



## Understanding Junior High Pupils

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Early adolescence, the popular age level for many confirmation or similar classes, is characterized by change. Such change occurs physically, emotionally, and intellectually. As young persons work their way through this traumatic period, they provide a challenge for teachers. Adolescents desire to be grown-up but dislike leaving the security of childhood. They are searching for their identities but covet acceptance by the group. They believe their behavior is that of mature young persons but often “play roles” according to the situation. They can be inquisitive, curious, eager to learn, but may feign boredom if such behavior is more acceptable to peers. Intellectually, they can grapple with conceptual ideas but still hold on to concrete thinking. They may begin to question authority but still try to please parents. They tend to accept religious doctrine but will do some questioning. So teaching junior high pupils can be frustrating, fulfilling, demanding, and challenging. Thus teachers will either enjoy or dread this important task.

There are several ways available to approach junior high pupils and their needs. For instance, teachers need to consider the influence of the environment and culture on their lives. Their style and choice of music, television shows, videos, fast foods, and clothing fads cannot be ignored. Of special interest is the research of scholars who have studied and analyzed their physical, emotional, and intellectual growth. Although such research is beneficial, it should never be construed to be so definitive that no room is left for individuality. To shed insight into this matter, this article will examine relevant research into the many factors that impact and influence these young people.

### I. PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT

#### *A. Physical Development*

One of the most noticeable developmental changes is physical growth. Although young people experience a wide variation in their rate of development during puberty, they follow a pattern of rapid but uneven growth. During this time sexual organs begin to mature and secondary sex characteristics appear. Such rapid and uneven growth results in a sense of awkwardness and the inability to control body movements. Both young men and women have trouble with their new body image and its lack of grace. The girls tend to grow taller and heavier which makes them uncomfortable around boys. These physical changes, although very natural, make this a difficult period for these young persons.

### *B. Emotional Development*

Resulting from the physical development is an emotional change. Basically, adolescents feel insecure, as evidenced by their many mood swings. At one point they will be despondent, then quickly move to the excitement of feeling on top of the world. Much of the time they will dwell on self and their new, even if confusing, role in life. They are aware of their physical growth and its impact on their relationship with parents and peers. Such an upheaval can lead to self-doubt, negative thinking, and depression. Expressing feelings, once so easy, now may be strained and awkward. Such emotional changes caused a mother of an eighth grader to lament that she hardly recognized her son's behavior. Her "model son" had become so different!

### *C. Intellectual Development*

In addition to the physical and emotional changes comes intellectual development. Research by Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and others has enabled adults, especially teachers, to understand the maturation of the cognitive domain, thus helping them enable young persons to grapple with ideas as well as express their rationale for moral decisions.

#### Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist and educator of the early twentieth century (1932), studied the cognitive patterns of behavior. By observing children he was able to chart their progression through stages of intellectual development. Such research indicated that by the age of twelve and thirteen, youngsters can move beyond literal thinking to the abstract. They can hypothesize, theorize, generate several solutions to problems, and comprehend subtle and symbolic meanings. However, Piaget's research illustrated that this ability was in its formative stage for children of this age and still needed to be nurtured.

#### Lawrence Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg built on Piaget's cognitive research. His twenty-year study of eighty-four boys provided the basis for a six-stage moral development scheme. This theory materialized from the responses the boys gave to a series of stories posing a moral dilemma. Kohlberg argued that a person's cognitive level helps determine the way he or she does moral reasoning and valuing. Thus, intellectual development and moral reasoning progress in a given pattern from childhood to adulthood. Although Kohlberg's research has been challenged—especially by Carol Gilligan

who insists his study of only boys skewed the results, since young women react differently—it still has been widely used to analyze and evaluate moral decisions. According to Kohlberg, prior to adolescence youngsters determine their moral decisions from a pre-conventional level. In stage one (ages 3-5) decisions are based on what is bigger and more powerful than the individual. Authority and the fear of getting caught are predominant in the actions of this moral stage. In stage two (ages 6-8) decisions are based on self-interest and reciprocal treatment (popularly referred to as "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine"). However, by adolescence moral decisions are of a more conventional nature, involving, e.g., living up to the expectations of others by being nice, and obeying the system or laws. Since moral decisions are a manifestation of one's religious life, Kohlberg's work cannot be bypassed by people involved in Christian education.

