

AGE-LEVEL CHARACTERISTICS

Children all develop at different rates, but there are some commonalities and definite developmental patterns that are helpful for leaders to be aware of as they plan and work with different age levels. An important element of our program ministries is "age appropriateness" - both in expectations and opportunities.

Please familiarize yourself with the developmental characteristics of the age level(s) with which you work to better prepare yourself for a good personal experience as well as provide a good experience for the children or youth with you.

WHAT YOU SEE // WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

(Adapted from Age Group Characteristics by Anne Gilbert)

CHARACTERISTICS OF SIX AND SEVEN YEAR OLDS

Physically Children...

- Grow at different rates
- Have lots of energy, seem restless, and have trouble sitting still, but tire easily

Mentally children...

- Have basic skills in reading, writing and counting
- Begin to tell the difference between fact and fantasy
- Can express themselves through art media, but usually cannot interpret symbols
- Are curious and eager to learn; love to investigate, explore and experiment
- Live in the NOW with little sense of time
- Learn best working imaginatively in fun, creative activities; "hands-on-learning"

Socially children...

- Want to play with other children
- Try new ways of relating to others
- Enjoy interacting with children of either gender
- Be sensitive about feelings - own and others
- Feel hurt but get over quarrels quickly
- Seek acceptance and encouragement from adults

And we should...

- Avoid physical comparisons
- Provide alternative active and quiet times

And we should...

- Allow opportunities to practice and use these skills
- Be clear about what is fact and fantasy
- Provide opportunities for lots of coloring, pasting, painting, etc.; avoid symbolism
- Encourage curiosity; allow opportunities to check things out and experiment in safety, with respect, under supervision
- Address issues in the present; draw from experiences in the recent past
- Have a variety of learning experiences to appeal to different learning styles

And we should...

- Encourage informal interaction
- Support efforts to make new friends
- Include both genders in group activities
- Encourage thoughtfulness and consideration of others
- Encourage reconciliation in a positive manner then be prepared to move on
- Be accepting, supportive, and positive in all things

Emotionally children...

- Strive to establish self-identity
- Base self image on others perspective
- Eagerly seek to please adults they admire
- Have many fears

Spiritually children...

- Enjoy "religious" activities; be open to learning about God
- Be unable to think logically about God or to express their feelings clearly
- Learn to sing familiar songs and learn simple Bible verses
- Talk to God easily if encouraged and given models
- Believe almost everything they are told about God

And we should...

- Treat and respect each child as a unique individual
- Be positive and affirming in an accepting, trusting and understanding atmosphere
- Model lives to be admired
- Listen non-judgmentally to fears and problems and offer encouragement

And we should...

- Offer interesting and engaging activities
- Expect and provide for learning about God to happen on an experiential level
- Provide opportunities for brief worship experiences that offer active participation, music and singing, and not too much listening while sitting still
- Include opportunities for expressing and experiencing different kinds of prayer
- Answer questions simply and clearly to the best of your ability; don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."

CHARACTERISTICS OF EIGHT AND NINE YEAR OLDS

Physically children...

- Grow steadily and stay active constantly
- Learn better coordination and more skills with their bodies
- Want to do rather than watch

And we should...

- Have lots of constructive, active things to do
- Allow time for lots of free physical activity
- Encourage learning through active participation

Mentally children...

- Be curious; ask lots of questions; often learn to love reading
- Begin to develop skills to reason and discuss
- Enjoy collecting things
- Learn best through creative, imaginative, enjoyable activities
- Want to be included in planning

And we should...

- Provide activities to stimulate curiosity and practice new skills
- Take time to discuss and reason with children
- Support healthy, innovative hobbies
- Offer a variety of learning experiences
- Encourage active participation in planning activities

EVENT/DEAN MANUAL

- Expand their attention span
- Remember things well

Socially children...

- Identify someone as a best friend, but may change frequently
- Begin to move dependence and loyalty from parents to other adult leaders
- Imitate adult behaviors and attitudes
- Begin to develop a sense of right and wrong in ways to relate to others
- Like to play team games, but may argue about the rules and what is fair
- Desire to be included in a group

Emotionally children...

