

Characteristics of Kindergarten and Elementary Children

Although all children are distinct individuals and have different rates of development, children of the same age do have some common developmental elements. Thus, in this section, some characteristics of each age-group are presented. A better understanding of the various ages will help you to be more effective in spreading the Good News.

One characteristic common to children in the elementary grades is high energy! Children of these ages are active and curious learners who will ask and say the most surprising things. And, though they share the common characteristics outlined in this article, it is important to never forget that each one of them is unique, with individual characteristics and gifts.



Kindergartners

Kindergartners are energetic, curious, and eager to learn about the world around them. With typical ages ranging from 5 to 6 years old, kindergartners exhibit a wide range of developmental levels. Children who have attended a preschool program may be more accustomed to group interactions and routines than children without that experience. However, every kindergartner will look to their teachers for guidance and approval, often needing positive reinforcement, especially when asked to work independently. All kindergartners thrive with hands-on experiences, nurturing guidance, and opportunities to explore their interests and creativity.

Physical Characteristics

Kindergartners grow at different rates and can exhibit a wide range of heights, weights, and body proportions. They are constantly in motion and have difficulty remaining sedentary for long periods. Their gross motor skills are quite developed, but fine motor skills like cutting, writing, and coloring are still emerging. Kindergartners may appear physically clumsy, bumping into objects or people as they move about. They require frequent breaks and opportunities to expend energy through movement and physical play. Kindergartners are also highly sensory, using all five senses to explore their environment.

Intellectual Characteristics

Kindergartners are in a period of rapid cognitive development, which they demonstrate through curiosity, creativity, and imagination. They frequently ask “why” about everything they encounter. They are concrete thinkers who learn best through direct sensory experiences and hands-on manipulation. While their attention spans are gradually increasing, kindergartners still need varied, interactive learning approaches to remain engaged. They enjoy repetition and familiarity, but they also thrive when offered new, imaginative experiences. A balance of experiences will provide kindergartners with the security of knowing something that has become familiar, as well as the excitement of learning something new. An advance alert often helps them prepare to put things away and get ready for the next activity. Kindergartners’ language skills are developing, so short and clear directions and explanations are best.

Social-Emotional Characteristics

Kindergartners have a strong desire to please their teachers and follow rules and routines. However, they are still learning to manage big emotions, which can sometimes lead to impulsive outbursts. While learning to cooperate with peers, kindergartners may struggle with sharing, taking turns, and resolving conflicts. They benefit from clear expectations, positive reinforcement, and nurturing classroom environments.



First Graders

First graders are enthusiastic, social, and eager to learn. Many are already reading and writing at a basic level, having developed these skills in kindergarten. Yet, 6–7-year-olds still need a lot of movement and activity. Though they are quite inquisitive, their attention spans are rather short. Making sessions varied and dynamic will ensure that your first graders are engaged and content.

Physical Characteristics

Much is happening in first grade in terms of physical characteristics. Many children are losing teeth and growing new ones. Their fine motor skills are fairly well developed, which means that they can use scissors as well as draw and write. However, cutting around curves and writing with precision can still take quite a bit of effort. And, for some children, these are still challenging tasks. First graders' desire to move and play points to the importance of varying learning activities for this age-group. To address this, it is best to keep them moving, by doing such things as starting the class in a prayer circle in one corner of the room, singing a song with several simple motions, moving to a table activity, sitting on the floor to listen to a dramatic Bible story, playing a game in the middle of the room, or better yet, going outside or to the gym to play. This variety will satisfy their need to move while keeping them engaged and focused.

Intellectual Characteristics

Thinking and learning are literal and concrete at this age. First graders will most likely think of God as a human person with human characteristics rather than use abstract or symbolic images. Nonetheless, first graders are thinkers. They ask a lot of questions, and they have creative imaginations. They will think about questions you ask, as long as the questions are not too complicated. Their attention spans are long enough that they like to listen to a good Bible story.

Social-Emotional Characteristics

Most first graders like playing with others, but they often prefer small groups. They are willing to cooperate, but they often want to “win” or have things go their way. Young children need continual affirmation, thriving on praise. Many first graders want to be the center of attention, so they like telling stories about themselves.



Second Graders

Second graders are lively, yet more grown-up and serious compared to the less confident first graders they were just a year ago. Now that they have a few years of elementary school experience, 7–8-year-olds are more settled and comfortable in their learning environment. They typically appreciate the order and structure of a classroom or catechetical setting. Thus, being organized and well prepared will help second graders to feel relaxed, content, and ready to learn.

Physical Characteristics

Most second graders have good hand-eye coordination and therefore are fairly adept at writing, painting, drawing, cutting, and pasting. Because they are still growing rapidly, they may be somewhat awkward at some of these tasks. However, in general they have good large- and small-muscle motor skills.

Intellectual Characteristics

Second graders are concrete thinkers, but they do have some analytical skills and can organize their thoughts. For example, they can make comparisons and think reflectively. Yet, most of their thinking is concrete and focuses on the physical things that they can see or imagine. They might have trouble imagining something with which they are unfamiliar. For example, they may have trouble imagining a desert if they have never seen one. So, if knowing what a desert is like is an important part of a lesson, they may need to see a picture or a video clip of a desert.

Furthermore, second graders do have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, although they will not always understand the consequences of their actions. They do, however, like to please adults.

