

Age-Appropriate Ways to Share the Gospel

THE GOSPEL TOOLKIT

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Gospel means “good news.” The Gospel is the good news of what God has done.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

In the Great Commission Jesus instructs His followers to spread the good news of the Gospel to the world. So, where do we start?



When we share the Gospel with kids, we want to do so in ways that are appropriate for the age and stage of development for that child.

WHAT DOES “AGE AND STAGE” MEAN?

As kids grow from infancy into adulthood, they go through different periods of physical, intellectual, language and social-emotional development. “Ages and Stages” is a term used to outline these significant periods in the human development timeline.¹

WHAT ARE THESE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT?

There are many different theories about stages of development. Before we dive into what they are, it’s important to note that theories are flawed and have limitations. There is consistency in the research on these developmental stages, but the amount of time a person spends in each stage varies quite a bit. It’s best practice as a disciplemaker to seek to know each person individually in order to understand their unique needs, challenges, environment and context.

Infants and Toddlers

AGES 0-2



STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

At this beginning stage of development, children are completely dependent on their caregivers for their basic needs. Psychologist Erik Erikson emphasizes the importance of trust in this developmental stage. If a child successfully develops trust, they will feel safe and secure in the world as they continue to grow and develop.²

As the child grows, imitation or copying becomes a big part of their learning process. Psychologist Jean Piaget coined this the *Sensorimotor Stage*. During this earliest stage of cognitive development, infants and toddlers acquire knowledge through sensory experiences and manipulating objects. A child's entire experience at the earliest period of this stage occurs through basic reflexes, senses and motor responses.³

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND SHARING THE GOSPEL



Infants and toddlers need to develop a sense of security, consistency and trust. As disciplinarians, it's important to create a safe and warm environment that fosters this. In doing so, you are setting the foundation for lasting faith; because when a child feels love, security and trust with their basic needs, they can later transfer into trust and security in their Creator. The big truths to teach infants and toddlers are: God made everything (including you) and

God loves you. As you tend to the basic needs of children in this stage, relate the love and care you are providing to the source of love — God.

As you hold a crying infant, you can sing "Jesus Loves Me." As you greet a toddler, tell them how happy you are to see them and how special they are to God. As you go for a walk outside, notice the beauty of God's creation and explain that God made everything. As you play together, point out what makes them unique and special, and emphasize they are made by God, and He loves them ever so much!

Preschool

AGES 3-5

STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

This is the preschool stage when the question, “Why?” becomes ever so common. Preschoolers are incredibly curious and question everything that is happening around them. Free play and pretend play aid in the development of problem-solving and allow kids to explore more complex social issues. Kids move freely between fantasy and reality, and often have a hard time distinguishing between the two. Piaget calls this the *Preoperational Stage* in which children are getting better with language and thinking, but they still tend to think in very concrete terms. At this stage, kids learn through pretend play but still struggle with logic and taking the point of view of other people.⁴ Preschoolers also greatly desire to please the adults in their lives.

According to Erikson’s research, preschoolers are searching to discover if they are “good or bad,” and children who experience guilt interpret mistakes as a sign of personal failure and feel they are somehow “bad.”⁵ Even though preschoolers may be exploring the concepts of good and bad, they still have an extremely simplified sense of morality. When they obey rules rigidly, it’s not necessarily because they understand them, but more likely because they want to avoid punishment and “being bad.”



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND SHARING THE GOSPEL

Theologian John Westerhoff says that faith grows like the rings of a tree, with each ring adding to and changing the tree somewhat, yet building on that which has grown before.⁶ In this way, continue building on the solid foundation of who God is and what He has done (God made everything and He loves you.), and “add one more ring” by teaching about God’s

goodness! Preschoolers are very impressionable; they will pick up and mimic what they witness. This is a great age to introduce kids to the Bible and the truth of Scripture, but be selective in what stories and concepts you teach. Avoid abstract concepts and choose stories that focus on these three core truths: God is good, He is love and He is the Creator. Ritual and repetition are important at this age, so don’t be afraid to repeat, repeat, repeat!

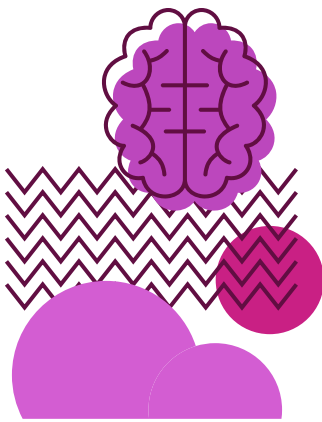


Early Elementary

AGES 5-8

STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

During the earlier stages, a child's interactions centered primarily on caregivers, family members and others in their immediate household. As the school years begin, the realm of social influence increases dramatically. According to Erikson, this stage is vital in developing self-confidence.⁷ Piaget calls this the *Concrete Operational Stage*, as thinking becomes more logical and organized but still very concrete. Kids at this point in development tend to struggle with abstract and hypothetical concepts.⁸ Things are either right or wrong, or great or terrible, without much room in between.



