

# Age Group Characteristics: Key to Understanding Kids

by Virginia Patterson, Ed.D.



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hy are age group characteristics the key to understanding kids? You might answer with, “Because that’s the way God made them.” Luke 2:52 says,

“And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” This Scripture suggests that God created people to progress through certain developmental stages that affect every area of growth—physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual. The more we understand these stages, the better we can minister to the needs of each child at camp.

Several researchers, primarily Erik Erickson and Jean Piaget, have contributed to developmental philosophy. Erickson’s research determined that children move through eight life stages, experiencing developmental growth from early infancy through adolescence and young-adulthood into adulthood.

Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, identified four general levels of qualitative reasoning. We all go through these levels from birth to our young adult years. The age group characteristics chart (see inside) is based primarily on the research of Erickson, Piaget and other developmental learning theorists.

Programs and curriculum should involve children at the skill and understanding levels they are capable of handling to help them in their developmental processes. But to gain the greatest degree of learning, they need the help, instruction and encouragement of adults.

Adults working with children and teenagers should be aware of age group characteristics that help them see the developmental process at work. Note the progression in the charts showing the developmental process from age level to age level.

## Cultural Influences

While the behavior of children is greatly influenced by their innate, God-given developmental stages, sociocultural factors also affect their behavior.

Children grow up in a variety of family situations. Because of the high divorce rate, many children spend a portion of their growing-up years with a single parent or face the challenge of a blended family. Others live with grandparents, relatives or family friends. Some are adopted by single adults; some are born through genetic engineering. Many are born to unwed teenagers; some of these kids live in poverty.

In schools, families and society, children are likely to experience abuse, violence and sexual exploitation, and be tempted with illegal drugs, alcohol and other risky behaviors.

In his book, *A Sympathetic Understanding of the Child: Birth to Sixteen* (Allyn & Bacon, 1994), David Elkind concludes that over the past 50 years, sociocultural changes have had a dramatic impact upon children.

A century ago, people viewed children as innocent, needing adult protection and security. This childhood innocence was reinforced by the schools and media. Childhood was a special, magical time to be savored and enjoyed. Children’s literature was protective and reflected family values.

However, since the 1960s, our perception of children has changed. Children are viewed as competent, ready to handle the challenges of life. This shift is primarily related to changes in adult lifestyles, not changes in the nature of childhood.

Evolving family structures, media and children’s literature continually expose children to the adult world and its problems.



# Camper Characteristics

## Grades 1 and 2

## Grades 3 and 4

### Physical

- very active and energetic, but tire easily
- improving in small muscle control; able to handle tools and materials
- developing large motor coordination—jump rope, ride two-wheeled bike
- developing basic physical skills necessary for playing games
- slow gains in height and weight

- have high energy level; hard for them to sit still and work on difficult projects
- devour new activities, experiences and food—insatiable appetite
- motor skills are executed more quickly, with better coordination and timing
- adolescent growth spurt begins, two years earlier for girls than boys
- puberty may begin for some girls; first stage of breast development
- able to take responsibility for personal hygiene

### Emotional

- express feelings freely—fear, joy, affection, anger, shyness, jealousy
- peer interaction more pro-social, less physical aggression
- sense of justice based on reciprocity, give-and-take
- learning to forego immediate reward for greater benefits later
- developing a sense of competence, a realistic self-image
- enjoy recognition for achievements

- have developed an adaptive set of strategies for regulating emotions
- self-definition and description of others include inner qualities, not only external
- can step into another's shoes and view self from that person's perspective
- judge others with more discernment and objectivity; recognize intent vs. mistake or accident
- becoming self-sufficient and independent; still sensitive to failure and criticism
- enjoy new experiences and challenges; need recognition for achievements

### Social

- developing the ability to see another's point of view; appreciate cultural diversity
- may experience peer criticism for physical, intellectual or sociocultural differences
- becoming more responsible and independent
- enjoy playing with friends (usually same-sex), but can also be alone
- beginning to develop "best friend" relationships based on trust
- strong sex-role stereotyping; imitate same-sex models
- concerned with fairness and playing by the rules

