



Understanding the Elementary Child

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Effective teaching begins with an understanding of children—knowing how they think and feel and being aware of the stages they pass through.

Parents and teachers sometimes wonder why kids act as they do. What motivates them? What keeps them from trying? How can we minister to the needs of the “whole” child? How do children learn best at each stage of development? We need answers to questions like these in order to teach the Bible to elementary children.

Understanding the developmental stages children pass through can help us plan more effectively. Children need a balance of active and quiet learning. Plan for a balance of activities during the children’s church hour. Children learn through involvement in carefully planned learning activities as well as when they are listening to an exciting Bible story.

Early Elementary

Young elementary children are becoming more aware of the larger community. They have new opportunities outside the home to participate in a variety of school and church activities. Their increasing skill development allows them to participate in group games and team sports. Their growing muscles need exercise in order to develop properly. Sitting for long periods

without breaks to stretch and move about can be very tiring and frustrating for 6- and 7-year olds. These children need opportunities to expend their energy.

Despite their rapid growth and their desire to grow up, this age group needs frequent doses of reassurance and encouragement. They are prone to worry. They may combine bits of information they overhear from adults with their imaginations to come to some frightful, unfounded conclusions. Sunday School teachers can lay a solid foundation of

God’s care during these years.



Stories of the Good Shepherd, the Prodigal Son, and Jesus Stills the Storm give children a sense of security and confidence.

Upper Elementary

Middle elementary kids (grades 3 and 4) and preteens (grades 5 and 6) go through growth spurts

that make them seem awkward and clumsy at times. Yet, these are the skill-building years when their fine motor skills are being refined. Preteens can be boisterous, noisy, and highly competitive. They want to be involved in activities, not just told about things. They enjoy clubs and may exclude peers from their group.

Older children want adventure, excitement, and involvement in “grown up things.” They resent being treated “like babies,” and want to be included in adult discussions and decisions.

This age group is increasing in reasoning powers, the ability to plan, organize, and do research for school projects. Take advantage of this important time to build their Bible knowledge and research skills. Older elementary children can classify and are ready to understand the divisions of the Bible. They can learn where to find the Creation story, the Gospels, and Paul’s letters. Middlers and preteens are curious and ready to learn what the Bible says about real life issues they face every day.

Memorizing skills are at their peak, and these children like the challenge of memorizing when it’s rewarded or in game form. Bible facts provide the knowledge base for their growing understanding of Scripture. Knowing Bible facts is just the beginning. Understanding

Scripture and relating it to our students' lives should also be our goals.

Elementary children respond to caring teachers who understand

them and who know how to make the Bible "come alive." They are ready to be inspired and challenged by the Word of God and its meaning for their lives. Wise

teachers will take advantage of these wonderful growing years to make an eternal investment in the life of a child.

Questions For Further Study—

1. List four characteristics of the early elementary child.

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

2. List four characteristics of the upper elementary child.

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

This article was adapted from one article in the colorful training booklet called *StepONE, A Guide for Teachers—Elementary*, by Verda Rubottom, Elementary Consultant in the Sunday School Field Ministries Department. *StepONE* reads like a magazine and trains like a conference. It's a quick, affordable training tool that your early childhood teachers will enjoy reading. *StepONE* will help teachers and parents minister effectively to 2- through 5-year-olds. The complete resource is available from the Gospel Publishing House, order number 02-0287. Call 1-800-641-4310.

