

# From our Churches

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*Scripture:*

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## ***AGE AND FAITH FORMATION***

What is Christian faith and how is it formed? How do children grow in faith?

All of us are on a journey of faith formation and are at different stages. The Theological Convictions of our new curriculum states “Before we are conscious of God, we are known by God who loves us and invites us into relationship.”

John Westerhoff and James W. Fowler, developers of faith development theory suggest that, if conditions are ripe for growth, faith expands like an upward spiral or the rings on a growing tree. What is that growth like in children? While children vary widely in their developmental processes, there are guidelines we can apply to the maturing conception of God, spirituality, and human relationships of different age groups. These categories are not rigid, but are on a continuum or direction of growth toward spiritual maturity.

The faith experienced by young children is the foundation upon which all other growth takes place and therefore deserves to be a priority in the church’s faith nurture agenda. The images of God’s caring presence and loving protection that we provide for our young children helps them grow in a trusting relationship with a generous God.<sup>1</sup>

Good relationships, experienced in a loving and generous environment, lay the foundation for growing generous attitudes and help children respond to God’s generosity. From learning to trust their caregivers, faith family and God, they move on to learning to say thank-you, to learning to share and give. When faith is nurtured in this way a child’s understanding will grow and extend to include a broader concern for others and God’s creation. If nurtured in a countercultural context of co-operation and generosity instead of competition and consumerism, children will mature to recognize themselves as stewards of their bodies, their time, their talents and their environment. We hope and pray that they will learn and choose to include God in the choices they make and to accept growing levels of responsibilities and partnership with God.<sup>2</sup>

### **Early Childhood Faith Experience and Concepts of God (0 – 5)**

- Children begin their spiritual formation journey by experiencing the love of God through loving interaction with their caregivers who serve as God’s hands, face, and heart. If caregivers are trustworthy and loving, and provide children with language for spiritual thought and

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Snyder, “Children’s Faith Growth”, Jubilee Guidebook, FLR, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Steckley et al. *Wrapped in God’s Love*, Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Interchurch Stewardship Committee, (2004).

expression, this trust and love is generally transferred to feelings and expressions of love and trust toward God. These expressions begin with non-verbal communication and evolve along with their physical, mental, and psychosocial development. Infants “overhear” and absorb the life of our spiritual community as they are cared for and cherished by their families and faith community.

- The response of children in early childhood to the idea of God is similar to the way they respond to a beloved stuffed animal or blanket; God provides emotional security. My three-year-old granddaughter plays with a ‘baby Jesus’ much like she plays with any other doll. Recently, my five-year-old granddaughter was comparing her father who was my baby to Jesus as God’s baby. “Spiritual awareness, then, is developmentally sensitive, which means that we need to tailor our expectations of children’s spiritual reflection to their age and stage of psychosocial development.”<sup>3</sup>
- As toddlers become preschoolers, they use their growing levels of perception and intuition to interpret their spiritual experience. Pretend-play based on the key stories and rituals of the faith is vital for exploring and owning the ideas and symbols of their spiritual community. Preschoolers have no clear division between reality and fantasy. We can expect them to weave together sacred symbols, Bible stories, secular storybook or television characters and real life experiences. Preschoolers also feel their lack of power in society and like to identify with superheroes that can do what they cannot do. They tend to view God as a miracle worker.

