



# UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT AT DIFFERENT AGE LEVELS

Every student is an individual. Their inner qualities, like temperament, personality, intelligence and rate of growth, and the external factors that influence them, such as family, economic status and social environment, make them unique. Nevertheless, there are some qualities that people at different age levels have in common, though the internal and external factors mentioned above will affect the way these qualities are manifested, their intensity, and their rate of development. As a catechist, you may find it helpful to know these characteristics in order to understand the needs of the students in your class. Below you will find some of these characteristics (adapted from a publication produced by the *National Catholic Educational Association*, and is used with permission).

## Who are you teaching?

**The First Grade Child:** Modeling of adults is critical to the development of first grade children. Their concepts of right and wrong are formed by the actions and words of the significant adults with whom they relate. These children are highly imaginative and frequently confuse fact and fiction. It is important that teachers and parents take the time necessary to explain reasons for things to them. It is at this stage that their own ability to make wise choices begins to develop.

Six-year-olds are persons who: learn best when involved in concrete experiences; are able to distinguish between good and bad; experience deep feelings and are able to demonstrate genuine affection; exhibit the desire to help others.

Some suggestions for teaching first graders: build on concrete experiences; give them practice on distinguishing between good and bad, right and wrong; explain reasons for things; provide opportunities to express positive feelings; provide opportunities to help others.

**The Second Grade Child:** The faith life of second grade children can, with positive and creative guidance, set the stage for life-long commitment to Gospel values. A personal encounter with Jesus in the Gospel stories gives children an experience of master teacher, healer, and compassionate “caretaker”. These children are growing less self-centered and more conscious of their responsibilities to others.

Seven-year-olds are persons who: are developing a personal relationship with Jesus; are highly competitive but respond to suggestions regarding compassion and cooperation; rely on others to define good and bad; love to learn and are naturally inquisitive.

Some suggestions for teaching second graders: use simple Gospel stories about Jesus; model the identification of right and wrong actions; suggest ways of helping and working with others; offer

opportunities to express feelings; answer questions promptly and simply; encourage learning through concrete experience.

**The Third Grade Child:** Third grade children move into significant relationships with their peers. They become increasingly conversant and interested in ideas. A clearer sense of time and space is evident at this stage, as well as an understanding of consequences related to behavior. Acts of intentional kindness are evident in the eight-year-old. The time is appropriate for maximizing the children's sense of personal responsibility for their actions. Knowing they are loved and forgiven for errors is an equally important factor for conscience formation.

Eight-year-olds are persons who: express and respond to signs of affection and affirmation; can accept responsibility for their own choices and decisions; are beginning to process abstract ideas and values; need personal, positive guidance in conscience formation.

Some suggestions for teaching third graders: increase opportunities to work with peers; emphasize the consequences related to behavior; invite children to exercise personal responsibility for their actions; begin to bridge from concrete material to abstract ideas.

**The Fourth Grade Student:** Fourth graders are in a state transition. These students are moving out of the close confines of family into a broader context of life. A growing capacity for self-motivation, responsibility, and self-reliance becomes apparent. Fourth graders are group oriented, and they need opportunities for group sharing and co-operative efforts.

The nine-year-old is a person who: loves to explore the unknown; can exhibit sincere loyalty and compassion; makes choices out of a context of "conscience"; can be sensitive to peer pressure; prefers to be with members of his/her own sex.

Some suggestions for teaching fourth graders: provide opportunities for group sharing and cooperation; encourage them to set goals for themselves; help them to express loyalty and compassion; give practice in making choices; help them to deal with peer pressure.

**The Fifth Grade Student:** Fifth grade students exhibit the beginning stages of "other centeredness." It is a critical stage for moral development and guidance as these students grow in independence and responsibility.

Ten-year-olds are persons who: have many questions about sexuality and sexual activity; are influenced strongly by the media; are usually in a pre-rebellious stage; understand right and wrong as measured against a set of values; see themselves as persons responsible for their own behavior.

Some suggestions for teaching fifth graders: include the moral dimension whenever possible; prepare yourself to answer questions about sexuality comfortably; give appropriate opportunities to exercise independence with responsibility; provide opportunities for group projects, giving clear guidelines; encourage critical questions about media presentations; explain civic, school, and classroom rules in terms of values; recognize peer pressure and try to use it positively; deal with the reality of peer pressure when dealing with decision-making skills.