Social-Emotional Characteristics

The second-grade child is developing a sense of self. Interaction with classmates helps the child, but there are times when a second grader may want to be alone. And friendships can change quickly in second grade. At the same time, the 7–8-year-old child likes to play and work with friends. For this reason, second graders do best working with a partner or in a small group. Given that there is a heightened interest in friendships at this age, it is a good time to talk about Jesus as friend.



Third Graders

Third graders are spirited, lively, and eager to take on more challenging, complicated tasks. However, 8–9-year-olds do not necessarily have all the follow-through skills needed to complete their tasks. Although they will take some initiative and work enthusiastically, you will have to help them stay organized.

Physical Characteristics

Coordination and balance are much improved for third-grade children. Their muscle groups and their fine motor skills have developed to the point that they can do more intricate tasks beyond writing and drawing. They have the ability to use small instruments and thus can do things like simple sewing or threading small beads onto a string.

Intellectual Characteristics

Verbal skills are in high gear by third grade. Most third graders have mastered a grade-level ability for reading, writing, and listening. They also like to talk and discuss their ideas. They are inquisitive, and now they want to know not just the facts but also the reasons behind the facts. For example, third graders may want to know why Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, or why he asked James and John to leave their father to be his disciples. And, they are ready and willing to discuss the importance of these facts.

This deeper level of thinking helps third graders to evaluate and make judgments. They are beginning to see the connections between concepts and to think abstractly. They not only know the difference between right and wrong but can also usually understand the consequences of choices they make.

Social-Emotional Characteristics

In third grade, the peer group is very important, and peer pressure can become an issue. Also, it is fairly common for third graders to have a “best friend,” though sometimes to the exclusion of other children. You can build on the notion of Jesus as friend and use examples of Jesus and how he treated his friends. Point out that Jesus welcomed many friends, like Peter and the Apostles, Martha, Mary, Zacchaeus, and others.

Most third graders enjoy the social dimension of working in groups and having group discussions. They can also work effectively in small groups to complete a simple task.



Fourth Graders

Fourth graders are now some of the older children in their elementary school. Thus, they often feel pretty mature, important, and more autonomous. They are willing to work independently and have less need for adult direction. They are ready to take on more responsibility and make decisions. Indeed, as 9–10-year-olds, they are at a good age to discuss the responsibilities of discipleship. Fourth graders may also develop particular interests in a hobby, sport, or activity, and they may take it very seriously.

Physical Characteristics

Girls are more physically mature than boys at this point. Some girls have begun prepuberty and even puberty. Girls and boys alike may be more temperamental and brooding. But, at the same time, they are still high energy and still like to play outside and with friends. They may also enjoy team sports.

Intellectual Characteristics

Fourth graders are able to do some abstract thinking and reasoning, but they still do best with concrete, hands-on learning. They like using books and references, and they have an interest in facts and figures. They also have a developing conscience and definitely have a sense of what is fair, right, and just. These interests make it a good time to have them delve more deeply into the Scripture stories that have moral lessons, as most of them do. For instance, a fourth grader will be intrigued by the fact that Jesus tells Peter he should forgive not seven times but seventy times seven times. Why would Jesus ask us to keep forgiving someone who keeps sinning?

Also, fourth graders have the capacity to complete a more complicated and prolonged project. So, for example, with guidance from you, a small group can take a Scripture story and act it out as a skit.

Social-Emotional Characteristics

This is an age for high emotions and dramatic intensity, especially among girls. Fourth graders are often critical of themselves and others, sometimes expressing this inappropriately by talking about friends and classmates. Many fourth graders are interested in the opposite sex. Even when this is the case, however, most still want to stay within their same-sex groups for socializing. In addition, they like working in small groups and can even come to a group decision. Again, emphasizing that Jesus wants us not only to welcome one another as friends but also to love and help one another can lead fourth graders to develop empathy and respect for those they may not naturally like.



Fifth Graders

Fifth graders may be considered “tweens,” because as 10–11-year-olds they are between early childhood and adolescence. Many of them, girls especially, will begin puberty, which often starts between the ages of 10 and 12 for girls and a bit later for boys. These biological changes are often accompanied by changes in emotions and intellect as fifth graders become more socially, intellectually, and physically mature. At the same time, they are still children who like to be silly and have fun.

Physical Characteristics

Many fifth-grade girls will show the physical signs of puberty as they begin to enter the developmental stage known as adolescence. Breast development and menstruation often occur for girls. Many boys, however, do not begin puberty until the ages of 12 to 14. Both boys and girls are often growing taller, feeling more stress, and sometimes experiencing changes in their sleep habits. Don't be surprised if they arrive late or sleepy if you have a Sunday morning session.

Intellectual Characteristics

Children in fifth grade are capable of critical thinking and problem solving. They are able to think somewhat abstractly. For example, ritual symbols are meaningful. They can understand that the cleansing effects of baptismal waters mean more than physical cleaning.

Social-Emotional Characteristics

Most fifth graders enjoy group work. They are mature enough to compromise, cooperate, and collaborate when it comes to completing an assignment or solving a problem. Some fifth graders will have feelings for someone special and flirt with, text, or message those they are interested in. Social media can be a major source of influence and social anxiety at this age. Cell phones and mobile devices may become an issue in the classroom but can also be used as teaching tools.

