

Luke's simple statement, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature," (Luke 2:52, NIV) sums up Jesus' development through the ages and stages of childhood. Even more important, the statement clearly recognizes wisdom (mental) and stature (physical) as separate areas of development. But Luke adds, "and in favor with God and man," suggesting spiritual and social growth or faith development.

John H. Westerhoff likens faith to a tree trunk. The young trunk has few rings; older trunks have many. The rings of faith growth occur as a result of life experiences and in interacting with others and with God. Westerhoff identifies four main stages of faith development.

1. Experienced Faith

- **The Key** to experienced faith in early childhood is observation and reaction. Children observe love and faith in their interaction with adults and react to what they experience. At this stage, they are too young to consciously think about faith, but they demonstrate unwavering faith.
- **The Needs** at this stage are to experience trust, love, and acceptance. Little children need a few trusted and loving adults in their lives. Sometimes pets provide the love and acceptance adults are too busy to give.
- **Foster Faith** at this stage through warmth, hugs, active listening, and countless experiences of unconditional love.

2. Belonging Faith

- **The Key** to faith for a primary-age child is a sense of belonging. Children of this age have a keen sense of the order of things. They are also great "joiners." They want to belong to a church that is bigger than their family and to clubs within the church.
- **The Needs** for children at this stage of faith development are:
 - * A sense of authority. They are satisfied to have their "why" questions answered, "because the Bible" or "because the Adventist Church" says so.
 - * A sense of the community they belong to. Stories of God's working in Bible times and in the beginnings of their church feed the child's growing faith.
 - * Experiences of awe and wonder, which are partly what worship is about.
 - * A sense of being wanted at church, being accepted by their teachers and peers, and are missed when absent.
- **Foster Faith** by filling the above needs through stories, drama, art, and creative worship experiences in a warm, accepting atmosphere.

3. Searching Faith

- **The Key** element of the adolescent's searching faith is critical judgment. For the pre-adolescent, quoting authorities is not enough. They want to examine all the information for themselves.
- **The Needs** at this stage of faith development are:
 - * To establish their own identity. They are questioning and examining their beliefs, their lifestyle, their appearance, all authority, and anything they identify with, in an effort to define themselves.
 - * To know that the religion of the head is equal to the religion of the heart. This compels kids to ask searching questions that challenge the adult's beliefs. They become critical of any explanations that cannot be supported by logic, good sense, and scientific inquiry. Adults need to accept the questions without feeling threatened, working with the kids to find the answers.
 - To be needed in the faith community.
- **Foster Faith** in adolescents through serious Bible study, short-term journeys, mission trips and service opportunities.

4. Owned Faith

- **The Keys** to a lasting faith for the adult are: conversion, witnessing, and discipleship. While conversion in pre-adolescence or childhood was real, the individual experiences it again in terms of a faith that they have taken responsibility for and ownership of.
- **The Needs** in adulthood are to be an example, to find opportunities to witness by word and by lifestyle, and to help others put faith to work.
- **Foster Faith** through teaching opportunities and social action as well as by personal Bible study and prayer.

How Children Think

Let's take a look at how children think at various stages and relate those patterns to their spiritual experience. Four stages of thinking, from birth through teen years, are briefly described with suggestions on how to instruct learners at each stage.

The model is borrowed from Swiss developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, who helped us understand how people think at various stages of cognitive development.

“Labeling individuals for their stage of development is not helpful. Neither should one view one stage of faith development as being better or worse than another.”
—Barbara Manspeaker

Stage I—Birth to two years

For the first two years of life a child's ability to understand is based on exploration of the world through the senses. The child learns about objects by placing them into the mouth, banging things together or dropping them on the floor.

The child watches an object being moved about the room and notices if the object remains the same or is changed. Sitting up, crawling, walking, climbing and running are also means of discovery. A Stage I thinker processes only what the senses focus on.

When teaching Stage I Learners...

