



## PARENT GUIDE FOR THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF CHILDREN

Parents are the first and best witnesses of the Catholic faith to their children. Whether you choose to homeschool or take advantage of a parish school or religious education program, it is helpful for you to have a general overview and description of the characteristics found at each stage in your child's development. These are not meant to be complete descriptions, nor are they meant to be stereotypical as each child develops at their own pace. This is a guide for you as to help you as you guide your child (ren) into a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ.

### GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (AGE 4)

- ✦ Learns by using senses, explores with all the senses.
- ✦ Enjoys manipulative play, which will help refine gross motor skills. (large muscle)
- ✦ Enjoys stories, rhyming, and nonsense songs, creative with a vivid imagination.
- ✦ Likes to make choices and begins to understand rules.
- ✦ Is developing sensitivity to the feelings and attitudes of others, particularly adults.
- ✦ Benefits from being given opportunities to be helpful and to show kindness.
- ✦ Lacks an understanding of cause and effect, intentional and unintentional actions.
- ✦ Needs to feel safe, protected, and loved.
- ✦ Needs encouragement with sharing with others.
- ✦ Needs repetition and review at home.
- ✦ Sees the world as centered around themselves, so basic manners need to be reinforced.
- ✦ Is capable of beginning to understand God's love by experiencing love within their family.
- ✦ Benefits from experiences in nature and appreciation of God's creation.
- ✦ Can use symbols and signs as a basis for awareness of the liturgy. (candles, altar, etc)
- ✦ Knows that prayer can be talking to God in their own words.
- ✦ Encourage their conversations with God, which are frequent currently.
- ✦ Needs to have demonstrated that God has made each child unique and special.
- ✦ Imitates parents and others in the household, so be careful of words and actions.
- ✦ Encourage the natural sense of God while waiting on content until they have begun to form their bond with God

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (KINDERGARTEN) some things carry over from previous level

- † Needs repetition and review at home.
- † Encourage their conversations with God, which are frequent currently.
- † Needs to feel that God has made each child unique and special.
- † Learns through active involvement.
- † Begins to be able to distinguish between fantasy and reality.
- † Listens and can begin to follow two and three step directions. Practice at home.
- † Thinks literally.
- † Desires to feel independent, but needs support and guidance.
- † Begins to show concern for others.
- † Needs to feel loved and accepted by others.
- † Needs to feel a sense of belonging in the family, in class, and in church.
- † Needs assurance of God's love through trusting relationships with caring adults.
- † Has a sense of wonder about God's creation, encourage it.
- † Is ready for exposure to Scripture and to various prayer experiences.  
Has an attention span of about 15 minutes on one active task.
- † Seeks individual attention and needs praise for accomplishments.
- † Begins to be able to collaborate in a group.

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (GRADE 1) some things carry over from previous level

- ✝ Recognizes that she/he belongs to a family.
- ✝ Experiences family rituals and activities. This is a great time to incorporate new liturgical year rituals into the family routine.
- ✝ Appreciates and thanks God or the special gifts they have been given. Continues to have private conversations with God. Encourage this.
- ✝ Understands that family and friends are important.
- ✝ Needs to experience forgiveness in daily life.
- ✝ Wants to help others, especially younger children.
- ✝ Is comfortable attending Mass on Sunday with family. Wants to take part.
- ✝ Helps others and is willing to help others.
- ✝ Shows respect for others.
- ✝ Begins to model Jesus and some of the saints.
- ✝ Changes are happening in the faith life of children between grades 1-3. They need to be introduced to a wider circle of people of strong faith. There needs to be consistent messages about faith from all adults who are in this wide circle.
- ✝ Model the faith lives of their parents and other important adults.
- ✝ Beginning to understand community responsibility and it is a good idea to allow them to create some household rules. This is the beginning of their moral development,
- ✝ Developing and learning about two sexes. They are becoming aware of the differences between boys and girls. They need to be assured and taught about the specialness of being male or female. Their friends are still of their own sex.

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (GRADE 2) some things carry over from previous level

- † Begins to appreciate family members and the gifts that each one has been given.
- † Beginning to see their role within the family.
- † Needs reinforcement on their specialness.
- † Is becoming interested in groups like scouting or team sports.
- † Growing sense of right and wrong. Conscience is developing. Might be very legalistic.
- † Changes are happening in the faith life of children between grades 1-3. They need to be introduced to a wider circle of people of strong faith. There needs to be consistent messages about faith from all adults who are in this wide circle.
- † Model the faith lives of their parents and other important adults.
- † They can retell a story from beginning to end, but they will not know the meaning of the story. They love to dramatize the stories of Scripture or any story, really.
- † He or she will be particularly interested in how things are made and how they work.
- † Daily practice of prayers becomes important to their routine and families need to keep this activity routine for the rest of their lives.
- † Begins to choose ways to share with others, encourage this.
- † As they begin preparation for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and First Communion, they need:
  - To witness forgiveness and mercy in their family.
  - To see important adults receiving these sacraments.
  - To be familiar with their parish church and the places within the building (altar, ambo, tabernacle, etc...)
  - To be reminded of good and bad actions e.g. Commandments and Beatitudes)

