

MoxieTopic: 7-year-olds

I almost entitled this MoxieTopic “7-Year-Olds: I Got Nothing” because this stage is beyond frustrating and it’s insulting in how nonsensical it is. You finally have a Big Kid who can read and do basic care routines on their own and be a participating member of your family, and then suddenly your kid wakes up one morning and has turned into Caillou. It’s the kid version of Kafka, and it’s really, really not fun for anyone.

(Yes, of course your child is wonderful and funny and sweet, and all that is still true when they’re seven, but there’s also just this underlying layer of chaos that’s characteristic of all the regression/developmental stages, and this one’s a doozy.)

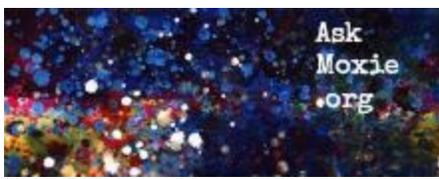
Standard Rough Patch Disclaimer: All the chaotic, horrible, melodramatic, trying behavior that wears on your last nerve is developmentally appropriate and is leading your child into a new era of awesomeness. So when you’re feeling sorry for yourself for somehow having spawned this whiny, antisocial child, bear in mind that this is all a good thing and it won’t last forever.

It will, however, last around an entire year.

“Seven is twice 3.5.” When you think about what’s going on, that’s probably the easiest way to conceptualize it. Everything that was chaotic and painful and confusing and too tender about 3.5 is twice the volume for seven. Here’s how:

They have zero emotional resilience. Everything bad that happens is the woooooorst thing that has ever haaaaaappened. Whether it’s a fight with a friend, getting in trouble at school, merely having to do homework, stubbing a toe, having to wear a pair of socks in a different color than they wanted, or not being allowed to choose dessert three nights in a row, it’s a crisis. A major crisis. From which they feel like they’ll never recover. And it’s your fault.

They have no ability to prioritize. A paper cut is breaking an arm is breaking the yolk of the egg while frying it is being punished at school is having a fight at home is someone touching your sweater lying on the couch is your friend excluding you. They have no ability to differentiate between things that are actually bad, things that are annoying, and things that they thought were fine a few months ago. Therefore, there’s no way to predict what will set them off. And it’s your fault.



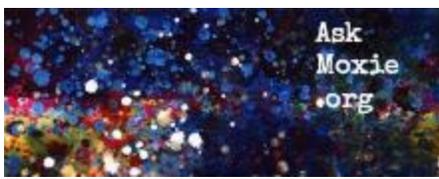
Everything has greater (negative) meaning. Telling them they have to finish dinner before they can go play causes them to spiral into recriminations about how no one loves them, no one understands them, they've never liked dinner, and if they ran away no one would miss them. They can't take anything at face value, and have to imbue everything that happens with some negative meaning about how other people feel about them and their unhappy prognosis for love and success in the world. And it's your fault.

They have no friends. You know how the key to enjoying adulthood is the realization that no one is really looking at you, so you can feel free to be yourself and make yourself happy? Seven year olds are the polar opposite of that. They're all 100% convinced that everyone is looking at them and judging them all the time, so they're paralyzed by both inaction and whining. Which means that they have a very hard time acting as a friend to other kids, and wouldn't be able to accept someone else acting as a friend to them, even if they noticed it. They may have kids that they play with every day and spend all their time with in a reasonably happy way, but they still feel like they have no friends. And it's your fault.

You start to question whether you have any friends. For the first few months of this phase you're just so shell-shocked by it that you keep resisting. But then when it hasn't gone away after the amount of time that a developmental phase usually lasts, you start to wonder if maybe the kid is right and you're the one with the unrealistic expectations. And maybe you are too unemotional and aren't even trying to fix things. And maybe your friends really don't like you. (Also: your fault.)

That last point is kind of a joke, but not really. Because this stage lasts so long (a year is a long time to deal with someone you love acting irrationally), you really can start to be affected by it and feel like you're responsible for it. And it feels like your kid is having a lot of problems from all angles. Maybe problems in school (if the teacher isn't entertained by seven-year-old drama), problems with the other kids, problems fitting in, problems getting things right. It can feel enormous, and like there's no way for you to fix everything. And you can't, because most of this stuff is just fallout from this developmental stage and it'll come back into place once your child (and all the other kids) are out of this stage again. But it's hard not to feel like you should be fixing it all now.

All the usual stuff about your kid coming through the developmental phase with new skills applies, so we'll assume that you're focusing on being as kind and loving as possible. This isn't your child's fault, and they deserve kindness with reasonable



boundaries from you. But while you're being firm but kind, let's talk about how to keep you healthy through all of it.