It's also normal at this stage for kids to center their thinking on themselves — a concept called "egocentrism." Theologian James Fowler calls this stage of faith development the *Intuitive-Projective Stage*. He explains that faith at this stage is experiential and develops through encounters with stories, images, the influence of others, a deeper intuitive sense of what is right and wrong, and innocent perceptions of how God causes the universe to function.⁹ Author and professor Robert J. Keeley states that story is important to all of us in our faith formation, but it is especially important to children at this age. As elementary-aged children learn more of the stories from the Old and New Testaments, they may begin to connect these stories together but still don't see them as one large story.¹⁰

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND SHARING THE GOSPEL

Build on the foundation of God's goodness and love by teaching kids the whole story of Scripture — "God's Big Story." The Bible tells us one big story with four key parts: the creation, the fall, redemption, restoration.

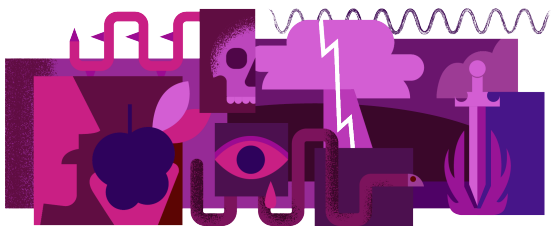
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CREATION

God existed before there was anything else. He created the world from nothing, and everything God created was good! When God made people, He made them in His image. They are very special to Him!



FALL

When God created people, He gave them the opportunity to know Him and live in relationship with Him. But through Adam and Eve, people broke their relationship with God by choosing to go their own way and sin. (Sin is anything we think, say or do that disobeys God.) From that point on, brokenness entered our world, and we still see it everywhere, especially in ourselves and others.



REDEMPTION

When sin and death entered the world and broke it all, there was no hope of everything ever being right again. But God sent Himself, in the form of Jesus, to do the impossible. Jesus made things right again in our relationship with God by dying on the cross and then defeating death when He rose again. Jesus is the reason we have redemption (the action of being saved from sin).



RESTORATION

Jesus brought about restoration (making broken things right) when He defeated death — God's world was being made right again, but it's not done yet. We experience the new love and hope God has given us as followers of Jesus. We also see a world that still has brokenness which God has not yet made right, but we know He will. In this time, we all get the choice of whether we will trust Jesus for our forgiveness and follow Him.

Upper Elementary

AGES 8-12

STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

In upper elementary, kids are heading towards adolescence but aren't quite there yet. Dr. Michelle Anthony states that kids in this stage desire increased independence from parents and siblings, as well as increased desire to be seen as intelligent and knowledgeable. As kids struggle to find the means to appropriately individuate, they can, at times, seem willful or defiant. Children begin negotiating for what they want or arguing their point of view at home and with peers, applying their more highly developed thinking skills, advanced language abilities and increased concentration skills.¹¹ Kids are more logical about concrete things, but they still struggle with abstract ideas and thinking.

Piaget explains that during this stage, kids become less egocentric and begin to think about how other people might think and feel. Kids begin to understand that their thoughts are unique to them and not everyone else shares their thoughts, feelings and opinions.¹² Kids will begin to use this insight when making decisions, so this is the perfect age to start conversations about important topics. Friendships and peer relationships increasingly become a core value during this stage of development. Kids are learning how to relate to peers, adjust to social rules and evolve from free play to more structured interactions and expectations.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND SHARING THE GOSPEL

Kids are beginning to learn what it means to live as God's people and can be challenged to think about situations and concepts that aren't immediately present in their world. Keeley states that Bible stories are vitally important in helping children (and all of us) understand our faith is much more than just a series of rules or moral lessons. God introduces Himself to us in these stories, and they help us know Him and know ourselves.¹³

Trusting God is the beginning. As a follower of Jesus you can grow in your relationship with God by reading the

Bible, talking to God in prayer, attending church and sharing this good news with others. Westerhoff calls this the *Affiliative Faith Stage*. Affiliative faith will look to the community and its tradition as its source for authority. We depend on significant others for the stories that explain our lives and how our people live. Belonging to a community is very important in order to fulfill our need to be wanted and accepted.¹⁴ Up to this point, a child has seen their leader as a reflection of Jesus. Now, they get to know and see their leader through their own personal discipleship journey, too. Kids not only have the ability to see God's love and sacrifice for them, but also how their leader fits into God's Big Story.



