

## Kindergartners and First-Graders

The sight of a yellow school bus picking up a child from the corner can pull at parental heartstrings like few other things can. Going to school—either part-time or all day—marks a tremendous change in the lives of these little ones, a change that’s felt not only in the home but in the church school as well.

What follows here is a brief description of some of the characteristics you’ll see in children in kindergarten and first grade. It leaves much unsaid—and is certainly no substitute for getting to know your group firsthand. But we do hope it will give you some insight into what you may anticipate from children in this age group.

### Intellectual Characteristics

#### Children at this age

- are beginning to enter the exciting world of symbols: numbers, letters, and words.
- are dealing with the complex process of learning to read and write; expect wide variations in ability levels.
- still depend very much on concrete experiences. They also continue to learn with their whole bodies. They love to touch, taste, feel, smell, explore, watch—and wonder. They learn best through *doing*.
- are still many years away from being able to deal with abstract faith concepts. They still interpret what they see, hear, and experience in a very literal way.
- enjoy listening to stories and retelling or reenacting them, but they listen with more discernment than preschoolers.
- have a longer attention span than preschoolers but still need to move frequently from one task to another.
- have often learned how to play games on a computer or a home game system (like Wii or X-box). They do not view technology as something foreign.

#### Tips for Leaders

- Don’t assume that because children are learning to read and write, they can use these skills effectively. Be patient and encouraging when asking children to count or to recognize letters or copy words. Because of the wide variance in reading ability in this group, you should be ready to adapt each session to best meet the needs and abilities of your children.
- Plan your sessions to give children frequent opportunities to change activities and move around. Balance active participation with some quieter activities.
- Plan learning experiences that appeal to different kinds of intelligences (word smart, number smart, picture smart, music smart, and so on. See the introduction to your leader’s guide and individual sessions for examples).
- Avoid using figures of speech, symbolism, and analogies to explain faith concepts.
- Relate learning to experiences the children have already had or to new experiences you can share with them.
- Learn how the kids in your group spend their free time and relate examples to those things.

## Social Characteristics

### Children at this age

- are still largely shaped by home and family; trust learned at home helps shape their concept of God and the faith community.
- are also experiencing an ever-widening social world through attendance at school, either part-time or full-time. They are learning new skills and making adjustments to many new and important people in their lives.
- are beginning to learn how to play with others, though they are still strongly egocentric. They are learning more about how to cooperate and how to behave in group settings. They are more open to learning about communal concepts like the church as God's family.

### Tips for Leaders

- Establish a good relationship with the home when possible. Include many home- and family-related illustrations when talking together about faith concepts. Encourage families to read the children's take-home papers to them.
- Draw on children's common experiences in home or school for examples.
- Watch for opportunities to build community. Encourage the children to do things together, to trust each other, to pray together, and to grow together in the faith.
- Look for teachable moments to help kids sense the diversity among themselves and among all of God's people.
- Remember that the children will see Jesus through you; you are an important flesh-and-blood example of faith in their young lives.

## Spiritual Characteristics

### Children at this age

- have a very real spiritual nature, a strong sense of who God is, and often relate to Jesus as their friend.
- are aware of right and wrong, but are still likely to define "wrong" in terms of its immediate consequence ("Taking cookies is wrong if Mom catches me!"). They begin to experience guilt and understand the joy that comes with forgiveness.
- understand God's love and our response within the context of everyday experiences and, to some extent, within the context of God's family, the church. By and large they are still concrete thinkers, however.
- can be delighted and awed by Bible stories. They can use their imagination to ask questions about the Bible and God.
- can express their love for Jesus in their own words and actions.

### Tips for Leaders

- Continue to help the children realize that God loves them and cares for them.
- Help the children sense that they are an important part of God's family, the church.
- Encourage the children to say their own prayers to God at home during the week and to be good listeners when God's Word is read.
- Let the children sense your own wonder and reverence about who God is and what God has done.
- Focus on attitudes and actions that exhibit faith, rather than on teaching complex religious concepts.
- Invite the children to express their feelings for God in a variety of ways that allow them to be spontaneous and child-like in their praise and worship.

## Second- and Third-Graders

As you prepare to lead second- and third-graders, remind yourself of who these delightful children are. There's much more to be said than what is stated here and, of course, each child is unique. The best way to get to know the children is to observe them from week to week, listening to what they have to say and being their friend as well as their leader.

