are alike or how they are different. Children who are efficient in the use of this knowledge construction function are able to engage in spontaneous comparative behavior. That is, they routinely make comparisons when confronted with various tasks or problems and spontaneously search for similarities and differences among objects, events or concepts. Most children will be able to see the difference between a small ice cream cone and a larger one - and be eager to tell you which one they want! Such a comparison is supported by strong perceptual cues and hypercharged motivation. The lack of spontaneous comparative behavior becomes more evident as the need to compare is supported by fewer prominent cues and lower levels of motivation.

The development of this knowledge construction function is a prerequisite for cognitive functioning that relies on categories (T-10). Sorting objects into categories involves comparisons to determine if the characteristics of an object match those of a given set. “Place red plastic squares in group A and large wood triangles in group B.” The development of this function also enables children to gain access to relative forms of experience all of which rely on comparisons (e.g. bigger than, earlier than, older than, sharper than, deeper than, better than). Comparisons are at the foundation of many other knowledge construction functions such as goal seeking (T-22) and summative behavior (T-25). The development of this function therefore supports the development and use of many others.

To mediate this function, help your students to discover how objects, events and concepts are alike and how they are different. There are so many times and places you can focus on comparisons in the curriculum. In all content areas, there are opportunities to compare: in history, events and eras; in literature, characters and themes; in math, division and multiplication; in art, form and color and so forth. Also,

language is an important factor in supporting this function. The verbal tools and concepts that children have determine the distinctions and the comparisons they can make. Keep in mind that numerous commonplace observations rely on explicit or implicit comparisons: "I feel better today than I did yesterday", "Johnny is the tallest", "Xavier's ability to read music is getting better", "It is cold outside today", "The soccer team played very well".

Show how comparing helps us to make better decisions. When buying a product for example, a bicycle, talk about all the things that one must compare to make the best decision: the price, the size, the color, the speed, the model, the brand and the workmanship. Also, help students look for ways to compare by discussing different attributes of objects; size, shape, color, texture, qualities, and use among others. "Let's look at these insects. How are they alike and how are they different? Look at their size, color and shape. Let's compare how they get around when they walk and how they get around when they fly". In addition, help students, through their daily activities, acquire words that enable comparisons such as big, little, sweet, sour, hard, soft, small, smaller, smallest and so forth.

When you mediate this function do not emphasize merely *how* to compare. In order for students to gain proficiency with this knowledge construction function it is important that they will have a good understand also of *why*, *where* and *when* to compare. In theory we can compare anything with anything else – and we could quickly fill our minds with an excess of comparisons that would prevent us from ever getting anything else done. Like all the knowledge construction functions comparative behavior is a tool of the mind that students need to learn to wield. This includes not only how to but also why, where, and when – and when not - to wield it. When they first acquire control over this function it is common for young children to make loopy and giddy comparisons. The high frequency use of a newly acquired function is a normal occurrence that helps to solidify its strength and develop the learner's sense of proficiency and mastery with its use. While such a 'comparo-manic' phase occasionally can be trying to others it is usually of short duration – and does serve a purpose!

Have your students identify and discuss situations that highlight the use of comparative behavior. For example we carefully control and time track events so we can compare the athletes' performances and determine the winner. Scientific studies are carefully designed to enable us to compare what happens under different experimental conditions. We compare the number of votes candidates receive to determine the outcome of elections. We compare the contents of

factory emissions with standards to determine if they are within legal limits.