- Strive toward more independence from home and family
- Have some degree of self confidence in new situations
- Begin to be more aware of violence and uncertainty in the world around them

Spiritually children...

- Be open to learn about God
- Begin to have questions about Christianity
- Be more familiar with the Bible and religious stories
- Enjoy active participation in worship
- Need encouragement and acceptance from parents and other adults around them
- Need reminders and affirmations that they are children of God and loved by God unconditionally to nurture their self image

- Gauge length of activities by attention span
- Support memory work activities

And we should...

- Offer opportunities to do fun things with different people
- Maintain a supportive and loving atmosphere
- Live a life worth of imitation; provide exposure to other positive adult role models
- Provide experiences that model and encourage good Christian social attitudes and behaviors toward all sorts of people
- Maintain positive attitude and help children move past disagreements without simply dismissing them
- Encourage and guide inclusion of all children

And we should...

- Offer security without overwhelming drive for independence
- Be affirming and encouraging
- Nurture an understanding, trusting place where fears and concerns can be expressed and discussed

And we should...

- Provide stimulating, enjoyable activities that encourage learning about God
- Answer questions honestly and simply; help them find answers we don't have
- Offer times for active worship in the community of faith
- Encourage learning and doing elements of worship; read litanies and Scriptures, sing, pray
- Offer enthusiastic affirmation and support for all they do
- Provide a variety of ways children experience this affirmation in many settings

CHARACTERISTICS OF TEN AND ELEVEN YEAR OLDS

Physically children...

- Grow steadily; enjoy active options; make noise and squabble with each other
- Mature at different rates, but girls usually faster than boys
- Begin to become aware of the opposite gender, but unsure about relationship

Mentally children...

- Read and express themselves better
- Have longer attention span
- Begin to think abstractly
- Begin to challenge things they've been told
- Give attention and energy to things of interest; ignore boring options
- Have good memories

Socially children...

- Explore ways to relate with both genders
- Develop more responsibility for friendships
- Show interest in people in other parts of the world
- Have strong feelings about fairness, justice, and social ills
- Need to belong to a peer group

Emotionally children...

- Increase independence from adults; more clearly express their own personality
- Want to make their own decisions
- Shift value preference from adults to peers
- Demonstrate responsibility and dependability

And we should...

- Have everything ready to go when they arrive
- Avoid comparisons and competition
- Involve both genders in activities of learning, fellowship and worship

And we should...

- Plan opportunities for creative writing and reading
- Provide interesting and challenging activities
- Encourage thinking, reasoning and problem solving
- Help children interact with good role model adults
- Allow children to make choices in activities
- Encourage memory work in creative ways

And we should...

- Support and offer guidance on appropriate relationships
- Create opportunities for satisfying interaction with others of their age
- Help children learn about people in other places and cultures
- Support efforts to serve people in need inside and outside the church
- Provide wholesome group activities

And we should...

- Offer experiences that enhance feelings of self worth
- Allow opportunities for decision-making
- Foster an atmosphere of trust, understanding and acceptance where children can freely express their problems and concerns
- Provide opportunities to participate in planning activities

Spiritually children...

- Explore different points of view in establishing their own beliefs
- Grow in faith as concepts mature
- Still live largely in the NOW; open to applying Scriptural morality to their own lives
- Relate belonging to the church with sharing and participating in the church activities
- Begin to understand history and see its relevance to current issues
- Begin to put beliefs and values in words

And we should...

- Provide activities for children to explore and interpret the Christian faith
- Offer opportunities for relationships with people committed to Christian living
- Help them explore relationships between Bible principles and their own decisions and behaviors
- Provide opportunities to actively participate in worship and fellowship with the whole body of Christ
- Offer historical background and cultural settings for events and people in stories of faith
- Give children opportunities to express their understanding of the Christian faith and message

CHARACTERISTICS OF TWELVE AND THIRTEEN YEAR OLDS

Physically young people...

- Grow rapidly and tire may easily; need rest whether they think so or not
- Begin maturing sexually; have questions and concerns about development in this area
- Are frequently awkward

And we should...

- Provide challenging but not over-tiring activities; do not confuse fatigue with laziness
- Answer questions simply and honestly
- Be patient and supportive

Mentally young people...