Having survived learning the basics of reading and writing, children in this age group are (usually!) eager learners. And their thought processes are also advancing, enabling them, for example, to grasp a simple chronology of Bible stories.

Here, then, are a few “typical” characteristics of this age group.

### Intellectual Characteristics

#### Children at this age

- are becoming capable of thinking logically (simple classification, grouping, and ordering) but they are not yet able to reason abstractly; they still need specific, “concrete” representations to tie their thinking to.
- Exhibit a wide variety of reading skills. Some are reading well above grade level but others are still struggling to learn the basics. Some are able to read from the Bible; others will struggle with this.
- are beginning to understand the use of religious rituals and symbolism (as in the sacraments).
- are developing the ability to think in sequence and to understand cause and effect.
- have a growing sense of time and space; are able to differentiate between now and long ago, between fantasy and reality.
- are great collectors of just about anything you can name.
- enjoy listening to well-told stories, making up stories, retelling and reenacting stories, and comparing one story with another.

#### Tips for Leaders

- Be sensitive to the wide variety in reading abilities. To avoid embarrassing weaker readers, choose reading aloud activities carefully. Over the course of the year their reading ability will improve but continue to be careful not to point out reading weaknesses.
- Nurture each child's strengths and continue to provide learning experiences that appeal to different kinds of intelligences (word smart, number smart, picture smart, music smart, and so on. See the introduction to your leader's guide and individual sessions for examples).
- Build on the desire to collect and categorize things by going on nature “treasure hunts,” by setting up display tables, by being “detectives” and finding out information, by making lists, and so on.
- Emphasize that Bible stories are *true* stories from God's Word; help them to begin to develop a simple chronology of what happened when in the Bible; occasionally have volunteers read directly from simple passages in the Bible.
- Continue to avoid most analogies and figures of speech to explain religious truths; however, basic religious symbols—such as the cross and the elements of the sacraments—can be explained to the children.

## Social Characteristics

### Children at this age

- are gradually moving from being totally self-centered and are developing better ways of functioning within a group.
- take a more active role in worship services (singing, praying, listening) and have a stronger sense of church as God's family.
- are making friends and are discovering what it means to be kind to each other.
- value rules and expect them to be followed. They have a developing sense of justice and fair play.
- enjoy showing off their new abilities and want to know that their abilities and gifts are valued.
- will often be very aware of media and of what is on television or in movies. Some of them will also know a lot about cell phones, computers, the Internet, and video games.

### Tips for Leaders

- Give children opportunities to work together in groups, but vary the makeup of the groups, since kids will often pick the same partners if you give them the choice. They will seldom pick partners of the opposite gender on their own, but boys and girls can work well together if they are assigned to do so.
- Take time to remind the children that they are a valuable part of the church, that the church cares for them, that they can contribute to the worship service by singing, praying, and so on.
- Try to model fairness in the way you deal with the children; from time to time remind children of the rules of your classroom so you can work well together.
- Invite the kids to help you with tasks such as cleaning up the room or passing out materials; give them small responsibilities and praise their efforts.

## Spiritual Characteristics

### Children at this age

- are capable of understanding basic salvation concepts and making a commitment to Jesus. But they may do so simply out of a desire to please you or parents.
- often express opinions and feelings about God and church. They enjoy asking a great many “why” and “how” questions.
- often include prayer in their daily routines. Their prayers are frequently self-centered but are sincere and offered in faith.
- often still see issues in black and white.

### Tips for Leaders

- Provide opportunities for children to express—in their own age-appropriate way—their commitment to Christ.
- Pay close attention to the questions children ask; help them discover the answer rather than tell it to them.
- Involve the children in different kinds of prayer experiences; guide them to include thanks, praise, and requests for others in their prayers.

## Fourth- and Fifth-Graders

Once you get to know the children in your group, you'll be amazed at how different they are! No two of these imagebearers are alike. Still most children in this age group are beginning to establish a sense of who they are. And some of this identity comes through joining groups of one kind or another.

Being aware of these patterns of development can help you understand and minister to the unique persons God has placed in your care for these few weeks and months. Below are a few reminders of the world of fourth- and fifth-graders.

