

Youth Developmental Stages
An Understanding for Youth Workers
By Natalie Bylinsky

When working with youth in the church, it is important for the youth minister to have a basic understanding of child development. Just as it is critical for a parent, teacher or advisor to recognize a child's ability level when setting up rules or activities it is vital for the youth minister to consider the maturity and developmental level of the children and adolescents with whom he/she is working and when setting up activities.

A lack of understanding of development can result in unnecessary anxiety and conflict for those who work with children. An example that is frequently seen with young mothers who don't know the pattern of physical development involves the mother becoming anxious when her child is unable to physically perform some task. For example, it would be unrealistic to expect a four-month baby to be able to stand. Unrealistic expectations can result in anxiety and frustration.

Conflict can also arise in these situations where expectations exceed the child's physical, emotional or cognitive ability. As a psychologist I regularly hear complaints that a young toddler is unable to sit still during dinner. Children at this age, however, have not developed the patience to sit still for a prolonged period of time. Conflict arises when the parent assumes that fidgeting about is intentional rather than a byproduct of being a toddler. Certainly when each parent has different expectations for the child further conflict can arise.

While most people are aware of patterns of physical development in young toddlers and children, seeing that there are skills that develop with time (such as sitting, standing and walking), many do not recognize that this physical development continues throughout childhood and adolescence. This pattern of physical development continues throughout adolescence, where children begin to develop more fine-tuned motor skills and develop muscle mass to complete tasks that were previously not physically possible.

Similar to the pattern of physical development, psychologists have studied patterns of cognitive, emotional and spiritual development. Some theorists have spent their entire careers studying patterns of development. Using these theories as a guide, this review will provide a summary of what one might expect from a child at different stages of development. Before reviewing these stages of development there is a major caution that must be made. The developmental stages described in this text are meant to provide an overview, not a tool for measuring the physical, cognitive, emotional or spiritual development of a given child. While reviewing the developmental expectations for a given age some might begin to assess that a child is "abnormal" or "has problems" because a specific milestone has not been reached. This material was not designed to provide an assessment but rather to present an outline of developmental stages to guide your work with children and adolescents. Do not fall into the trap that many parents do when they purchase books that describe developmental levels and then worry that their child is not at the correct stage. Similarly, parents often compare early developmental milestones between young children. "My son is sitting up, can yours?" I caution all who read this review of development not to act as pediatricians or psychologists assessing the developmental level of a child. This review is to be used as a guide for the Youth Ministry worker to appropriately plan activities for the children and adolescents with whom you are working not as a guide for assessing children.

Having voiced this caution, there is a second caution that I will add. There may be times when you might feel compelled to discuss concerns or issues with a parent. My second caution is to broach any such topics very carefully and to be certain about your facts. I have heard numerous horror stories of child care workers having read a book about developmental psychology telling a parent that a child is "slow" or "shows signs of having a problem" when in fact there were other circumstances or facts that were not considered before a conclusion was reached. Diagnostically these issues are complex and involve review of many factors that are not easily assessed. It is not the role of a Youth Minister to do an assessment of a child. In fact, such an assessment can do significant harm.

With these cautions voiced, I would like now to focus on the development of children from preschool to late adolescents, reviewing physical, cognitive and emotional development within each age group. The review of development will be followed with a brief synopsis of how these stages of development impact the work of a youth minister.

PRESCHOOL (4-5)

Physical development at this age includes frequent growth spurts and continued development of gross and fine motor skills. The preschool age child begins to master running, jumping, skipping and catching. The child has the motor skills to brush his/her own hair and teeth.

At this age the child is beginning to develop fine motor skills that are needed to draw and write. The child is able to work with a pencil or crayon to draw a picture and write letters. Drawings of children in this developmental age are simple, but symbolically often reflect the general shape of the object. For example, a drawing of a person will include the basic shape of a person, with a head and body, but typically lacks sophistication and details.

Just as the child develops physically there is a distinct pattern of cognitive development. At the age of four to five the child understand concepts of measurement and grouping. Typically children at this age can count, recite the alphabet and remember short songs or poems. The child is able to use words to express feelings and has the ability to tell a story with a beginning middle and end. The child understands rules for behavior and can follow simple instructions and those that involve several simple steps.

At this age the child understands 2,500 words and has a vocabulary of approximately 2000 words. Verbally the child can combine 6-7 words to make a sentence.

