



Developmental Characteristics of Elementary Aged Children

This document describes the developmental characteristics of elementary aged children and provides activities to include for each age group.

Kids at different ages learn differently due to their physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development. Knowing these general characteristics will help leaders shepherd elementary aged children as they reach, teach, love, and understand them.

Early Elementary (Kindergarten–2nd Grade)

- Physical development
 - Are extremely active, so use a combination of high, moderate, and low energy activities
 - Learn with their whole bodies, so include activities that use all five senses or body movements
- Cognitive development
 - Enjoy discovering and creating, so plan activities that allow them to do so such as playing games, acting out the Bible story, solving simple codes, puzzles to answer lesson questions or learn memory verse
 - Don't think abstractly very well, so keep things simple
 - Are just learning reading skills, so be realistic and mindful of time it takes for them to read for themselves
 - Prefer structured activities and prefer making simple choices
- Emotional and social development
 - Are sensitive, so use positive words
 - Desire approval, so really listen to and affirm them
- Spiritual development
 - Are learning to view Jesus as friend and helper
 - Begin to feel the need to trust Jesus as Savior
 - Enjoy learning from the Bible
 - Begin to have a simple understanding of sin and its consequences
 - Begin to have a simple understanding of the gospel
 - Know the right answers but may not understand application
 - Are interested in finding out more about God and Jesus and His plan of salvation
 - Can learn to use the Bible to ask questions about God
 - Start to make conclusions about God

Middle Elementary (3rd–4th Grade)

- Physical development
 - Are active, so provide active learning experiences; intersperse movement into lesson time
 - Are enthusiastic, so give them things to be enthusiastic about; model excitement about their learning
- Cognitive development
 - Are improving their reading skills, so let them locate Scripture in the Bible and find information from reading a verse or passage of Scripture

- Highlight or underline key words or phrases in the Bible or lesson book
 - Read verse or lesson summary as a group
- Can discover and apply Bible truths, so talk about ways to apply the lesson to their lives
- Know the Bible teaches people how God wants them to live
- Can memorize and apply, so encourage Scripture memory
- Emotional and social development
 - Enjoy building relationships and friendships, so allow them to work in groups
 - Are looking for ways to show their independence, so challenge them, offer opportunities for them to help, and give them choices
 - Can be anxious, withdrawn, tend to complain, or hesitant to try new activities; structure and routine can help
 - Can be sensitive, easily hurt, cry easily; utilize Prayer Chair or other leader to provide individual attention away from the group as needed
- Spiritual development
 - Develop values but might think right/wrong is not necessarily good or bad
 - Know the Bible tells of God's salvation
 - Can ask questions about religion, so let them ask
 - Can follow the examples, teachings, and commandments of Jesus
 - Are aware that God loves and values all people

Older elementary (5th–6th Grade)

- Physical
 - Are active but can handle longer periods of sitting
 - Enjoy competitions and active games
- Cognitive development
 - Think more, so they may seem slow to respond; don't be afraid of silence; listen and respect their ideas
 - Are imaginative, creative, and curious
 - Bring in history and facts about Biblical culture
 - Involve them in planning skit or song for large group time
 - Use arts to express main point of lesson (ex: music, dance, drama, art, crafts, science)
 - Can memorize easily, think quickly, and solve problems
 - Give choices when possible
 - Let them ask questions and answer with the Bible
 - Present group challenges
 - May try to avoid things that appear too difficult for them
 - Break down activities or assignments into smaller pieces
 - Have children work in pairs, teams, or with helpers

- Emotional and social development
 - Begin to question authority, so they may need reminders of class rules and behavior expectations
 - Love to socialize, so encourage fellowship inside and outside the class
 - Worry about fitting in and being rejected, so look for ways to personally affirm each child
 - May be on an emotional roller coaster, so give them a calm role model
 - Are often critical of themselves and others, so help them feel needed, accepted, and loved
- Spiritual development
 - Can be sensitive to conviction from the Holy Spirit
 - Develop a value system based on their own understanding of Biblical principles
 - Can apply Biblical principles to their lives
 - Make many choices but may not follow through on long-term commitments
 - Value their own experiences
 - Allow time for them to share
 - Watch for shepherding moments
 - Begin to adopt a religious belief system of their own; therefore, it is important that they know what the Bible says