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (GRADE 3) some things carry over from previous level

- ✝ Begins to express opinion and feelings about God and the Church.
- ✝ Tends to be less cautious than younger children.
- ✝ Begins to demonstrate responsibility for actions, something to be built on at home.
- ✝ Developing an ability to feel empathy and compassion.
- ✝ Very curious and wants to explore things on their own.
- ✝ Beginning to develop close friendships.
- ✝ Can understand social and personal sin.
- ✝ Needs continual encouragement and support from family and other adults as they stretch out toward independence.
- ✝ Enjoys family and church rituals.
- ✝ Interested in hero stories from the Bible and from the lives of the saints. Encourage this.
- ✝ Prayer is still a bit self-centered, but sincere. Needs to focus more on thanksgiving and praise than requests.
- ✝ Needs to feel a part of the church community and is very willing to help at church.
- ✝ 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.
- ✝ Needs stability in home and in school. While this is true of all levels, with growing independence, the 3rd grade student needs to have solid and safe environments.

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (GRADE 4) some things carry over from previous level

- † Your child at this level is at a plateau in their stages of development. This does not mean they are not taking in added information, but rather the changes at this level are very small.
- † Enjoys participating in liturgy and church events.
- † Learns from observing as well as explanations.
- † Has become technology savvy.
- † Is very vocal about their feelings. They are often glad to share their interests in movies, sports, tv shows with anyone who asks.
- † Is now significantly influenced by teens and pre-teens in popular culture like music, television, social media. This needs to be monitored.
- † 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 by others. This is where we see bullying beginning.
- † Is beginning to think of larger social issues like war, hunger, poverty, prejudice. Needs guidance to not internalize.
- † Your child has developed good gross motor skills and is beginning to refine fine motor skills. This will be obvious in sports or just in their day-to-day movements.
- † Continues to grow in independence and feels a need for increasing independence from the family. This age child likes to help in forming plans and wants to play a role in making decisions in the home.
- † The 4th grade learner will continue to need the reinforcement of parents in the things that they do.
- † Interested in sexuality; they are also interested in living things and how they are made. They still do not like to be associated with the opposite sex.
- † Prayer becomes more rote and less imaginative at this level. Encourage creativity.

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (GRADE 5) some things carry over from previous level

- ✦ Your child can begin to be critical of adults who appear insincere in their faith.
- ✦ Open to learning about other cultures and is accepting of those who are different.
- ✦ Ready to take on liturgical roles.
- ✦ Belongs to various peer groups and adheres to their codes of conduct.
- ✦ Is learning to problem solve and make choices independent of adults.
- ✦ Greatly influenced by secular heroes, like sports figures.
- ✦ Will be experiencing rapid physical and emotional changes. Know differences between the sexes.
- ✦ Is 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.
- ✦ Your child will begin to seek privacy. Sometimes they will become secretive to achieve this privacy. At this age a child continues to experience occasional jealousy of siblings.
- ✦ Will still need the reinforcement of parents in the things that they do but do so privately as they will get embarrassed.
- ✦ Fifth graders will talk back to teachers and parents as they are spreading their independence.
- ✦ Your child knows right from wrong. They tend to tell the truth and sometimes they will avoid speaking rather than tell you a lie.
- ✦ Loves to travel to new places and explore. Fields trips and family trips are very important.
- ✦ Values success in competition and likes to compete.
- ✦ Humor is important to this age level, and they are developing a well-defined sense of humor.

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (GRADE 6) some things carry over from previous level

- † Your 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. Progress is quite erratic and unpredictable. Changes in adolescents are highly individualized and varied. You cannot expect the same thing from one youth as the next.
- † At this stage, your youth is more interested in their peer group, interests of the peers, and is willing to listen to their peers more than authority figures.
- † Likes to hang out in groups, usually groups of same sex. Has fierce loyalty to these groups.
- † Behavior can vary from alert, imaginative, to rebellious and quarrelsome.
- † Has an increased sensitivity to criticism and begins to challenge authority.
- † Justice and fairness are critical to this age level, even if they are not seeing the whole picture.
- † Young adolescents are keenly aware of the importance of Scripture for guidance in every day and this needs to be reinforced.
- † Very service-minded.
- † Is beginning to develop a historical sense of things and how things have come to be.
- † There is an increased awareness of the opposite sex but may lack the social skills needed to navigate through this time.
- † Past images and thoughts about God are challenged. These need to be replaced by more up to date images and thoughts that match their current age and development.
- † Value centered as individuals.



