

Profile of a Sixth-Grade Child

Characteristics

Sixth-graders are in psychological "no-man's land." They feel they do not belong for they are too old for elementary school and too young for junior high. They seem to be hanging around, waiting, with little to do.

Along with increased physical growth, eleven-year-olds are developing new emotional patterns and are subject to variable moods from one extreme to another. They may be fidgety, disagreeable, resentful, argumentative, insolent, and sulky at one time and at others exuberant, out-going, candid, communicative, sincere, and friendly.

Pre-adolescents are interested in bodily development. Sexual curiosity intensifies, and they begin to take care of personal appearance. Most eleven-year-olds exhibit a growing interest in clothes, although this does not mean they know how to choose or how to care for their clothing.

By now they are comfortable with abstract ideas and reasoning, though they still need concrete objects and examples in order to grasp general principles. They become curious about details of the past, about "what really happened." They are aware of evil in the world, of social problems, and of the need for group action to meet human needs.

Faith Development Needs

Because eleven-year-olds are self-conscious about their bodies, they need to be led to understand and accept themselves as they are, created in the image and likeness of God with the potential for maturing into adults who have a unique role in life.

Since the pre-adolescent is beginning to experience the inner "world" of emotions, confusion, indolence, the catechist can help to develop a deeper realization that original sin has an effect on human passions, intellect, and will, e.g., *false* happiness like riches or physical pleasure may be chosen.

Sixth-graders question almost everything, and they want detailed explanations instead of yes-or-no answers to basic questions about the meaning of life. They need to learn to make sound moral judgments based on Christian principles, realizing that choices or decisions they make can strengthen or weaken their relationship with God and others.

Because eleven-year-olds are beginning to recognize connections between the past and the present, this is the appropriate time to teach salvation history. The catechist will guide the students to understand that salvation history is still going on and that God continues to communicate himself to us in everyday life. This is an opportunity to teach about actual grace.

Pre-adolescents, because of their new awareness of themselves, their impulses, and their feelings, develop definite ideas about their life work. The catechist should encourage them to learn about vocations of Christian service in religious life and/or the ordained ministry.

It is necessary to foster the virtue of hope. Christian hope relies on the love God has for us, and on a love which knows that all things are possible with God.

Implications

The fact that sixth-graders are more aware of social problems, indeed have a strong sense of social justice, results in their willingness to help others, even at some risk or actual cost to themselves. The catechist can lead them in the study of the Scriptural history of God's identity with the oppressed and his action to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

Students at this age need a safe and secure setting for exploring questions and doubts. As they try to integrate the reality of their life experience with their religious beliefs, they need a forum in which to explore their feelings. It is crucial that the catechist provide such a forum.

Peer pressure is becoming stronger, but youth work well and have a zest for "community projects." This is a good age for planning activities that advocate peace and justice.

In teaching young people to pray, the catechist should keep in mind that *learning to pray is different than learning prayers*. Prayer is to be taught so that the boys and girls unite themselves to God with spontaneity and joy. Silent prayer is to be encouraged, for example, after the narration of a gospel passage or at unforeseen moments created by nature or by the interaction of the children. The prayer dimension of good decision-making can be introduced at this time.

Catechists need to nourish their own personal relationship with God. Through continued growth in prayer, they are enabled to make an essential contribution to the lives of the children by sharing faith experiences with them.