

Profile of an Eighth-Grade Child

Characteristics

The thirteenth year of life is one of complex transition involving body, mind and personality. The transition often comes unbidden and sometimes unexpectedly. Changes in body build and body chemistry affect posture, coordination, appearance, voice, facial expression as well as attitude and tension. Body changes intensify awareness of growing up. Moods change, fluctuating between hidden despair and optimistic self-acceptance.

Thirteen-year-olds are not always open and communicative. At home they may lapse into spells of silence, musing, and reverie. At school they may be apathetic and uninterested in any class which does not challenge and stir their emerging conceptual power.

The young person is beset by interpersonal demands from family, peers, and teachers. Home, school, and peers often conflict and aggravate confusion.

Yet, in the midst of these pressures, adolescents usually preserve self-identity and achieve a measure of independence. They meet developmental problems with heightened awareness of themselves and the world in which they live.

At thirteen years, youth are in a momentous transition. They long for and need security, sympathetic understanding, and supportive love in spite of their inability to respond openly and consistently.

By learning to accept themselves, their good characteristics together with their weaknesses, students build and achieve a sense of self-worth.

Eighth-graders continue to seek approval from adults and peers, and are eager to have friends, although preferring one or two close friends of the same sex. They tend to form cliques and identify strongly with peer groups and interests. The all-important question to the reflective thirteen-year-old at this period of growth is WHO AM I?

Faith Development Needs

In general young people are developing the ability to think logically and abstractly. They begin at this age to question the logic and consistency of their beliefs. If adults give them knowledge, freedom, opportunity, and reassurance, they can then probe their previously unquestioned instruction so that they eventually experience faith as a personal relationship with God.

Junior high school students tend to fall into patterns of hero-worship, seeking models to follow and imitate. At the same time, they are concerned about choices. They need to be provided with credible and attractive vocation and career models of faith. The example of Jesus and Christian heroes and heroines reinforces in their minds their vocation to the Christian life and to the special ministry to which God is calling them. This is a good time for contact with priests and religious as role models.

Implications

Because young people experience fluctuating moods and strong emotional stress at this stage, the catechist should strive to deepen their awareness of the great and total love and acceptance Jesus has for each person, presenting Jesus as one who saves, redeems, forgives, loves and leads them to the Father through his Spirit living in them. It is a time to emphasize the intrinsic goodness of each individual.

Although teens are capable of logical and abstract thinking, the life of faith is still best presented through concrete experiences which afford the opportunities to incorporate Christian values into their lives.

As the need for privacy and time to be alone becomes more important to the adolescent, ways of fostering and deepening their spiritual life should be developed.

Peer pressure is often the determining factor in the young person's decision to experiment with drugs, alcohol, and sex. Catechists should provide strong and effective support groups involving the youth in home, parish, and community activities.

Young persons seek to be themselves and to make their own decisions. It is the task of the catechist to assist them in conscience formation.

In adolescence, teens make the transition from dependence to independence. Among the serious questions facing them are several crucial ones: Who am I? What do I believe? What do I think is important? And most important, who is Jesus and what difference does he make for me? The effective catechist, by willingly sharing faith experience—where one has been, where one presently is, and where one is going—will help the youth discover answers to these questions.

The teenager needs time to reflect on what it means to be called to a particular way of life. Being in a transitional stage, the adolescent needs guidance in the discernment of a vocation.

Participation in the ministries of the local parish will establish a sense of viable membership in the People of God as well as nurture self-esteem and introduce the young person to a peer group of similar values.