

Understanding the Kindergarten Child

Adults are responsible for supporting young children as they develop and learn. Supportive relationships with adults are critical to a child's development. It is helpful, therefore, that kindergarten educators understand the typical development of the kindergarten child as well as the individual strengths and needs of the children in their classroom. The importance of families and culture in child development is also an area with which the kindergarten teacher should be familiar.

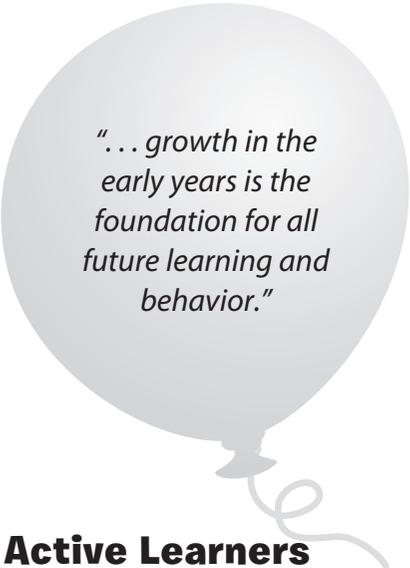
Support for Teachers

Some general descriptions of the typical development for kindergarteners are provided in the front pages of the Guide for this program. This will help catechists have a basic understanding of what to expect from children at this age. But there are other implications of this important developmental period that should be known by those who are working with kindergarteners.

The Importance of the Early Years

Research tells us that 90 percent of a child's brain is developed by the age of five. This tells us that growth in the early years is the

foundation for all future learning and behavior. It is important, therefore, that teachers of this age level understand that the kindergarten year is a valuable and unique stage of the human life cycle. The purpose of kindergarten is not simply to "practice" for first grade. These young children are working on skills that will serve as the foundation for later academic learning. The kindergarten child requires highly active, play-based and child-directed learning experiences which serve to support their development and inspire a sense of curiosity and wonder.



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Active Learners

According to the position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), learning results from both the physical and social worlds in which young children live. This means

that children must have the opportunity for active learning and physical movement as well as time for social interaction. Kindergarteners benefit less from long periods of whole-group instruction. Because of this developmental characteristic, it is important to include short but engaging whole-group story times and combine them with opportunities for children to work with activities and materials that interest them.

Predictable Sequence

NAEYC also describes development in young children as progressing in an orderly sequence across each of the developmental domains (physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language and aesthetic). This predictable sequence gives teachers an idea of what to expect from the children in their classrooms. However, even though the progression may take place along a known sequence, the rate at which typical children develop varies greatly and requires that teachers vary their approach, materials and level of support to meet the needs of individual children in the classroom. One size does not fit all in the kindergarten setting.

Individualized Experiences

Curriculum for kindergarten and the primary grades is based on a continuum of skills that are developed over time. Some kindergarteners might be at an entry level of a particular skill set while others have mastered the skill. This scenario can be reversed when the next concept is presented or a different subject area or skill set is introduced. Remember that typical kindergarteners vary greatly in their development and these developmental differences typically level out in the second or third grade.

Child-initiated Activity

Young children tend to grow and develop best in an environment that allows for child-initiated activity. This means that children should be given the opportunity to be active decision makers in the classroom. They should be offered meaningful choices from a variety of activities and materials.

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The Role of Family in Development

Partnerships with families are extremely important because young children learn and develop within the context of their families. Parents and other significant family members are valued as partners because they are the children’s first teachers. They provide the cultural context and key life experience that are the basis for future learning and development. Families bring to the home-school partnership their cultural beliefs and home language. Kindergarten is the time to develop trusting relationships by embracing cultural differences and valuing the traditions and language of the home. It is not recommended that teachers use dialects other

than their own and kindergarten is not the time to correct children when they are using the speech patterns they have learned from their families. There is plenty of time to expose children to more formal language usage once the children and families have become part of the school community.

Spiritual Growth and Development

As young children grow and develop spiritually, it is important that teachers remember the cognitive limitations that exist in kindergarteners. The *Stories of God’s Love Kindergarten* program is designed to help young children build a strong foundation for faith formation. The concepts are presented in a positive way that allows children to explore new ideas in safe and familiar terms. Maintaining an encouraging and responsive classroom will allow the children to take their first steps in faith while growing stronger in their relationship with God and the Church.