Middle School

AGES 12-14

STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT



Middle School is a time of searching for identity. Kids are asking the question, “Who am I?” There are many things competing for a child’s attention in this stage: family, peers, school, friends, extra curricula, social media and the list goes on. As they seek to establish a sense of self, teens may experiment with different roles, activities and behaviors. According to Erikson, this is important to the process of forming a strong identity and developing a sense of direction in life.¹⁵ Keeley points out two things — which may seem contradictory — are also going on at this time: a desire for independence and a desire to belong to a group. Since teens want to be independent, they are at the point where they want to choose their own faith. For the first time, their faith is not merely a reflection of someone else’s faith. The importance of friends is also great at this age. Because these teens are trying to figure out who they are, they will try to differentiate themselves from their parents — at least to a certain extent — and align themselves with a group of friends who can also significantly influence them.¹⁶

Piaget calls this the *Former Operational Stage* during which kids develop the ability to think about abstract ideas and situations, the ability to systematically plan for the future, and reason about hypothetical situations.¹⁷

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND SHARING THE GOSPEL



As Disciplemakers, we need to help kids experience the Bible in community and learn how to navigate Scripture so they can engage the Bible personally. It’s important that students learn *imago Dei* — we are made in the image of God.

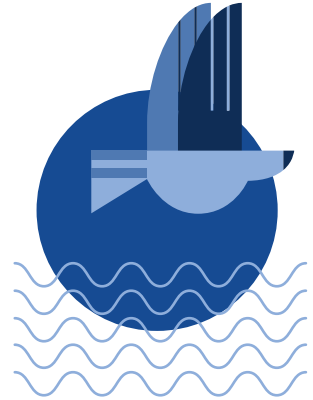
Our purpose and identity solely comes through Christ. Students may begin to ask hard questions as they consider how *imago Dei* affects how they think of themselves and how they treat others.

High School

AGES 14-18

STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

After the rollercoaster of middle school, things start to level out and stabilize in high school. Relationships with friends are still important, yet teens start to have a more clear sense of who they are and what they value. This is also an important time as they prepare for more independence and responsibility as young adults, and true independence is on the horizon. As a result, teens become more emotionally and physically separated from their family. Westerhoff calls this stage *Searching Faith*. It is characterized by questioning, critical judgment and experimentation. In this questioning stage, individuals discern their understanding of faith as opposed to just accepting the group or church norms. He states that in order to find a faith of our own, we need to doubt, question and test what has been handed down to us.¹⁸ It is paramount how we handle this stage since our response can attract and maintain the adolescent or turn them elsewhere for faith responses. Westerhoff explains the culmination of the faith development process finds expression in a personal, owned faith.¹⁹



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND SHARING THE GOSPEL

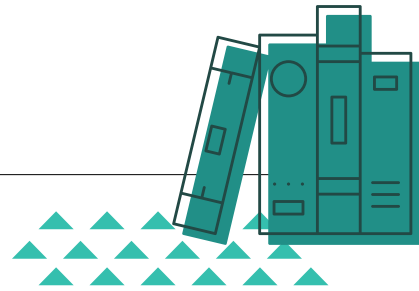


High School students may wrestle through doubt and ask some hard questions. It's important for teenagers to learn how to defend their beliefs. Doubt may express uncertainty, but doubt is not the opposite of faith. Our natural desire when someone expresses doubt is to shut it down, but it's important to remember that doubt can serve as an opportunity to discover truth more deeply and trust God more fully. Encourage students not to ignore or suppress their doubts, but willingly make them known and discover the truth found in Jesus. As Keeley states, all of these stages are best experienced in community. A strong sense of

community is the best way to give kids and students the support that they will need in all stages of their development.²⁰

At each stage in a child's life, they will come to know the works of Jesus and God's never-ending love for the world in a deeper and more intimate way. When you continually share the four acts of the Gospel with children, you give the ones who have come to know Christ an opportunity to understand their salvation in a way they developmentally were unable to comprehend when they first chose to follow Jesus. And for those who are still grappling with their salvation, you create a safe place for them to ask their questions and experience God's love in a tangible, age-appropriate way.

Endnotes



1. "The Ages and Stages of Child Development," Child Development Institute, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/ages-stages/>.
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3. Cherry, "Piaget's 4 Stages of Cognitive Development Explained: Background and Key Concepts of Piaget's Theory," Verywell Mind, May 2, 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/piagets-stages-of-cognitive-development-2795457>.
4. Cherry, "Piaget's 4 Stages of Cognitive Development Explained."
5. Cherry, "Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development."
6. John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (n.p.: Morehouse, 2000).
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9. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development* (n.p.: HarperCollins, 1995).
10. Robert J. Keeley, "Faith Development and Faith Formation: More Than Just Ages and Stages," Lifelong Faith (Fall 2010), https://faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/faith_development_faith_formation_keeley.pdf.
11. Michelle Anthony, PhD, "The Social and Emotional Lives of 8- to 10-Year-Olds," Scholastic, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/family-life/social-emotional-learning/development-milestones/emotional-lives-8-10-year-olds.html>.
12. Cherry, "Piaget's 4 Stages of Cognitive Development Explained."
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14. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*
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16. Keeley, "Faith Development and Faith Formation."
17. Cherry, "Piaget's 4 Stages of Cognitive Development Explained."
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20. Keeley, "Faith Development and Faith Formation."