### Erik Erikson

One of the giants whose work has been most influential in learning as well as developmental theory is Erik Erikson. Using the foundation of the Freudian psychosexual scheme, Erikson delineated eight “stages of man” or “turning points” from infancy to old age. Although these stages are associated with ego development and specific ages, Erikson insists that persons in certain situations can revert to earlier patterns. Prior to early adolescence a person has passed through four stages. As a child up to one year of age, the major issue is trust versus mistrust. The degree to which the baby’s world becomes secure and dependable rests upon how he or she is treated. From ages two to three, children learn to be autonomous and want to do everything on their own. If not encouraged in this they can remain very dependent on adults (autonomy versus self-doubt). Four and five year-olds learn to take the initiative or to feel guilty if the situation demands it. During their elementary school years, children either become industrious through the pleasure of their accomplishments or are hesitant to try for fear of failure. In junior and senior high years they are coping with their identity and role confusion. Erikson’s research illustrates that many and varied emotions and struggles compete for attention during this time. But adolescents who have resolved the tasks of earlier developmental stages will begin to make a positive adjustment. Because of Erikson’s ability to articulate human psychological development, his ideas were quickly appropriated and championed by religious educators.

### James Fowler

James Fowler is probably the most important life-cycle theorist for teachers of religious doctrine and faith journeying. Basic to his research is a relationship between faith and theology. These terms complement each other: theology is a cognitive or intellectual exercise, while faith is a response to what one believes. Fowler’s ideas on faith development, influenced by Erik Erikson, are both informative and helpful in religious instruction. Through interviews and an analysis of responses, Fowler determined six stages of faith development. To him, faith is a verb or activity that enables individuals to find meaning in life. This dynamic process, once started, is continuous. Fowler describes infancy as a time of undifferentiated faith. During this period a child learns from the significant adults in his or her life; the spiritual foundation is formed by how a child is cuddled, bathed, and fed. What Fowler says about this period is strikingly similar to what religious

educators have insisted must be present for a person to develop his or her theology and grow in faith. Basic for a strong spiritual foundation is the need for individuals to experience love, security, acceptance, and a sense of fulfillment. It is on these basic needs that the spiritual process builds. Children respond to God as they respond to the significant adults in their lives. Their feeling and sense of trust are as important to their religious development as is their intellectual understanding. Following this basic period, Fowler notes, children from three to six begin to talk about experiences. This intuitive-projective stage is one of inconsistency; it is fragmented and episodic. There is no pattern or context to life, since reality is the present experience. Stories, pictures, symbols, and songs work together to enable the child to construct an image of God. Such images apparently remain throughout life. In stage two, children of elementary school age begin to interpret religious ideas in a literal fashion. They love to hear the stories of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and David. (The narrative, the mode enabling children to

pattern their thinking, is prominent throughout the Bible.) They like to listen to the life of Jesus and the stories he told. In other words, they like to hear about the heroes of the faith and what their leadership accomplished. But as they listen, they think literally or factually. Throughout this stage they are forming and reforming a theological foundation on which to build. Stage three, the synthetic conventional period, begins at age eleven and is operational during the educational task of confirmation. Along with Piaget, Fowler underscores the ability of this age group to do abstract thinking. Young people can separate ideas from real experience which makes this a crucial time for religious understanding. God can be talked about as Spirit and friend rather than as an authority to be feared. By reading the many interviews included in this thorough research, it is possible to gain insight into how theological concepts are interpreted by adolescents.

Of all the research discussed, the faith development is of primary importance; it illustrates the type of answers and the type of experiences associated with this pivotal period of life. However, research does not completely exhaust or account for the differences and similarities among the early adolescents. They are not a monolithic group, but individuals influenced by parents, society and culture, the church, and especially their peers.

## II. SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Although children of junior high age wish to be treated as young adults, they are still dependent on their parents or support persons. They still live with significant adults and are subject to the rules of the home. The family is also the primary determinant of both their religious and moral values. As parents and young people work through this period of life, it helps if the parents begin to transfer more and more responsibility to their children; teachers should do the same.

