



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **Guide to Whole Person Development – PART 1 CHARACTERISTIC AGE-STAGE BEHAVIORS**

Imagine an essay contest for parents that involves describing your child as he/she was two years ago. Though you would recall occasional or unusual characteristics, your contest paragraph would more likely represent patterns of behavior and focused wisdom that came with hindsight. If the contest judge compared the essays within an age group, commonalities would be noted and a typical profile would emerge. Probably one-of-a-kind characteristics that explain the uniqueness of some children would be excluded from the description to yield the common wisdom of the essays. Now imagine that you possessed that common wisdom before your child entered that stage of life! Would it have been helpful to you? Parents have expressed the desire to know what to expect so as to be more ready (if we ever can be) and, perhaps, to parent more effectively at each new stage in the life of a developing child.

**“Normal”** refers to the **standard, average pattern of development for a child who is without physical or psychological challenge and who experiences a nurturing home.** Parent or caretaker presence in life-giving settings is marked by affection; patience; understanding; genuine interest; and regular assurances of love, encouragement, warmth, and friendliness. Daily household experiences include simple, clear routines; manageable choices; and a pattern of respectful parent interaction rather than imposition or interference.

### **THUMBNAIL SKETCHES OF THE DEVELOPING CHILD**

#### **EARLY CHILDHOOD (Grades Pre-K, K, 1, 2)**

**Age 4-5:** Speaks in lengthy conversations that often involve fantasy, boasting, or bragging; confuses fact with fiction; develops humor and enjoys silliness in entertainment, books, and stories; occasionally uses foul language; begins to identify good and bad; seeks approval from friends; may lie or steal; may lose control easily; prone to mood swings.

**Age 5:** Beginning to be capable of self-criticism, to balance self-sufficiency with sociability, and to learn how to give and receive; eager for responsibility; purposeful with activity but also noisy; interested in group activity; good verbal expression; enjoys dramatic play; can wash, dress, eat, and use the toilet independently; begins to display individuality; characterized by trust, openness, wonder, fantasy, and a short attention span; developing self-confidence, self-respect, and independence but still wants to please parents and teachers; may experience bedtime fears and nightmares.

**Age 6:** Exuberant, restless, spontaneous, overactive, easily fatigued, assertive, aggressive; wants to be first, less

cooperative than earlier, keenly competitive and boastful; short attention span that requires concrete experiences and frequent activity change; loves to learn new words and definitions; has difficulty making decisions; evidences inconsistent maturity levels, regresses when tired and often less mature at home than with outsiders; group activity is popular; interest differences begin to surface between boys and girls.

**Age 7:** Sensitive to others' feelings and attitudes; especially dependent on approval of adults; unpredictable; full of energy but fidgety and often dreamy or absorbed; boy-girl activity interests become more divergent; seven-minute attention span; requires active participation in learning with concrete objects, has limited ability for abstract thought, requires specific, literal directions; cautious and self-critical, anxious to do things well; likes to use hands; talkative, prone to exaggerate; may fight verbally instead of physically, and is competitive; enjoys songs, rhythms, fairy tales, myths, nature stories, comics, television, movies; able to assume some responsibility; likely to be demanding and inflexible; concerned about right and wrong but may take small things (steal), lie,

cheat, or complain a lot; beginning to understand cause-effect and situation-outcome.

### **MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (Grades 3, 4, 5)**

**Age 8:** Often careless, noisy, and argumentative, but also alert, friendly, and people-oriented; more dependent on mother than on teacher; sensitive to criticism; growing awareness of individual differences; eager and more enthusiastic than cautious; higher accident rate; seeks acceptance, forms groups or clubs, and seeks a best friend of same sex; hates to be left out; in case of conflict gives allegiance to peer instead of adult; fond of small group activity, team games, adventure stories, collections (rocks, stamps, etc.), and spontaneous dramatization; more able to grasp the meaning behind an event; bossy about rules.

**Age 9:** Reasserts independence; challenges adults; demands equal treatment; has an extreme sense of fairness (“eye for an eye” approach); easily troubled by conflicts with friends, teachers or tensions at home; nervous habits like fidgeting and nail biting may appear in response to sitting in class for long periods of time; invents imaginary playmate; competes with friends while still wanting their companionship; relies on friends for support; begins to see adults are capable of making mistakes; forms opinions and attitudes toward school; ability for logical thinking is fostered by solving puzzles, mysteries, and predicting endings to stories.

**Age 10:** Usually good-natured, decisive, responsible, dependable, reasonable, with strong sense of right and wrong; individual differences and abilities now apparent; capable of prolonged interest, making plans and pursuing them independent of others; group associations (clubs, gangs) of one sex only, of short duration and changing membership; best friends are important to girls; perfectionistic tendency—wants to do well but loses interest if discouraged or pressured; absorbed in talk and discussion; often outspoken and critical of adults, although still dependent on adult approval; argues about fairness in games; influenced by values of peer group; interested in current events, people, world and community, biography and great deeds; able to engage in brainstorming alternative solutions and consequences associated with a given situation.

### **EARLY ADOLESCENCE (Grades 6, 7, 8)**

**Age 11:** Awkwardness, restlessness, and laziness common as result of rapid and uneven growth; emotional responses (girls cry; boys swear and fight) closely related to physical and emotional growth; teasing and antagonism between

boys and girls; begins to think about the future; concerned with sex role; enjoys daydreaming; grows in self-control; can be careless about clothes, room; attention span longer and concentrated; disturbed by differing opinions and standards among friends and family; concerned about right and wrong, fairness, cheating, and lying; willing to participate in discussions; searching questions about God, life, and death.

**Ages 12-13:** (Due to the wide range of individual differences in maturity levels during the pre-teen stage, this article combines ages 12 and 13.)

Often overly critical, changeable, rebellious, uncooperative; values group opinion more than that of adults; self-conscious about physical changes; interested in earning money; transitioning from concrete, literal thought to abstract thinking; begins to explain things verbally and symbolically; benefits from group problem solving and peer teaching; demonstrates high-level critical thinking ability by summarizing, outlining, word mapping, and identifying parts of a whole; appreciates warm affection and sense of humor in adults; motivated by sense of belonging and acceptance by peer group; shut down by nagging and condemnation; benefits from opportunities for increased independence and responsibility without pressure.

### **ADOLESCENCE (High School)**

Adolescence is the transition stage from childhood to adulthood. Originally considered the teen years from 12 to 20, psychologists now extend the period to age 25 because it takes some individuals longer to integrate security, autonomy, initiative, and industry into an identity that is capable of facing the challenges of the adult community. Adolescence is a time of rapid change physically, emotionally, relationally, and socially. Adolescent life is like riding a rollercoaster. If you think it a hard time for parents, imagine the stress for the teen! It is an intense time marked by growth spurts, the appearance of secondary sex characteristics, sex glands, and acne; mood swings, sexual feelings, impulsive behavior, and general anxiety about growing up and facing the future; a new sense of self that defines—and is defined by—attitudes and values as well as relationships with parents and peers; the ability to think abstractly, theorize, hypothesize, analyze, and synthesize; establishing a sexual and social identity through friendships, crushes, and love; replacing emotional and financial dependence on parents with personal responsibility; establishing a pattern of short-term goals and follow-through behaviors; contributing to society through vocational choice and exercising citizenship.

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