### Intellectual Characteristics

#### Children at this age

- are often proficient readers, though reading ability varies considerably and some may still struggle, especially with out-loud reading. Instead of learning-to-read they are now reading-to-learn. They are getting better at reading and studying the Bible with an emphasis on learning the facts. They can often be good at memorizing.
- love to gather and classify facts and dig into a subject. They have a growing sense of time and space, a good grasp of cause and effect, and can deal with timelines and maps.
- are still “concrete thinkers” and are usually unable to reason with abstract ideas in an adult way. It is easier for them to talk about *things* than about *ideas*.
- tend to have thinking that is anchored in personal experience (“You said it was impossible; well, I know someone who did it.”) Their thinking is also colored by emotion and by a sense of fair play.
- are identifying their preferences for certain learning styles; you may recognize budding artists or writers or musicians in your group. Some children in this age group have a beginning sense of what they're good at and may be somewhat self-conscious when asked to do things they don't do well.
- still love to learn by doing—participating in games, dramas, role plays, group projects, art projects, service projects, etc.
- often have a strong interest in nature, the environment, or animals.
- some will be very knowledgeable about things that are on television or in the media. Many will be well-versed in video games or in computers and the Internet. Some may even have cell phones of their own.

#### Tips for Leaders

- Continue to be sensitive to children who struggle with reading; ask for volunteers to read aloud or assign shorter/simpler pieces to weaker readers.
- Read some of the books your kids are reading, and watch some of the movies and TV shows they enjoy so you can refer to these for examples and illustrations. If you don't know what they're watching or reading, ask them. They're usually happy to tell you about it at great length.
- Recognize each child's strengths; structure your sessions so they give each child a chance to do something he or she really enjoys and does well; at the same time, encourage kids to try activities that may challenge them a bit (music, art, drama, dance, role play.) Let the group know that you have strengths and weaknesses of your own, and learn to laugh at

your own attempts to try something at which one of the children excels. This can help set the stage for accepting everyone's best efforts.

- Recognize that while these children can concentrate for longer periods of time and become involved in a topic, they also have a great need for movement. Shift activities frequently or add physical activity to the learning time so kids don't become antsy.
- Respect the mental boundaries of this age-group by staying away from theological arguments and analyses, but encourage their mental growth by asking *why* they feel as they do or have a certain opinion, by taking them into the nonliteral world of parables, by moving them into the discussion of ideas as well as things, and by using the anecdotal lives of heroes—including biblical heroes—to teach more abstract concepts such as faithfulness, love, covenant, and so on. Encourage them to think about why the people in Bible stories acted the way they did.
- Take advantage of good weather by occasionally going outside to work on an activity.

## Social Characteristics

### Children at this age

- are developing a sense of individual value and worth; are forming a sense of personal identity that includes statements about what they believe; need a sense of individual value and encouragement for their efforts in work and learning. They can be very sensitive to criticism.
- may place impossible expectations on themselves, tearing up stories they've written or pictures they've drawn because they don't think they're good enough.
- are spending more and more time with their peers or forming clubs or groups with children of their own gender. The opinions of friends begin to take on more importance, sometimes challenging the opinions of parents. Their group identity is stronger now than at any previous time in childhood.
- are becoming more responsible and caring toward each other and adults.
- are developing a communal sense about God's family, the church. They often want to be part of the church or peer groups within the church.
- are quick to sense when one child is favored or given special privileges.

### Tips for Leaders

- Encourage and support the children's efforts in work and in learning. Make sure they know that their work is acceptable and you are not looking for "perfection;" (when they become self-critical, it's hard for them to participate because they feel they can't do anything right).
- Encourage group work of all sorts, stress cooperation as opposed to competition. Encourage the children to interact with all of their classmates. Avoid cliques by not allowing them to choose their groups but assigning children to small groups when doing group activities.
- Give children responsibility for working effectively with others in groups and for working independently on some projects.
- Tell some of the "faith stories" that come out of your life and the life of your local congregation.
- Encourage participation in church activities such as children's choir, children's programs, and special events. Children can add their gifts to congregational worship as readers, ushers, artist, singers, and in prayer. Encourage your church to use those gifts.

- Help kids develop a sense of belonging to the community of believers.
- Work to avoid favoritism.

