

# The Developmental Stages of Children

A sound catechetical program will respect the differing needs of students in each developmental stage. Methods of teaching must account for the various learning styles and gifts of the students. With this in mind, what follows is a general overview and description of the characteristics of the developmental stages of children. These are not meant to be complete descriptions nor are they meant to be stereotypical as individuals develop at their own pace.

## Getting to Know Your Early Childhood Learners (Ages 4-5)

Every child is unique, but there are some common characteristics generally shared by four-five year olds. These generalizations should help you as you endeavor to teach a love of the Catholic Faith to these grade level students:

- ◆ The child of this age is beginning to trust peers and adults outside their families. They need to feel safe and comfortable within their religious education classrooms.
- ◆ Playtime activities are self-centered and explorative. They are friends with whoever is with them at the time.
- ◆ Children of this age accept all members of their group equally. It is helpful to teach basic manners for group interaction to this age level.
- ◆ Small group activities are essential to helping children of this age develop independence and to foster their self-confidence.
- ◆ The child of this age has a short attention span and will frequently race from one activity to another. There is a need for several types of learning activities, even within an hour time span. There should be a place for them to exert their immense amount of energy.
- ◆ Pre-schoolers perceive stories in single images, like a slide show. They learn intuitively through story images.

- ◆ Since they are concrete learners, symbolic language is taken in its literal sense. Adults will have little control over what meaning a story will have for a young child. Therefore, Scripture stories need to be chosen carefully with an eye to avoiding anything that is abstract or ambivalent.
- ◆ Children of this age have vivid imaginations and they are beginning to distinguish between reality and fantasy. But, they have not gotten there yet.
- ◆ Children of this age need assistance in coping with anything that is unfamiliar or frightening.
- ◆ Group prayer is important to this age level. Children will also frequently have their own conversations with God as they like to talk to God about themselves.
- ◆ Children of this age experience God within their family and relate well to the concept of being part of God's family.
- ◆ Preschoolers are in the first stage of moral development. Their actions are governed by rewards and punishments. They are influenced by the actions and moods of the primary adults in their lives. Something is "good" if it pleases an adult and something is "bad" if it brings a punishment or scolding.
- ◆ In early childhood, there is no mention of sin, for the emphasis should be placed on forming a relationship with God.
- ◆ "Too much too soon" should be something avoided in the preschool classroom. The spontaneity and creativity of this age level should not be curbed, but encouraged and developed.
- ◆ This age level takes great pleasure in nature and in all creation, hence the curriculum for this level contains much in background of God as Creator.

## Getting to Know Your Primary Learners (Grades 1-3)

Every child is unique, but there are some common characteristics generally shared by most six- through eight-year-olds. These generalizations should help you as you endeavor to teach a love of the Catholic Faith to these grade level students:

- ◆ The child of this age has a limited life experience to draw on, but the religious education program must draw on this limited experience.
- ◆ There is a profound change in the faith life of children between grades 1-3. There is a definite maturing in the faith that needs to be fostered in the faith community (NDC #33). They are and need to be introduced to a wider circle of people of strong faith. They need to receive consistent messages about the faith from all adults who are in this wide circle.
- ◆ Brain research tells us that primary children have an attention span of around 20 minutes and they tire easily. Boredom and restlessness will tell you that your lesson is too long or complicated. They need a variety of activities.
- ◆ The primary level student needs a stable, consistent learning environment with frequent repetition of favorite activities and review of key concepts.
- ◆ They are eager to join in groups of peers. This age learns well in groups. Children this age tend to form gender - segregated groups---and although they are still very trusting, they tend to be shy around children and adults whom they do not know. Sharing belongings with others is still difficult at this age and there is still some tendency to be envious of others.
- ◆ This level of students is very active. They enjoy hands-on activities and learn best by doing. The first grader enjoys imitating the behavior of parents and other important adults (be careful here). He or she will be particularly interested in how things are made and how they work.
- ◆ The primary student is very imaginative and likes to explore the world of make believe by telling and listening to stories (oh yeah...the Bible), drawing pictures, etc. They can retell you a story from beginning to end, but they probably will not know the meaning of the story. They love to dramatize the stories of Scripture or any story, really.