Often teachers of this age group forget the cultural setting and society in which the young people function. Most are at home with computers and computer learning. Most watch considerable television and videos. Most like to be with their friends enjoying fast foods, movies, and dancing. Most like to conform to a dress code of their own choosing. Most attend schools where there are creative approaches to teaching. So it should not seem strange that they cannot get excited

about using workbooks or listening to a person lecture about church doctrine in theological terms. This does not mean that these adolescents have to be entertained, but it does mean they need to be challenged.

Important to these young people are their peers. It will be their peers who will determine the in-group. Because peer pressure is a reality, young people may be tempted to use drugs and alcohol. However, the desire to be accepted can be utilized in a religious setting to support youngsters at this crucial time. Teachers need to take the time to build a collection of individuals into a group. This does not happen without planning. Young people coming from different schools and varied backgrounds need to become acquainted and feel at home. In this way a climate is created which allows ideas to be discussed with openness and frankness.

Last, but far from least, is the congregational community. Although educators have always articulated the importance of the community, it was vividly illustrated anew in the recent denominational study on effective Christian education and faith maturation. This research,

conducted by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, studied trends such as membership loss, indifference, lack of congregational and denominational loyalty, and the lack of youth involvement. Their study of churches (Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Methodist, Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, and United Church of Christ) showed that a vibrant congregational life aided faith maturation. Working with the theory that a mature faith reflects God's personal love and grace through acts of compassion and concern, they discovered that churches where the negative trends were reversed had certain characteristics. These included warmth (the climate of acceptance within the church), care (personal interaction among persons), challenge (discussion, debate, and new methodologies related to one's spiritual life), worship (an important and excellent teaching resource as well as a time for nurture), and leadership (pastors and people visibly demonstrating their Christian commitment). The final characteristic discovered was the existence of a strong adult education program. This type of congregation, growing in spirituality and community and filled with vitality, would be the ideal context for teaching junior high youth.<sup>1</sup>

Although this article has examined research into early adolescence and faith development, it is insufficient to emphasize only the human dimension of this process. Faith in God is a gift freely given. God's grace is and always will remain a mystery, so we in the twentieth century can still endorse Paul's statement to the Corinthian congregation: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor 3:6). Yet this confession should never hinder teachers at any level of religious education from becoming as effective as they can be.

### III. GUIDELINES

Adults teaching young people should be aware of recent research into human growth and development and apply its results in their presentation of theological doctrine and their nurture of children's faith. These teachers should:

- provide a climate of acceptance and understanding for young people as they experience the physical and emotional changes of early adolescence

<sup>1</sup>Peter L. Benson, "Building a Faith for the 90's," *The Lutheran* (January 3, 1990) 9-11.

- affirm what their pupils believe and challenge them to rethink their theological understandings in light of their ability to utilize conceptual thinking
- encourage children of this age to question and think so their beliefs will remain relevant to their expanding world
- recognize that the pupils' image of God is changing from one of an authority figure or parent to one of a friend
- affirm the need for self-acceptance and independence by expecting pupils to be more responsible for the way they learn
- be aware of the culture in which children function by observing their life style and keeping abreast of the trends (a subscription to a teen magazine is a must for persons working with junior high youth)
- encourage young people to examine their rationale for moral decision making as they begin to move beyond conventional thinking
- support them as they grapple with peer pressures along with their faith maturation

- use relationship building to enable young people to learn together as peers
- provide opportunities for involvement in the congregational community so junior high pupils will observe and experience the meaning of faith in the fellowship of the church

The following books are suggested for anyone wishing to gain more depth in any of the theories mentioned in the article:

Clouse, Bonnidell. *Moral Development: Perspectives in Psychology and Christian Belief*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985.

Erikson, Erik. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1968.

Fowler, James. *The Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1982.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. *The Philosophy of Moral Judgment*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

Olson, G. Keith. *Why Teenagers Act the Way They Do*. Loveland: Group Books, 1987.

Piaget, Jean. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. 1932. Reprint. New York: The Free Press, 1965.