Emotionally, these children are becoming more independent and are beginning to have a fundamental understanding of gender roles. In fact children at this age can have a pretty rigid patten of gender specific behavior. For example, they might have rules that “boys only” engage in some activities. Children at this age also begin to have friendships that are based on preference.

Children at this age are beginning to develop self-esteem. Identity and self-esteem develops through the mastery of tasks.

Children at this age are able to regulate their emotions. They can verbalize their feelings and express reasons for feeling sad, happy or mad.

SCHOOL AGE (6-10)

The school age child grows at a rapid rate approximately 2 to 3 inches per year. During this time there is a dramatic increase in muscle mass and strength. Physical development also includes improved fine motor skills and an increase in strength. Children at this age begin to master more and more physical abilities and become increasingly adept at sports and dance. Fine motor control results in the ability to make complex drawings and to write using cursive script.

Cognitive development includes dramatic improvements in long term memory resulting in a dramatic increase in vocabulary. During school age child can have a vocabulary of 25, 000 to 30,000 words. Children at this age also understand grammatical rules and understand humor that involves violation of grammatical rules. A major focus in this developmental stage is the acquisition of knowledge in school.

The school age child becomes increasingly independent and is able to follow complex rules. At this age the child enjoys competitive games and clearly understands rules associated with games. Self-esteem continues to develop during this phase and is tied to mastery and social relationships.

Socially, the school age child is focused on relationships with same gender peers. As the child grow the peer group becomes important for the establishment of identity. Friendships now begin to focus on common interests and compatibility.

PRE-ADOLESCENT (11-12)

The pre-adolescent youth can have significant growth spurts. However, there is great variation between children. Similarly, children who are 11-12 years old may also begin to show signs of puberty. Development includes continued improvement in both fine and gross motor skills.

Cognitively these children are able to reason and problem solve. They are beginning to develop abstract reasoning skills and can understand multiple perspectives. Children at this age are receptive to problem solving approaches that encourage considering alternatives and consequences.

Emotionally these children fluctuate between independent and dependent behavior. These children frequently want to have increased independence but will often vacillate between wanting to be treated as an adolescent and wanting to be treated as a child.

As the child develops his/her peer group becomes increasingly important. As adolescence approaches the peer group becomes more critical in terms of self-esteem and identity development.

Children in the preadolescent phase have ambivalent feelings toward the opposite sex, shifting between interest and disregard. As the child enters puberty he/she is more interested in romantic relationships. Same gender peer group continues to be of critical importance for the child; however, he/she will also begin to show interest in the opposite sex.

EARLY ADOLESCENT (13-15)

The young adolescent continues to have growth spurts and enters puberty where there is development of adult sex characteristics. Physical development can also be a source of tension for the adolescent if he or she is not developing at the same rate as other in the peer group. For example, a young girl who is physically developing earlier may feel uncomfortable with her body, just as a child who is a late developer may feel awkward around peers. Body image becomes increasingly important for the adolescent.

Cognitively the adolescent is able to reason and understands multiple perspectives. The adolescent can use this abstract reasoning to solve complex problems. The adolescent also has increased maturity related to understanding complex moral issues and problems.

Emotionally the adolescent continues to need independence and conflict is common between parent and child because of this need for independence. Despite the frequent reliance on peer group the adolescent relies on family for support and nurturance.

Romantic relationships become increasingly important and directly impact feelings of self worth.

LATE ADOLESCENT (16-18)

The older adolescent continues to have growth spurts. Physical development can continue to be a source of tension for the adolescent if he or she is not developing at the same rate as others in the peer group. The adolescent at this age is at peak physical health. Body image continues to be important for the adolescent.

Cognitively the adolescent is able to reason and understands multiple perspectives. The adolescent also begins to make long range plans for the future and is able to develop plans for achieving goals.

The adolescent develops a personal identity. At this time the adolescent begins to develop a new relationship with his/her parent where he/she is an adult in the relationship.

Romantic relationships become increasingly important and directly impact feelings of self worth. Friendships continue to be of critical importance but as the adolescent enters adulthood the focus is on coupling and developing intimate relationships.

IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT ON WORK WITH YOUTH

The youth minister will need to recognize that identity formation is key for the adolescent. As the adolescent is forming his/her own personal identity he/she is evaluating what issues are important to him/her. At this stage of life the adolescent will begin to consider what role that the Church and spirituality will have in his/her own life. The adolescent is looking for a place where they belong.