

Who are your Eighth Graders?

“The catechist – must take into consideration all the human factors of a particular age level in order to present the Gospel message in a vital and compelling way.” (NDC #48)

MIDDLE SCHOOL – Seventh and eighth grade is a time of rapid change. Physically, cognitively, morally, emotionally, and socially, these young people are “crossing the bridge” between childhood and adulthood. It may be a longer journey for some than others because of each one’s unique pattern of development. However, there are some general developmental comments about this stage that can be made.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

Physical

- Undergo a growth spurt.
- Develop secondary sex characteristics.
- Are sensitive to physical changes and body image which greatly influences self-image.

Cognitive

- Begin abstract thinking.
- Use a more complex decision-making process.
- Can reason based on possibilities not just experience.
- Can be self-conscious and critical

Identity

- Want to belong.
- Begin to distance themselves at times from family influences and identify more closely with peers.
- Seek limited independence.
- Value friendship based on trust and loyalty.

Moral

- Reason at conventional level.
- Resolve moral dilemmas based on expectations outside of self, i.e. peers, laws, parents, etc.

Faith

- Desire active involvement and are open to service opportunities.
- Are willing to explore a personal relationship with God as they begin to define their own image of God.
- Look to the Church for the content and expression of faith.

Realizing all these factors, a middle school religion program should be one that still involves the concrete, but also provides opportunities for “community building,” “reflection,” and “activity.” These young teens are truly in a transition time. They need both faith structure and flexibility in a religion program. Junior high school students, who range in age from 11-15, present particular challenges and opportunities to those who minister to them: parents, those responsible for religious education in parishes, youth workers, and clergy. These young people have needs and wants that are unique to their situations and their levels of maturity in many areas. Adults who work with these younger adolescents must be attentive to the special circumstances, needs, and attitudes of junior high students.