

UNDERSTANDING AGE-GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

Human beings develop physically, emotionally, spiritually, and cognitively throughout their life span. One way you can express love and care for young people and build their sense of worth as children of God is to expect behavior of them that is appropriate for their ages. The opposite side of this is to show your love by not expecting behavior that is appropriately expected only of older children.

Younger Children (ages 7–9)

can be characterized in the following ways:

- They learn best by doing, and they have very short attention spans.
- They think in concrete terms about things they can see, hear, taste, smell, or touch. Most cannot think about abstract ideas such as truth, love, sin, and so on. They have a great need for adult role models of the same gender.
- They seek out heroes.
- Their faith is very literal. Because they are unable to think abstractly and because they seek out heroes, they enjoy the stories of the Bible and hearing about the people in the stories.
- They want to master many skills, but they still need to be cherished for themselves, not their performance.
- They are very active, but are often unable to manage their own need for rest. They need rest time and a clear bedtime.
- They are beginning to define themselves outside their families and look to their peer groups for acceptance.
- They have a very silly sense of humor.

Older Children (ages 10–12)

can be characterized in the following ways:

- They are very active but need help slowing down for rest.
- They have a deep need for fairness and characterize everything as right or wrong.
- They thrive within same-gender friendships.
- They are reluctant to relate to, and especially to touch, the other gender.
- Girls mature much earlier than boys and may be menstruating and wearing bras by this time.
- They still have a need for same-gender role models.
- They are beginning to question everything, but do so more out of wonder than out of doubt.
- Their faith is very literal and reflects the faith of their parents.
- They are beginning to learn the fundamentals of abstract thinking.

Younger Youth (ages 12–14)

can be characterized in the following ways:

- They are in the midst of a great deal of change: physically, emotionally, and socially.
- Boys experience growth spurts, voice changes, hormonal swings, and sexual changes.
- Girls tend to be more mature emotionally, socially, and physically than boys their same age, and therefore begin to date boys one or two years older. They swing back and forth between adult and childlike behavior.
- They need to be accepted and belong and will do almost anything to do so.
- They may have experimented with drugs, cigarettes, sex, and alcohol or be thinking about it, and may need a nonjudgmental person with whom to discuss their choices.
- They focus on the “now” and have very little ability to think about the future implications of their actions.
- They need very clear boundaries that allow them a sense of freedom and help them develop skills for responsibility.
- They are developing abstract thinking skills but may still prefer to think concretely.
- They are very idealistic.

Older Youth (ages 15–18)

can be characterized in the following ways:

- They are seeking to form an identity separate from their families.
- They can use abstract thinking skills that enable them to think about concepts and perspectives other than their own and about the consequences of their actions.
- They are beginning to form a statement of faith that is separate from their parents’.
- They are questioning the authority of scripture, church leaders, and their parents.
- They are almost fully developed physically but are still very self-conscious about appearance.
- They are very concerned about weight. This concern, particularly in girls, may develop into eating disorders.
- They still need lots of rest and sleep, but do not usually plan it into their day without reminders.
- Many have probably experimented with drugs, smoking, sex, and alcohol. They need to be able to discuss their choices in a nonjudgmental atmosphere.
- They are under tremendous pressure to succeed so that they can get into college or get a job.
- They want to belong.

