

The sight of a yellow school bus picking up a child from the corner can pull at parental heartstrings like few other things can. Going to school—either part-time or all day—marks a tremendous change in the lives of these little ones, a change that’s felt not only in the home but in the church school as well.

What follows here is a brief description of some of the characteristics you’ll see in children in kindergarten and first grade. It leaves much unsaid—and is certainly no substitute for getting to know your group firsthand. But we do hope it will give you some insight into what you may anticipate from children in this age group.

Intellectual Characteristics

Children at this age

- are beginning to enter the exciting world of symbols: numbers, letters, and words.
- are dealing with the complex process of learning to read and write; expect wide variations in ability levels.
- still depend very much on concrete experiences. They also continue to learn with their whole bodies. They love to touch, taste, feel, smell, explore, watch—and wonder. They learn best through *doing*.
- are still many years away from being able to deal with abstract faith concepts. They still interpret what they see, hear, and experience in a very literal way.
- enjoy listening to stories and retelling or reenacting them, but they listen with more discernment than preschoolers.
- have a longer attention span than preschoolers but still need to move frequently from one task to another.
- have often learned how to play games on a computer or a home game system (like Wii or X-box). They do not view technology as something foreign.

Tips for Leaders

- Don’t assume that because children are learning to read and write, they can use these skills effectively. Be patient and encouraging when asking children to count or to recognize letters or copy words. Because of the wide variance in reading ability in this group, you should be ready to adapt each session to best meet the needs and abilities of your children.
- Plan your sessions to give children frequent opportunities to change activities and move around. Balance active participation with some quieter activities.
- Plan learning experiences that appeal to different kinds of intelligences (word smart, number smart, picture smart, music smart, and so on. See the introduction to your leader’s guide and individual sessions for examples).
- Avoid using figures of speech, symbolism, and analogies to explain faith concepts.
- Relate learning to experiences the children have already had or to new experiences you can share with them.
- Learn how the kids in your group spend their free time and relate examples to those things.

Social Characteristics

Children at this age

- are still largely shaped by home and family; trust learned at home helps shape their concept of God and the faith community.
- are also experiencing an ever-widening social world through attendance at school, either part-time or full-time. They are learning new skills and making adjustments to many new and important people in their lives.
- are beginning to learn how to play with others, though they are still strongly egocentric. They are learning more about how to cooperate and how to behave in group settings. They are more open to learning about communal concepts like the church as God's family.

Tips for Leaders

- Establish a good relationship with the home when possible. Include many home- and family-related illustrations when talking together about faith concepts. Encourage families to read the children's take-home papers to them.
- Draw on children's common experiences in home or school for examples.
- Watch for opportunities to build community. Encourage the children to do things together, to trust each other, to pray together, and to grow together in the faith.
- Look for teachable moments to help kids sense the diversity among themselves and among all of God's people.
- Remember that the children will see Jesus through you; you are an important flesh-and-blood example of faith in their young lives.

Spiritual Characteristics

Children at this age

- have a very real spiritual nature, a strong sense of who God is, and often relate to Jesus as their friend.
- are aware of right and wrong, but are still likely to define "wrong" in terms of its immediate consequence ("Taking cookies is wrong if Mom catches me!"). They begin to experience guilt and understand the joy that comes with forgiveness.
- understand God's love and our response within the context of everyday experiences and, to some extent, within the context of God's family, the church. By and large they are still concrete thinkers, however.
- can be delighted and awed by Bible stories. They can use their imagination to ask questions about the Bible and God.
- can express their love for Jesus in their own words and actions.

Tips for Leaders

- Continue to help the children realize that God loves them and cares for them.
- Help the children sense that they are an important part of God's family, the church.
- Encourage the children to say their own prayers to God at home during the week and to be good listeners when God's Word is read.
- Let the children sense your own wonder and reverence about who God is and what God has done.
- Focus on attitudes and actions that exhibit faith, rather than on teaching complex religious concepts.
- Invite the children to express their feelings for God in a variety of ways that allow them to be spontaneous and child-like in their praise and worship.