- Plan physical activities like walking to God's house or having a classroom "nature" walk.
- Give children objects to touch. The objects should be large enough that they cannot swallow. .
- Vary activities by alternating action with quiet or listening activities.
- Provide a variety of materials and textures for the child to handle.
- Use familiar materials to attract their attention—relate the object or experience to spiritual concepts, such as: God's love, creation, or their praise and thanksgiving.
- Keep calm in every situation. Speak quietly; avoid hurry. Proceed at a child's pace.
- Model for them how to express their feelings to God. Show a variety of flowers, then pray, "Jesus, we thank you for the flowers." They may try to repeat it with you!
- Give clear impressions by repeating stories in exact words. Use visuals and activities to focus their attention on the story.
- Speak of Jesus as a friend. Help the child feel confident of His love.

Stage II—Ages two to seven

From the ages of two to seven, a child's thinking can operate independently from the body's senses. During this time, a child's imagination seems to know no boundaries—simple objects like a pencil or a block of wood can be transformed instantly into a plane, dog, banana or a shooting star!

Not surprisingly, the child's thinking is quite inaccurate. Space relationships aren't fully understood — tall is big and large is valuable. If asked to choose between a nickel and a dime, the Stage II child will pick up a nickel "because it's bigger" and therefore more valuable.

Gullibility also characterizes a child in Stage II. Santa Claus is a real person and so is the tooth fairy. Talking animals, though unrealistic, fit the ways that children naturally think at this stage. Stage II thinkers find the Bible story of Balaam's donkey and the great fish that swallowed Jonah to be completely appropriate ways for God to communicate. Miracles are entirely credible to these young minds.

No problem is too big for their God to handle—they pray in absolute confidence. This characteristic of children is surely what Jesus referred to in Matthew 18:3, "Except you become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

A Stage II thinker accepts God as a real person and accepts and returns His love. Children at this age want to please God and can choose Jesus as their friend. But they are also very literal. This is illustrated by the little boy who said, when the doctor asked to listen to the boy's heart, "I don't have a heart. I gave it to Jesus."

When Teaching Stage II Learners...

- Plan varied activities by mixing action activities with quiet, "processing" times.
- Teach through dramatic play—they learn by doing!
- Emphasize Bible truths of sharing and helping. Show how they can please Jesus through their acts of kindness. Adopt a class service project (for older members).
- Teach them to express joy and praise to God through music.
- Give them opportunities to think! Present a problem and let them solve it on their level of understanding. Give them time to reason out an answer and then explain their solution.
- Present the lesson so the students can place themselves "in" the story—relate the lesson to their daily life.

Stage III—Ages seven to eleven

From approximately the age of seven to the age of eleven (or even later) a child's thinking ability centers on what is concrete and tangible. What is real is what is experienced.

As relieved as adults might be that the child has become more realistic, the realism comes with a certain loss. If what is real is what is experienced, then is God real?

These Stage III children seek first-hand confirmation of what they learn. When the pastor shares that Jesus is in heaven interceding on our behalf, these children ask: "If Jesus is in heaven, how can He simultaneously help the person who is homeless or in prison?"

Although some childish perspectives drop away, these years are a fertile time for information storage. This is the age when memorization is quick and facts are easily remembered. Bible quizzes, Bible sword drills and other Scripture contests are popular.

"Loving" God must be spelled out in concrete terms for these students. That's why simple service projects are so enthusiastically supported. The Ten Commandments can be appreciated because they are so straightforward; but the Sermon on the Mount, with all its multiple applications, is a bit confusing.

"Stage III thinkers are not only literalists: they tend to be little legalists. Preoccupied with questions of right and wrong, they want behavior spelled out in rules—which they gladly apply to others."

—Noelene Johnsson

Symbols are not well understood at this stage. When you share passionately what the cross means to you, a Stage III student is amazed that anyone can get so

emotional about two pieces of wood! And the Communion service is tasteless wheat crackers with only a swallow of grape juice!