- appreciate moral rules and social conventions; helping others because it's right
- same-sex peer groups emerge; two or three "best friends" tend to change
- learning to balance school with many interests—sports, music, hobbies and the like
- generally good social rapport with peers, parents, teachers; sibling rivalry may increase
- tend to be responsible, dependable, congenial; overextension/fatigue may limit desire
- become aware of gender stereotypes in personality traits and school subjects

### Intellectual

- attention becomes more selective; active involvement is needed
- use memory strategies; present information in organized, meaningful ways
- word definitions are concrete, referring to functions and appearance
- vocabulary increasing rapidly; most enjoy reading
- enormous curiosity and activity—climbing, jumping, running, exploring
- can understand right from wrong

- logical thought remains tied to concrete situations
- memory strategies for recitation and organization become more elaborate and effective
- long-term knowledge base grows and becomes better organized
- grasp double meanings of words, comprehending metaphors and humor
- adapt messages to the needs of listeners in conversation and communication
- capable of spending hours on activities that interest them; can budget time and work alone

### Spiritual

- need help using the Bible; some can read independently
- can memorize Bible verses and understand basic Bible truths
- understand they can have a relationship with God and Jesus
- able to confess wrong things (sin) done and ask for forgiveness
- feel they can tell God anything; He is a friend and helper
- beginning to see church as a group of people, rather than a place

- can read and understand easy Bible versions; able to have personal devotions
- capable of memorizing Bible verses and passages
- see Jesus as God, but also as a human being Who lived a perfect life
- can understand the need for confession of sin and acceptance of Christ as Savior
- have a simple, honest faith; believe prayer is effective
- beginning to make choices based on biblical values that affect behavior

## Grades 5 and 6

- like physical activity; have a high energy level; boys are sports-minded
- motor performance gradually increases and levels off for girls; continues for boys
- growth spurt in girls—weight and height; early menarche
- gradual growth spurt for boys; early genital development
- able to take responsibility for personal hygiene, health and fitness
- need information/counsel as to benefits and consequences of overall good health

- achieving personal independence and a greater sense of internal control
- friendly and cooperative; may have outbursts of anger, defiance; need to be noticed
- sense conflict over beginning to separate from parents and wanting to be with them
- need warm relationships with adults other than parents; see adults as role models
- may alternate between mature behavior and childish language and behavior
- increasing freedom creates concern about the security of the world around them

- outgoing, friendly, relate well with adults and peers; respect strong teachers/leaders
- want to belong to peer groups with similar values to reinforce identity and self-esteem
- value same-sex friendships in terms of loyalty and companionship
- place high value on rules and fairness; respect authority
- becoming more competitive as well as responsible
- spend less time with parents and siblings; still enjoy the family

- better use of concrete operations skills; mental trial-and-error experimenting
- can ask logical questions and make generalizations about real things and events
- beginning to think abstractly, but still need concrete, practical applications
- discover how things are made/work by active, participatory learning experiences
- can improve learning by making plans, following through and evaluating activities
- can develop pride in self by doing things well and cooperating with peers

- able to study the Bible on their own and develop biblical values
- have a desire to understand more about God through Bible study and Bible memorization
- can comprehend the death and resurrection of Jesus and desire salvation
- can apply biblical values to real-life situations and make choices accordingly
- have a growing sense of compassion and service to others

## Grades 7 to 9

- girls reach peak of growth spurt; add more body fat than muscle; average age of menarche
- girls' motor performance gradually increases, then levels off
- boys begin growth spurt, add more muscle; take pride in athletic prowess
- major pubertal change begins for boys; may feel tired, awkward, irritable
- girls may date older boys because of physical development; few boys date

- preoccupied with self, introspective, self-evaluative; may be moody or depressed
- increased conflict between parent and child; desire for independence vs. dependence
- regard themselves as always on stage, having an imaginary audience; everyone's focus
- may develop an inflated opinion of their importance
- self-esteem declines; need opportunities to plan and lead in accepting, safe environments
- dread violence and aggression in school and community