## Spiritual Characteristics



### Children at this age

- are developing a conscience—a personal sense of right and wrong that often expresses itself in judgments of what’s “unfair” or unjust. They may be critical of adults who appear to be insincere in their faith.
- may be able to deal—in a limited way—with moral questions in terms of motives as well as consequences. They are beginning to think about questions of ethics and morality in the context of love, loyalty, promises, and so on.
- may show an increasing concern about people who are hungry, homeless, or poor.
- are often open to learning about other cultures and can be more accepting of differences in others, especially if they have personal experiences with people who are different from them.
- understand why we pray. Are able to make up spontaneous prayers.
- are more inclined to look inward than younger children and may ask questions and wonder about making a commitment to Christ.

### Tips for Leaders

- When discussing moral/ethical issues, try getting into areas of motivation/intentions of those involved. Give guidance in making ethical decisions and encourage children to recognize the authority of Scripture. Examples from life are useful in helping children develop morally.
- Offer some service projects that children can do as a group.
- Watch for opportunities to point out the contributions of different cultures to music, worship, prayer, and so on.
- Watch for questions and statements that indicate an interest in making a commitment to Christ. Encourage the children to explore their faith and grow in their relationship with God. For some this may mean providing the necessary guidance to help them take the steps toward a public commitment.

## Middle Schoolers

As you lead sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders, you'll soon get to know what they're like. But even veteran leaders find it hard to analyze and categorize this age group. One reason is that kids in middle school are in transition from childhood to adulthood. Somewhere, probably at widely different points on the developmental continuum, you'll find each of your students taking halting lunges forward and painful slips backward.

The preteens in your group can vary all the way from those who profess to "hate" the opposite sex to those who spend increasing amounts of time thinking about them. The differences in physical maturation alone can be stunning. And physical changes are matched by intellectual, social, and spiritual changes that are every bit as dramatic.

Here are a few reminders for you to consider as you prepare to teach your middle schoolers.

## Intellectual Characteristics



### Young teens

- are gradually acquiring the ability to think abstractly and are no longer limited to "concrete" experiences from which to draw conclusions. Older middle schoolers have a developing ability to conceptualize, understand metaphor, think logically, speculate about ideas and propositions, and entertain lots of questions while toying with a variety of answers. While abstract thinking is starting to happen, keep in mind that many middle schoolers are just beginning this process. Some may still need very concrete examples to help them cross the bridge to more abstract thinking.
- like to flex their new-found mental muscles by pointing out inconsistencies in what they've seen, heard, and learned about many topics, including their faith.
- are becoming increasingly capable of working out their own system of beliefs and values.
- continue to need a lot of variety and "hands-on" learning experiences to maintain interest and attention. They can stay on one task longer than younger children but still respond best to frequent changes in pace and activities.

### Tips for Leaders

- Be aware that these early teens may be at widely differing places in their ability to handle abstract thinking. This means that you should include some questions and activities that they can successfully handle. At the same time, you can move your teaching beyond just facts and information.
- Ask questions that help these kids give their opinions and give them opportunities to draw conclusions from Scripture, to raise questions of their own, and to apply the insights gained from Bible study to the way they live from day to day.
- Establish a personal relationship with your kids. Stimulate, challenge, and lovingly guide them as they rethink old assumptions and entertain new ideas.
- Create a warm, friendly environment for learning where kids are free to ask questions and be themselves.
- Vary your teaching approach and methods from week to week as much as possible. Use activities that cover the range of all eight intelligences (see introduction to your leader's guide and individual sessions).



- Avoid lecturing whenever possible. Try some of the more unusual and creative activities suggested in your leader's guide.

## Social Characteristics

### Young teens

- struggle with the task of establishing their own identities. Many tend to move away from families and teachers toward their own peer group, who help them shape their beliefs, test their values, and provide support.
- may show their identity struggle in ways that startle and irritate adults (garish trends, abrasive music, or exclusive groupings).
- often feel an almost desperate need for acceptance, especially by their peers. Friends become very important, and though some middle schoolers won't admit it, research shows that families continue to play a vital role in influencing the values and beliefs of this age group.
- ride an emotional roller coaster with unpredictable ups and downs. They can be spirited, reckless, and energetic, especially in small groups, but they may also experience feelings of isolation and loneliness (despite hectic schedules and much busyness.) Their need for affirmation, acceptance, and support is hard to overestimate.
- may occasionally behave in disruptive ways to gain peer approval. They may giggle and whisper or they may be loud and argumentative. You'll have to judge just how much noise is detrimental to learning, how much bothers the group, and how much bothers you. Most young teens really want a well-run classroom.
- are often hugely concerned with their appearance to the point of becoming self-conscious. There seems to be no limit to the things these teens can stress about concerning their body image and self-concept. They don't want to be embarrassed but embarrass easily.
- may often appear totally self-absorbed (because they often are), but they are now able to take the perspective of other people. This new ability ironically gets a good workout as the kids use it to look at themselves as they think others do. While eventually this will blossom into an adult-like sensitivity to others, for a while it adds to their egocentrism.
- may spend long hours playing video games, going online, instant messaging, watching TV, or talking or texting on their cell phones.

