

The children in your group may differ from each other in the ways they learn best, but there are some ways in which little ones grow and develop that make them very much alike. Here's a brief description of some of the characteristics you'll see in the preschool children you learn and grow with each week. It leaves much unsaid—and is certainly no substitute for getting to know the children firsthand. But we do hope it will give you some insight into what you may anticipate from preschoolers intellectually, socially, and spiritually.

Intellectual Characteristics

Children at this age

- think very concretely and literally, not abstractly or figuratively as youth and adults do; to a preschool child, things are as they appear to be.
- are not capable of reasoning or organizing abstract faith concepts along logical lines.
- learn through their experiences at home, at church, at preschool, and from caregivers.
- learn with their whole bodies. They love to taste, touch, move, explore, smell, watch, and wonder.
- are beginning to develop some literacy skills; some can write their own name, recognize the letters of the alphabet, and count to twenty.
- love to use language to please adults; “right answers” do not necessarily indicate comprehension.
- enjoy being told stories and read to. Repetition is an important way to learn.
- are often easily distracted from staying “on task.”

Tips for Leaders

- Try for a reasonable balance between times of quiet listening and active, “hands on” participation.
- Relate learning to the experiences children already have or to new experiences you can share with them.
- Give your little ones plenty of opportunities to move around.
- Keep games, stories, and other activities short, with transitional periods that enable movement from one part of the room to the other.
- Provide a variety of learning experiences: stories, art, music, words, numbers, group interaction, and so on.
- Avoid using figures of speech, symbolism, or analogies.
- Remember that each child develops at his or her own pace; nurture each child's strengths.

Social Characteristics

Children at this age

- are blissfully egocentric; they see the world through their own eyes.
- are developmentally incapable of understanding another's perspective or emotions.
- are self-centered, yet are significantly influenced by others, especially mom, dad, teachers, and other significant adults.
- are on the verge of experiencing a wider world of people; many young children still want to play alone and must make a real effort to have any meaningful play with others.

Tips for Leaders

- Accept children's developing concepts of themselves without judging their apparent egocentrism.
- Emphasize the theme that we are special to God; we've been created by God, belong to God, and are dearly loved by God.
- Recognize that you are a role model—a picture of God's love and care—for little ones.
- Encourage cooperative play with others while remaining sensitive to individual needs for attention and recognition.
- Do your best to make learning fun; make your room a safe and friendly place where kids will want to be every week.

Spiritual Characteristics

Children at this age

- have a growing sense that God is very special and real.
- tend to have a very literal concept of God, perhaps as a “grandfather” figure.
- readily accept what you say about God.
- sense that God loves them and cares for them.
- enjoy some Bible stories, especially about Jesus; want stories retold often.
- can develop attitudes of love and trust toward Jesus and God.
- do not yet have a built-in control (conscience) that nudges them toward right behavior for its own sake; They do the “right thing” out of fear of punishment or to win approval.
- sense that “church” is a good place to be.
- recite simple prayers; in some cases they may add their own ideas to form prayers.

Tips for Leaders

- Above all, let kids know that God loves them and cares for them; teach this in the context of common childhood experiences with which children can identify.
- Let these little ones sense your own wonder and awe about who God is and what God has done.
- Focus on attitudes and actions that exhibit faith.
- When you do teach religious concepts, keep them simple and few (God loves us; we love and obey God; God is good; Jesus is God's Son); repeat them often.
- Nurture faith by giving little ones a love for the stories of Scripture and by laying attitudinal foundations for later understanding of Scripture's great truths.