- Question and challenge adult thought and teaching; can think more abstractly and reason deductively but still rely heavily on concrete experience
- Enjoy adventure and discovery
- Sense of humor strong but sometimes awkward

And we should...

- Offer activities that challenge thinking, reasoning, and asking questions
- Plan for interesting activities to learn about and interpret the Christian faith
- Laugh with them, not at them (individually and collectively)

Socially young people...

- Are self conscious

And we should...

- Provide activities than increase sense of self worth

EVENT/DEAN MANUAL

- Want to be grown up but revert to childishness often
- Strive for independence from adults
- Need to belong; have a strong sense of loyalty

Emotionally young people...

- Have periods of moodiness as emotions fluctuate
- May feel misunderstood
- Demonstrate responsibility and dependability
- Experience frustration

Spiritually young people...

- Explore, question and evaluate their own beliefs and experiences
- May experience doubts
- Relate religious ideas to personal decisions
- Understand historical relationships and their influence on the Christian faith
- Desire to contribute to the life of the congregation

- Respect each as an individual; have high, but reasonable, expectations
- Give them responsibilities they are able to handle
- Offer wholesome group activities

And we should...

- Foster an environment of understanding and acceptance where they can safely express themselves
- Listen carefully, trying to understand their concerns
- Include them in planning activities
- Understand and accept individual personalities and abilities

And we should...

- Provide interesting activities in learning and interpreting the Christian faith
- Allow for questions and doubt; help them discover resources for exploring answers
- Structure experiences where they can discover the relevance of the Bible to their decisions
- Offer historical background and cultural setting for events and people in the story of the Christian faith
- Facilitate opportunities to participate in worship and fellowship of the whole congregation

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOLESCENTS

(Adapted from "Adolescent Thinking and Understanding" by Gary Sapp, Handbook of Youth Ministry, eds. Donald Radcliff and James Davies)

Physical

- Bodies physically develop more adult characteristics with which the individual may or may not be completely comfortable
- Hormones influence not only physical development but also emotional well-being and outlook

Mental

- Because of increased facilities in abstract thinking have a better grasp of the "future" and all its possibilities
- Utilize "prepositional thinking" to deal with possibilities through fantasy and hypotheses; can perceive multiple ways to approach problems; may lead to difficulty in making decisions
- Engage in hypothetical-deductive reasoning; create propositions, organize ideas, test outcomes, make decisions
- Use scientific reasoning to manipulate variables and outcomes; can understand and manipulate relationships between abstractions
- Have advanced use and understanding of language; understand metaphor, simile, irony and sarcasm; use word play to express beliefs, values, and preferences that are differentiated from adults'
- The ability to "think about thinking" allows the evaluation of thought processes for accuracy, consistency and truth

Social

- Able to conceptualize the thoughts and perceptions of others; can lead to heightened sensitivity to public exposure (This means adults should minimize public criticism and avoid ridicule.)
- Can better grasp complexities and nuances of social situations and relationships; makes decision-making more complicated and stressful
- Has high degree of idealism and criticalness which may first manifest itself within family relationships
- Evaluations of self and others tend to be more reality-oriented, objective, evaluative and reflective

Emotional

- Have a heightened sense of self-awareness and enhanced self-consciousness
- May tend to over-differentiate their own feelings (i.e., assume that no one can experience the heights or depths of emotions or thoughts they can); could lead to distortions in perception of reality
- Develop a real sense of "self"-- individual identity, responsibility, and esteem; self concept is central in influencing the development of interpersonal relationships and determining their type and quality

Spiritual

- Because of heightened awareness and preoccupation with self may experience overwhelming feelings of shame, guilt and worthlessness; can lead to opportunity for spiritual growth and enhanced religious understanding or increases in destructive, rebellious or criminal behavior (Research shows that adolescent religious conversion experiences and suicide attempts are highest around fifteen years of age.)
- Develop more personal relationship with God; begin to see God as confidant who provides loving guidance and support, not just one who provides answers for requests
- More deeply understand the significance of every person's worth in God's sight
- Better comprehend the holiness of God and the human-divine relationship
- Able to wrestle with the paradoxes of religious teachings and experience
- Questions and doubts about religious teachings and experiences are normal and can, in fact, provide the basis for enhanced spiritual development