- conformity to peer pressure increases; cliques form; may join crowds
- maximum impact of peer group—helps with psychological distancing from parents
- loyal friendships become more intimate for girls
- friendship for boys built on status and mastery in sports or other activities
- dating relationships lag behind same-sex friendships; some girls date older boys
- may experience identity confusion: adult or child, male or female
- increased gender stereotyping of attitudes and behaviors; more difficult for girls

- begin using basic formal operations—abstract and hypothetical concepts, inductive and deductive logic; solve problems by considering alternatives
- want facts and proof for things previously accepted on trust; want teachers/leaders to express opinions and not be threatened by student challenges
- want a part in decision-making affecting them; most adhere to internalized values of parents
- want definitions and details about social, moral and political issues
- become more idealistic and critical of adults and themselves

- capable of a commitment to Christ
- able to practice Christian growth disciplines
- struggle with failure to live up to biblical standards and their ideals
- have a keen sense of right and wrong; becoming aware of social and moral issues
- like to be involved in activities and events that are significant and help others

## Grades 10 to 12

- reach adult physical development
- physical activity for girls declines due to fewer opportunities and less encouragement
- motor performance increases dramatically for boys; involvement in sports and athletics increases over the high school years
- achieve sexual maturity; have probably started dating; may have experimented with sex

- self-esteem rises due to approval of parents, other adults and peers
- sense of identity becomes more clear; self-concept more organized and consistent; personal and moral values are key themes
- balance between social and emotional growth; receptive to criticism, may try to change
- friendships based on greater loyalty and intimacy, promoting the capacity for romance
- may be anxious about forming intimate heterosexual relationships
- concerned about career choice and other aspects of the future

- conformity to peer pressure declines; cliques and crowds decline
- family system has changed, allowing more independence and freedom; less conflict
- autonomy leads to being more responsible, dependable; perform social niceties
- siblings may be companions, especially same-sex siblings
- forming emotionally intimate pre-sexual partnerships
- strong gender stereotyping contributes to sexual coercion and abuse

- master the components of formal operational reasoning on familiar and different tasks
- engage in hypothetical, deductive reasoning—think of possible solutions to problems and test them systematically to arrive at the best solution; like to discuss and explore
- able to coordinate theory with evidence and evaluate the logic of complex problems, thus forming personal convictions
- realize academic potential with encouragement from parents, peers and teachers/leaders
- better at everyday planning and decision-making; balance school, job, recreation and family

- able to practice Christian growth disciplines
- able to give, serve and make personal commitments to Christ and to causes
- acquiring an ethical system and set of values as a guide to behavior
- may consider how spirituality is part of their search for the meaning of life



As the adult perception of childhood changes, the demand for children to be competent is overwhelming.

Often, children are left to fend for themselves—or they are expected to help adults solve adults' problems.

As the adult perception of childhood changes, the demand for children to be competent is overwhelming. Preschool-age children are enrolled in all kinds of schools—ballet, swimming, sports, music, language and drama. They are dressed in designer clothes and put on display. And there are long waiting lists to get kids into the right kindergartens or private schools.

The media depicts children as competent, often outwitting adults or helping parents with their problems. Children's literature includes stories about relatives who have AIDS, children who have been sexually abused and parents who are alcoholics or drug addicts.

### Caring for Kids

In light of these factors, what can camp staff do to help kids adopt Christian values and behaviors to cope with the world in which they live?

First and foremost, let them be children! Encourage situations where they can succeed.

When they succeed, they will gain self-confidence.

Let them take initiative and do their own projects. Support creativity. Recognize strengths.

Children need adult friends who will give them encouragement, praise and positive feedback. In the camp setting, we should talk to kids, listen to them, look at them and compliment them.

As camp staff, we can also reinforce hope in children.

Explain God's plan and purpose. Share the goal that motivated the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:7–17: "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (verse 14). Paul offers himself as a model to be imitated and recommends that his readers pattern their lives after those who are reaching toward this goal.

Camp leaders, too, have the wonderful opportunity to model Christ for those whom God brings under their care. ☩

### Editor's note:

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