### **Primary Faith Experience and Concepts of God (6 – 9)**

- If children have experienced love, trust and generosity in the early years, they will have the capacity to expand that faith into a deeper relationship during their elementary school years. Their experience of faith will demonstrate a growing sense of fairness. They will respond deeply to religious narratives and will continue to view God and Biblical characters as great and good faith heroes. Experiencing trustworthy and loving relationships in the family and faith community remains vital for healthy faith development. They are moving beyond their earlier egocentrism and enjoy playing with, and not just alongside of others. They tend to view and experience Jesus as a loving, strong friend. Children who lack this foundation need us to fill in this gap for them. They require lots of patient love, understanding and consistency to help them learn to love, trust and share.
- In the faith community, primary age children will enjoy participating in worship, singing, and being part of the community and will be absorbing its attitudes. Pretend play remains an important way for them to express and internalize the symbols and ideas of their faith community, but they will begin to apply their growing awareness of the social structures of their environment to their religious ideas. They will begin to have and articulate questions about our world, the causes and purposes of things and will need the freedom to discover and create their own ways to express their evolving and deepening understanding of God.
- Primary children express their faith by being enthusiastic helpers with simple, age-appropriate tasks, and by participating in rituals of worship in the home and congregation. They are beginning to develop a sense of responsibility and are often joyful givers as well as worshipers.

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Marie Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives*, San Francisco, CA,: Jossey Bass, 2004, p. 124

## **Middler Faith Experience and Concepts of God (8 – 10)**

- Middlers enjoy worship if it is within their comprehension level. If they are familiar with the stories of the Bible, they will often identify with favorite characters. They thrive on memorizing and performing Biblical dramas or litanies and can contribute to intergenerational worship with these skills.
- With some modeling, they will personalize scripture and pray with it. Their growing writing skills make it a good time to begin faith journaling. With adult assistance, they are now able to develop a thoughtful inquisitiveness about their spiritual experiences and to articulate these experiences to others.
- Children in this age bracket often respond to God in deeply personal ways. While they view God as both creator and friend, who God is and how God works are often puzzles to be investigated. Middlers make connections between their faith in God and God's involvement in the systems that shape the larger world and its ecological, political and social issues. As they become increasingly aware of the larger issues of the world in which they live, they generally enjoy research and service projects. They can appreciate the beauty of creation, their dependence upon it, and our responsibility to care for it.
- Friendships with peers are increasingly important. They have the maturity for kind and generous sharing with others. They are very aware of rules and want things to be fair. While they are beginning to understand sin and forgiveness, a strong need for assurance of unconditional acceptance continues, especially when they have failed and need to accept negative consequences for their actions. They are idealistic and expect the adults in their faith community to live out the faith they profess. Observation skills are being fine-tuned and they are becoming more critical of inconsistency between words and actions in adults.

## **Junior Youth Faith Experience and Concepts of God (11 – 13)**

- While there is a huge range of levels of maturity in this age bracket, Junior Youth are generally more like youth than children. Their lives are filled with many critical questions and much insecurity as they undergo puberty and establish increasing levels of independence from their caregivers. As they develop skills for analyzing what they have been taught they become increasingly critical of inconsistency between words and actions of the adults in their lives. However, they are also developing the skills to critique what society is offering them and are developing and owning values as emerging adults. They are often interested in other faith traditions and in articulating their own beliefs. "Important support for faith development can be given by unflappable adults who are not threatened by questions."<sup>4</sup>
- Spiritual disciplines of reflection, journaling and Bible studies that help them understand God's intentions for the world can help them process their questions, develop their relationship with God and discern their place in the family of faith as well as in the larger world.
- God can now be experienced as a confidante, guide, and counselor who helps them come to terms with their personal moral behavior. They also perceive God's behind the scenes activity in social systems.
- At this time, the dominant message of our culture tends to tell junior youth that "You are not okay" – unless you have a certain appearance, a certain weight, wear the right clothes, enjoy

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<sup>4</sup> Marlene Kropf and MMA. Spirituality and Children, Healthy Living Topic Sheet

the right music and have the right toys. Keeping up with peers is a common temptation. Peer activity becomes more dominant, but this does not eliminate their strong need for acceptance by the larger community.

- The church needs to clearly communicate with this age group that they are gifted by God, and that these gifts need to be identified, developed and shared with others. Like Middlers, they need opportunities for reflecting on the differences between needs and wants. With good role models, many of them will give joyfully of all that they have and are. Finding ways of incorporating what they have to offer our community is helps them feel valued and part of the faith community.<sup>5</sup>

## **Sources**

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Steckley et al. *ibid.*