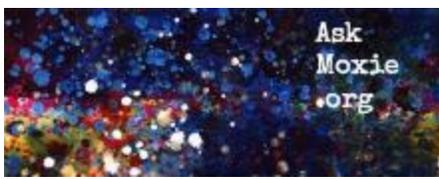
1. Find support. Did you join an online baby group that you've forgotten about? Now may be the time to go back. Start to talk to the other parents at school dropoff. Befriend your child's teacher. Hang out to meet other parents wherever your kid and other seven-year-olds are. Look for other parents of seven-year-olds online. It feels unnatural to target specific groups of people for friends, but you're in a stressful situation and you need some people who understand. Deliberately spend some time with other people in the middle of dealing with seven-year-olds who can understand the pressure you're under right now.

2. Talk about it. Millions (literally) of people have gone through this exact thing, but it's not a common topic of conversation for people on the other side. People with older kids aren't just going to proactively say to you, "So how's it going with a 7-year-old? Pretty, horrible, huh?" But they remember, and will be willing to give you reality checks when you need them. Even a simple "Seven year-olds, amirite?" status on social media will be a signal flare for those of us who remember, and we'll show up to confirm that it's the age, not you. (Ignore the "cherish every moment" people.) Everyone has stories of the everyday overemotional drama that will help you know you're not alone in having a child who could rival the best silent film actors.

3. Get out of the crucible. Go out and do stuff and see other people. Even the cashiers at the grocery store are some adult conversation, and they probably don't think anything happening to them today is your fault. Spending all your non-working time with a child who's lashing out is going to make you tense and harden you simply because you have to defend yourself constantly. Get out to get a reality check that there's nothing wrong with you.

4. Keep yourself healthy. Drink a lot of water. Run or do other exercise. (You will be amazed at what an hour a day of some kind of rhythmic exercise like running, yoga, or swimming will do for you.) Eat a lot of vegetables. Don't berate yourself when you eat your emotions. Choose sleep when you can. Use the time you'd spend fixing your kid's problems--if that were possible--on nurturing yourself.

5. Live your life. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you need to fix your kid before you can do things you want to do. Hang out with friends. Read books. Take a class. Train for a half marathon. Go back to work or go up for a promotion. Plan a vacation. All this stuff



will give you something to do while you wait for your child to become easy to live with again. If you wait, though, you've got nothing going on but waiting to react to whatever your child says or does that day, and you waste a lot of time being tense and unhappy.

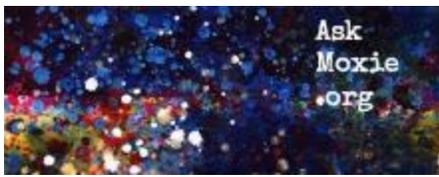
If you have other children:

Don't forget that this stage can be rough on them, too, whether they're older or younger than your seven-year-old is. They're going to need your support and help in understanding that it's not about them, and they can't change the seven-year-old's behavior, and it will end. Basically, everything you're doing for yourself to keep yourself healthy and as emotionally connected as possible to the seven-year-old, you should help your other children do.

You really don't want to set up a situation in which the seven-year-old becomes isolated from the rest of the family, or in which there's favoritism. It's tough, though, when one child is irrational and difficult much of the time and the others are not, not to develop an almost "us vs. them" mentality. (If you haven't read Faber and Mazlish's *Siblings Without Rivalry*, now's the time to do it. And if you read it awhile ago, read it again.)

If you can get everyone on the same side, though, of understanding that the seven-year-old isn't acting this way on purpose to hurt people, that will help everyone. Really, the entire family is being held hostage by this stupid developmental phase. And the other children have either gone through it already or will go through it in their own time. So the current seven-year-old isn't the enemy--they're a victim like the rest of you are.

This does mean that you may have to come up with some strategies as a family to minimize the damage the current seven-year-old does, though. Rules about safe spaces for different people, words or phrases that are not allowed, and consequences for pushing or breaking healthy boundaries can keep everyone safe and on the same team. Your kids, if they're verbal, can help you figure out how they need to be kept safe, including the current seven-year-old.



To recap:

1. Seven can be a long, difficult year.
2. Seven is characterized by an utter lack of emotional resilience, and an inability to prioritize. Everything is horrible and is causing intense emotional pain that derails the seven-year-old for hours.
3. Assuming that you're being kind to the seven-year-old, your priority should be keeping yourself and your other children healthy through this long, problematic phase.
4. It'll be easier to maintain relationships after this stage is over if you can think of the entire family as being on the same team, including the current seven-year-old.

Courage.