- ◆ Children of this age are beginning to move away from the monologues of preschool and into dialogues and conversations.
- ◆ The primary student can only focus on the here and now. They have no sense of past or future. Everything must be repeated, repeatedly. Precise directions for activities must be given and given each time the activity is done. They will not remember the directions from last week. (or even yesterday for the same activity)
- ◆ They are also beginning to take responsibility for their actions and to learn social skills.
- ◆ Primary students need constant reassurance and encouragement, especially from important adults. They respond well to praise and are easily hurt by public criticism or ridicule. (who isn't?)
- ◆ Primary students are capable of memorizing simple formulas and prayers. They enjoy group singing and recitation. As they move into the later primary years, they develop these skills more fully.
- ◆ Children of this age model the faith lives of their parents.
- ◆ The catechetical program for this age level needs to include them in liturgical celebrations. They have a deep and growing interest in ritual, prayers, images of Jesus and the stories of Scripture.
- ◆ Children of this age are still in the early stage of moral development...rewards and punishments. They are beginning to understand community responsibility and it is a good idea to allow them to create the rules for the classroom. They take their responsibilities seriously. They are easily disturbed by criticism from those in authority.
- ◆ Children of this age are developing sexually. They are becoming aware of the differences between boys and girls. They need to be assured and taught to respect the specialness of being male or female. Their friends are still of their own sex.

## Getting to Know Your Intermediate Grade Learners (Grades 4-5)

Although every child is unique, there are some common characteristics that are generally shared by most nine- through eleven-year-olds. These generalizations should help you as you endeavor to teach a love of the Catholic faith to these grade level students.

- ◆ Learners at this level are at a plateau in their stages of development.
- ◆ Learners at this age have better control of motor skills. They enjoy group activity and are more capable of complex skills in sporting activities.
- ◆ The intermediate student is eager to join groups of peers. He or she learns well in groups. At this age, children are still most comfortable in same gender groups, and they feel that it is important to follow the expectations of the group regardless of the consequences. They choose leaders for their groups and follow them closely. Children in this age group strongly dislike being embarrassed in front of friends or strangers. Sharing, at most times, becomes easier in this grade level than in the prior ones.
- ◆ Humor is important to this age level and they are developing a well defined sense of humor. Sometimes this can lead to mocking or teasing of others.
- ◆ Intermediate students begin to think abstractly. They have a longer attention span and they are capable of hard work. They are also developing a sense of time. The concrete world is becoming more important than the imaginary world. The child of this age enjoys reading. Students are sharpening their study skills and they are able to concentrate for longer periods of time.
- ◆ Intermediate students need to function in an orderly world. They want things to happen in a predictable pattern. This age child can begin to observe people and situations and form conclusions about them. He or she continues to be interested in living things and how they are made.
- ◆ Intermediate learners are beginning to draw their own conclusions and judgments based on their own observations.

- ◆ They are still at the hero worship stage and continue to respond well to and desire to imitate, models of Christian living. Although they are sensitive to praise and criticism, they are beginning to understand the need for constructive criticism.
- ◆ Adventure, fantasy, risk, success and humor form the elements of a successful story for the nine- to eleven-year-old child.
- ◆ The intermediate student realizes the need for guidelines on behavior. While realizing and accepting the need for these guidelines, they will have trouble controlling their tempers and they also tend to provoke fights.
- ◆ The intermediate students are beginning to understand the importance of being fair and recognizing another person's point of view. This age child is able to understand the cause and effect of his or her own actions and the consequences of good and bad choices. Intermediate students want to live by the rules and they want others to live by them too. They believe in the letter of the law.
- ◆ The intermediate student continues to grow in independence and feels a need for increasing independence from the family. Yet, he or she does recognize the importance of belonging and of being in stable relationships. This age child likes to help in forming plans, and wants to play a role in make decisions in the classroom and in the home. They enjoy activities and projects that call upon their increasing ability and desire to care for others.
- ◆ These children are on the verge of a very organizational stage. They feel a strong need to fit the varied facts, ideas and skills they are given into a large and workable whole. At this age, they must organize skills and concepts into an order that they understand.
- ◆ The intermediate student begins to want privacy. Sometimes they will become secretive in order to achieve this privacy. This age child continues to experience occasional jealousy of siblings. A clearly defined sense of humor is seen in this age child.
- ◆ The intermediate learner will continue to need the reinforcement of parents in the things that they do. Yet, the fifth grader can become embarrassed when a parent comments or praises them in front of peers. Sometimes, fifth graders will talk back to teachers and parents.