### Tips for Leaders

- Build relationships. Let your kids know you like them, enjoy their company, and want to be with them. Listen to them and let them know you take them seriously. If possible, try to attend at least some of their games, concerts, plays, and other special events. They might not show that your attendance matters, but it does.
- Look for opportunities to affirm individuals privately (public praise can embarrass them.) Avoid sarcasm and criticism. Help them feel loved, accepted, and valued.
- Make the classroom a place where everyone is safe to express thoughts or opinions. Be fair but flexible, consistent but caring. Deal with individuals who misbehave individually and apart from the group. Doing it in front of their peers puts them in a situation where they will be even more disrespectful to you in order to impress their friends. Taking peers out of the situation makes it easier for everyone.
- The best way to have a well-run classroom is to vary the pace and activities. Kids who are engaged in the learning are less likely to misbehave. Building personal relationships with them also helps them to want the class to go well.

- Provide lots of opportunity for group interaction and working together on assignments or projects, but make sure no one is left out or feels rejected. Asking them to form their own groups gives too much opportunity for some kids to feel left out or hurt.
- Provide clear instruction for projects and activities while encouraging kids to be creative. They should have a good idea of what's expected of them. Creativity is often enhanced when kids are given some parameters within which to work.

## Spiritual Characteristics

### Young teens

- are moving from doing good simply to avoid punishment or to return a favor to a more “conventional” level of faith and morality, where the key is conforming to what the group or culture defines as “normal” and acceptable. These young teens are developing their own beliefs and values in the context of peers, school, media, and church. Belonging to groups like the church and participating in its rituals and ministry become increasingly important.
- are able to commit themselves to Christ and to understand what it means to live a life of Christian gratitude and service. Public profession of faith is a very real possibility as some have arrived at the place of making commitments in their own right, apart from peers and parents.
- are able to deal with moral questions in terms of motives as well as consequences. They can think about questions of ethics and morality in the context of love, loyalty, promises, and so on.
- are idealists, quick to point out faults and failures at home and in the world, quick to spot injustice, and eager to become involved in worthy causes.
- need to know they're important to God and to the church right now, not just when they get older.
- often admire and seek to imitate adult faith models as a way of establishing their own identity.
- may be struggling with doubts and questions about their faith, feelings that often intensify with older adolescents. Their faith still likely reflects the faith of their parents, but they have begun to make it more personal and individual. Some may reject the faith of their parents and teachers out of rebellion or a desire to demonstrate that they think for themselves, but this is more likely with older adolescents.
- will have particular resonance with thinking about a God who knows them as individuals and cares about them. As they are working on developing their identity, knowing that God knows them and loves them personally is very important.

### Tips for Leaders

- Involve kids in active ministry through service projects you do as a group. Encourage kids to participate in your church's worship and outreach ministries. Encourage your pastor or worship coordinator to find ways to consistently include young teens and children in worship leadership.
- Gently encourage those who express an interest in publicly professing their faith. Offer to talk with kids individually about their faith and answer any questions they have about the process of confessing their faith before your congregation.
- Help kids think through moral issues, give reasons for their choices, and get beyond just going along with the group. Use lots of examples from their lives. Case studies can be an effective approach for teaching ethics to older kids.

- Build on their idealism by encouraging them to respectfully protest injustice and inequalities they see at school or in their community. Encourage them to resist the clique mentality and think inclusively when it comes to selecting friends and joining groups.
- Think of yourself as a faith model for the kids. Know what you believe and live it and speak about it openly. At the same time, talk with them about difficulties and struggles that you experience (within reason, of course.)
- Assure kids who are struggling with their faith or with their failures that God does not expect or even reward perfection. God's grace is a gift through Christ.
- Encourage kids to have regular devotions at home and explore various forms of participatory prayers in your weekly sessions.