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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER

**(GRADE 7)** some things carry over  
from previous level

- † Your 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. Progress is quite erratic and unpredictable. Changes in adolescents are highly individualized and varied. You cannot expect the same thing from one youth as the next.
- † At this stage, your youth is more interested in their peer group, interests of the peers, and is willing to listen to their peers more than authority figures.
- † There is a great variation at this level in the physical, emotional, spiritual, and social development of each youth. Each youth at this level needs to be accepted where they are currently.
- † Your child is influenced by their changing body. Sometimes, this is confusing for them.
- † Youth at this age begin to being able to think abstractly.
- † Your youth may struggle with their own identity due to the pressure or example from peers.
- † Thrives when given the opportunity to experience the positive aspects of their new gifts of mind and body.
- † 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. They want to see a fair and just society,
- † They begin to develop friendships with those of both sexes.
- † The youth need to learn the skills of critical reflection so they can analyze life experiences, society, culture and Church in the light of the Gospel. There will be a struggle between what the Church teaches and what society teaches. Church values must be emphasized in the home.
- † They like to be involved in planning liturgical services and leading prayer.

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## GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR EARLY LEARNER (GRADE 8) some things carry over from previous level

- ✦ Your 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. Progress is quite erratic and unpredictable. Changes in adolescents are highly individualized and varied. You cannot expect the same thing from one youth as the next.
- ✦ At this stage, your youth is more interested in their peer group, interests of the peers, and is willing to listen to their peers more than authority figures.
- ✦ Needs a certain degree of privacy.
- ✦ Experience extreme highs and lows in relationships with friends.
- ✦ Require outlets for their talents: sports, art, music, drama, etc.
- ✦ Needs discussion, reflection, and prayer time with family. They may not ask for this.
- ✦ Lives a lot of their lives on social media. Care must be taken in this area.
- ✦ Is growing independent of the family unit, so creative ways to maintain unity without stifling the autonomy is a necessity.
- ✦ Very service-oriented. This is usually outside of the family unit.
- ✦ Enjoys being the role model for younger siblings as well as with other younger children.
- ✦ Dialogue between science and faith will be a conversation for both religious education and home over the next few years.
- ✦ The adolescent gives up their childhood notions of God. There is questioning of previously accepted tenets of faith. Open dialogue in the home is important when these doubts arise.
- ✦ Setting and attaining goals is a habit that an adolescent can achieve. A sense of time 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.

## RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Catholic Family Resource Library! - Catholic Sprouts Fun and meaningful family activities that help build that domestic church.

Catholic Icing — Catholic Crafts and More for Kids Catholic Icing is a website that offers Catholic crafts, activities, and resources for kids of all ages. You can find printable crafts, home altars, prayer tables, spiritual communion, VBS, etc

Catholic Kids | Loyola Press Large variety of family resources for the liturgical year.

<https://nfcym.org/programs/strong-catholic-families/leader-parent-resources/> Family resources from the National Forum for Catholic Youth Ministry. Resources geared for families with teens.

Project Nazareth | Evangelize Boston From the Archdiocese of Boston: Passing on your Catholic faith is some of the most crucial work a parent will do. PROJECT NAZARETH is a resource to help families grow their faith together. It is a tool to build the domestic church with Christ as the cornerstone.

Strong Catholic Family Faith - Home Large collection of resources from all over the United States.

52 Sundays A dynamic guide to help you and your family reclaim the Lord's Day with prayer, activities, food, and more! It offers simple and insightful ways for your family to spend time together each Sunday learning more about the Catholic faith and having fun while you're at it. Free downloads. Spanish version available.

Burnham, Bob. Little Lessons from the Saints. Chicago: Loyola Press. 2021.

Dowd, Kevin Ph. D Teaching Kids to Respect Others. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2018.

Geddes, Joan Bel. Children Praying: Why and How to Pray with Your Children. Ave Maria, IN: Ave Maria Press 1990.

Hendricks, Kathy. Forming Families in the Faith. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2015.

Hunt, Jeanne. Holy Bells and Wonderful Smells. Cincinnati: Franciscan Media. 1996.

Popcak, Dr. Greg and Lisa. Parenting Your Teens and Tweens with Grace. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor. 2021

Stanz, Julianne. The Catholic Parents' Survival Guide. Straight Answers to your Kids' Toughest Questions. Chicago: Loyola Press. 2023.

Vogt, Susan V. Raising Kids Who Will Make a Difference: Helping Your Family Live with Integrity, Value Simplicity, and Care for Others. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002.



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