

Once you get to know the children in your group, you'll be amazed at how different they are! No two of these imagebearers are alike. Still, most children in this age group are beginning to establish a sense of who they are. And some of this identity comes through joining groups of one kind or another.

Being aware of these patterns of development can help you understand and minister to the unique persons God has placed in your care for these few weeks and months. Below are a few reminders of the world of fourth- and fifth-graders.

Intellectual Characteristics

Children at this age

- are often proficient readers, though reading ability varies considerably and some may still struggle, especially with out-loud reading. Instead of learning-to-read they are now reading-to-learn. They are getting better at reading and studying the Bible with an emphasis on learning the facts. They can often be good at memorizing.
- love to gather and classify facts and dig into a subject. They have a growing sense of time and space, a good grasp of cause and effect, and can deal with timelines and maps.
- are still “concrete thinkers” and are usually unable to reason with abstract ideas in an adult way. It is easier for them to talk about things than about ideas.
- tend to have thinking that is anchored in personal experience (“You said it was impossible; well, I know someone who did it.”) Their thinking is also colored by emotion and by a sense of fair play.
- are identifying their preferences for certain learning styles; you may recognize budding artists or writers or musicians in your group. Some children in this age group have a beginning sense of what they're good at and may be somewhat self-conscious when asked to do things they don't do well.
- still love to learn by doing—participating in games, dramas, role plays, group projects, art projects, service projects, etc.
- often have a strong interest in nature, the environment, or animals.
- some will be very knowledgeable about things that are on television or in the media. Many will be well-versed in video games or in computers and the Internet. Some may even have cell phones of their own.

Tips for Leaders

- Continue to be sensitive to children who struggle with reading; ask for volunteers to read aloud or assign shorter/simpler pieces to weaker readers.
- Read some of the books your kids are reading, and watch some of the movies and TV shows they enjoy so you can refer to these for examples and illustrations. If you don't know what they're watching or reading, ask them. They're usually happy to tell you about it at great length.

- Recognize each child's strengths; structure your sessions so they give each child a chance to do something he or she really enjoys and does well; at the same time, encourage kids to try activities that may challenge them a bit (music, art, drama, dance, role play.) Let the group know that you have strengths and weaknesses of your own, and learn to laugh at your own attempts to try something at which one of the children excels. This can help set the stage for accepting everyone's best efforts.
- Recognize that while these children can concentrate for longer periods of time and become involved in a topic, they also have a great need for movement. Shift activities frequently or add physical activity to the learning time so kids don't become antsy.
- Respect the mental boundaries of this age-group by staying away from theological arguments and analyses, but encourage their mental growth by asking why they feel as they do or have a certain opinion, by taking them into the nonliteral world of parables, by moving them into the discussion of ideas as well as things, and by using the anecdotal lives of heroes—including biblical heroes—to teach more abstract concepts such as faithfulness, love, covenant, and so on. Encourage them to think about why the people in Bible stories acted the way they did.
- Take advantage of good weather by occasionally going outside to work on an activity.

Social Characteristics

Children at this age

- are developing a sense of individual value and worth; are forming a sense of personal identity that includes statements about what they believe; need a sense of individual value and encouragement for their efforts in work and learning. They can be very sensitive to criticism.
- may place impossible expectations on themselves, tearing up stories they've written or pictures they've drawn because they don't think they're good enough.
- are spending more and more time with their peers or forming clubs or groups with children of their own gender. The opinions of friends begin to take on more importance, sometimes challenging the opinions of parents. Their group identity is stronger now than at any previous time in childhood.
- are becoming more responsible and caring toward each other and adults.
- are developing a communal sense about God's family, the church. They often want to be part of the church or peer groups within the church.
- are quick to sense when one child is favored or given special privileges.

Tips for Leaders

- Encourage and support the children's efforts in work and in learning. Make sure they know that their work is acceptable and you are not looking for "perfection;" (when they become self-critical, it's hard for them to participate because they feel they can't do anything right).
- Encourage group work of all sorts, stress cooperation as opposed to competition. Encourage the children to interact with all of their classmates. Avoid cliques by not allowing them to choose their groups but assigning children to small groups when doing group activities.
- Give children responsibility for working effectively with others in groups and for working independently on some projects.
- Tell some of the "faith stories" that come out of your life and the life of your local congregation.

- Encourage participation in church activities such as children’s choir, children’s programs, and special events. Children can add their gifts to congregational worship as readers, ushers, artist, singers, and in prayer. Encourage your church to use those gifts.
- Help kids develop a sense of belonging to the community of believers.
- Work to avoid favoritism.

Spiritual Characteristics

Children at this age

- are developing a conscience—a personal sense of right and wrong that often expresses itself in judgments of what’s “unfair” or unjust. They may be critical of adults who appear to be insincere in their faith.
- may be able to deal—in a limited way—with moral questions in terms of motives as well as consequences. They are beginning to think about questions of ethics and morality in the context of love, loyalty, promises, and so on.
- may show an increasing concern about people who are hungry, homeless, or poor.
- are often open to learning about other cultures and can be more accepting of differences in others, especially if they have personal experiences with people who are different from them.
- understand why we pray. Are able to make up spontaneous prayers.
- are more inclined to look inward than younger children and may ask questions and wonder about making a commitment to Christ.

Tips for Leaders

- When discussing moral/ethical issues, try getting into areas of motivation/intentions of those involved. Give guidance in making ethical decisions and encourage children to recognize the authority of Scripture. Examples from life are useful in helping children develop morally.
- Offer some service projects that children can do as a group.
- Watch for opportunities to point out the contributions of different cultures to music, worship, prayer, and so on.
- Watch for questions and statements that indicate an interest in making a commitment to Christ. Encourage the children to explore their faith and grow in their relationship with God. For some this may mean providing the necessary guidance to help them take the steps toward a public commitment.