- ◆ Intermediate students are interested in sexuality; they are also interested in living things and how they are made. Yet, they still do not like to be associated with the opposite sex. The intermediate student will often tease their peers who do choose to have friends of the opposite sex.
- ◆ This age level students do know right from wrong, particularly through being familiar with rules and directions. They tend to tell the truth and sometimes they will avoid speaking rather than tell a lie.
- ◆ The intermediate student is very vocal about feelings. They like to share things at certain times. They are often glad to share their interests in movies, sports, and TV shows with anyone who asks.
- ◆ Intermediate students like to travel and see new places. They are fascinated by maps and stories of people and places past and present. Field trips and other outings are major events in the life of this age level.
- ◆ Intermediate students like to play a variety of games and they are very competitive. They are concerned with who has won the game and who has lost.
- ◆ The intermediate learner likes to collect and classify things and exercise the ability to question and experiment.
- ◆ Prayer becomes more formal and less spontaneous because this age level does not like to draw attention to themselves.

## Getting to Know Your Younger Adolescent Learners (Grades 6-8)

Although every child is unique, there are some common characteristics shared by eleven- to fourteen-year-olds. The characteristics of this age level continue to develop into the teens and 20's. These generalizations should help you as you endeavor to teach a love of the Catholic faith to these grade level students.

- ◆ The young adolescent is in the early stages of adolescence...beginning that transition between childhood and adulthood. This is a time of great development--physical, moral, emotional, social, psychological, and spiritual. Some of these changes happen suddenly. More often than not, progress is quite erratic and unpredictable. Changes in adolescents are highly individualized and varied. You cannot expect the same thing from one student as the next.
- ◆ The adolescent has a small group of close friends of the same sex. He or she identifies very closely with the interests of this peer group. The peer group is beginning to exert more and more influence, both good and bad, on the decisions made by the adolescent.
- ◆ Conforming is important to the early adolescent. There is a tendency for adolescents to want to look, act and dress like their peers. There is a certain feeling of comfort and security in conforming.
- ◆ Appearance becomes an important aspect of their social life.
- ◆ Adolescents are searching for an identity of their own and so they will try on various roles to see which fits them the best. They tend to be insensitive towards others and ultra-sensitive about themselves.
- ◆ Adolescent students are able to take on more responsibility both within the family as well as within other groups. Occasionally, they will enjoy taking care of younger siblings or other young children.
- ◆ Adolescents are becoming independent. A strong sense of self-identity will be an asset during the sometimes difficult stage of life called adolescence. Adolescents have learned that they are unique and creative and they are able to participate in activities which express their personal creativity.
- ◆ The early adolescent will know right from wrong, particularly through formulas, such as rules and directives. Adolescents absorb the attitudes of the adults around them. They are quite capable of assessing whether the adults in

their lives live up to the rules and attitudes they profess. You cannot fool this age level if your actions do not match your words.

- ◆ The young people of this age level are aware of the moral conflicts of society and they need opportunities to discuss and work through these conflicts.
- ◆ The adolescent will have a growing interest in sexuality. They are capable of learning about the roles that men and women have in God's plan for human reproduction.
- ◆ A strong sense of self identity is an asset at this grade level. A stress on uniqueness and creativity in all its forms helps mold a strong sense of self.
- ◆ Adolescents are protective of their privacy. While encouraging and setting a classroom atmosphere of sharing and self-expression, respect their desire to keep some information private.
- ◆ Setting and attaining goals is a habit that an adolescent can achieve. A sense of time and chronology leads to an understanding of the difference between long and short term goals. With goal setting and practice will come the ability to deal with successes and failures.
- ◆ Justice and fairness are critical to this age level.
- ◆ The adolescent gives up childhood notions of God. There is questioning of previously accepted tenets of faith.
- ◆ Prayer tends to be more personal. Values can be put into action. The adolescent can be very service-oriented toward others. They like to be involved in planning of liturgical services.
- ◆ The adolescent likes to be a role model for young students.