Their most difficult questions have to do with whether or not we will need wings to fly in heaven, or if our pets will be there.

When Teaching Stage III Learners...

- Show how they can use their energy for the Lord! Organize a class service project.
- Make handwork purposeful—with practical use and a connection to the lesson.
- Provide variety in your lesson presentation and surprise them by occasionally changing the order of your class routine.
- Use drama, role plays, and readings that pose a situation or problem for them to solve.
- Help them feel secure in God's love. Affirm their special gifts.
- Explain the "why" of rules.
- Boys this age admire strength and power. Show them how God enabled men and women in the Bible to be strong to do His will. Encourage Bible reading as a "faith-strengthening" exercise.
- Present short biographies of godly heroes for them to imitate.

Stage IV—Age eleven through the teen years

Stage IV thinking comes gradually. It may begin as early as 11 years of age, but for most it occurs during the teen years. Physiologically, the left and right half of the brain fuse together. The person is finally able to think about thinking! Logic and abstract thought become possible and symbols can be understood rather than just memorized.

How can you tell when a person is moving into Stage IV thinking? They start asking questions! Everything is "Why?" Rather than preventing, ignoring, or disdaining this question, it's best to encourage their questions so issues can be discussed within the home, school or church. This is the age for using Talk Sheets and discussion starters in a small group setting.

When Teaching Stage IV Learners...

- Listen when they talk.
- Remember your own teen experiences and relate them when relevant.
- Keep a sense of humor.
- Don't overreact. Teens love to share controversial ideas just to see your reaction!
- Truly care about them. Arrange group activities outside of the classroom situation.
- Avoid using abstract Christian jargon.
- Keep the program active and varied to keep their interest.

- Use Bible Learning Activities (see Chapter 7), interactive video, Talk Sheets, etc.

Buried Alive!

Ahead of time, bring to junior class stacks of newspapers, garbage bags, and a blanket.

Divide the class into groups of 4-6. One person from each group lies on the floor (or blanket) with arms outstretched. The others gather around and toss newspapers on the person until they are completely covered. Halt the activity when the bodies are sufficiently buried. (Make sure they can still breathe!)

The “buried” person stays under the newspapers while classmates discuss the kinds of things kids can feel buried under (parent’s expectations, school pressure, work, guilt, sin). Kids now break out from their cover. How does it feel to be free of all the clutter? Read Luke 16:13.

Try This...

Scan this chart for an overview of Erikson’s eight life stages, their tasks and resulting virtue.

The Life Stages	Developmental Task	How Achieved	Resulting Virtue
Infants—1st Year	Trust	Trust is learned when physical & emotional needs are anticipated and met.	Hope
2nd Year	Autonomy	Autonomy is learned as they begin doing things for themselves.	Right use of will
3rd—5th Year	Initiative	Self-confidence is gained as they take initiative to follow through on tasks.	Self-confidence
6th Year—Puberty	Industry	Completing job assignments, learning to become industrious; recognition for both effort and results.	Competence
Adolescence	Role identity	Learning one’s place in family, school and church. Discovering one’s gifts and talents.	Loyalty
Young Adult	Intimacy	Learning the value of shared love	Commitment
Middle Age	Productivity	Taking part in service work; share good of self and others	Caring
Old Age	Integrity	By passing on virtues, accepting changes that can and cannot be made; accepting death.	Wisdom

Educational psychologist, Erik Erikson, suggested eight stages in a person's life. He named the stages according to the chief developmental task of each stage. The favorable outcome of mastering the task is a virtue—a positive character trait. A person who masters each stage of development is systematically developing character. So perhaps Luke's "in favor with God and man" suggests character development. Notice that faith—as in trust—is foundational to character development. Psychologists tell us that mastery of each successive virtue is dependent upon mastery of the previous tasks.

*Children who learn to trust that their needs will be met have faith in their providers. This faith, initially conferred on humans, can eventually be transferred to the One who fills all our human needs.

Resources

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