Child Development: Developmentally Appropriate Catechesis

Introduction

This segment is meant to help you reflect on what developmentally appropriate catechesis is and why we practice developmentally appropriate catechesis. Just follow the outline. Begin by reflecting or journaling on the *first question*. Watch the video *Age Appropriate Catechesis*. Note how the explanation sheds light on what you will do with your group. Then read the article "Developmentally Appropriate Catechesis" and jot down your responses to the *reflection questions*.

First Question

Think back to your school days. What were the differences in your experiences from first to fourth grade and from fourth grade to eighth grade?

Video

Watch the video Age–Appropriate Catechesis and respond to these questions:

- What insight did you get from the video about how you will interact or present to your group?

- What does a catechist need to be aware of when doing group work with K–3? 4–6?

- Besides the fact that the National Directory calls for systematic and developmentally appropriate catechesis, why do you think it is

important?

- What did you learn new from the video?

Article: Developmentally Appropriate Catechesis

Read the following article and respond to the questions:

What is important as children learn about their faith? Not only what we teach, but also how the learner receives it. We can teach things in a theologically accurate way, but if it's not delivered in a developmentally appropriate manner, the material may be misunderstood. We can misrepresent Catholic teaching by getting the facts wrong, but we could also misrepresent Catholic teaching by delivering the facts in a way that they are not well understood. While each individual is unique, there are some general trends in development that can guide age-specific catechesis.

First Grade. Because this is the beginning of formal religious education for many children, and because the aim of catechesis is "communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ" (GDC, 80), it is logical to focus first grade catechesis around the person of Jesus. First graders are just beginning to move beyond the developmental self-focus of the preschool years, so an introduction to relationship with Jesus and the Church community is appropriate. Children this age are beginning to move into a cognitive stage of rule-based thinking, so this is a great opportunity to provide them with the basic teachings of the faith. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, these basic teachings are often communicated in the form of stories. Interactive storytelling techniques involving visuals, three dimensional props, and acting out the story can be especially engaging activities for children this age.

Second Grade. Children this age are in the Piagetian cognitive stage of "concrete operations." They understand cause and effect and know the world works according to rules. Therefore, this is a great time to introduce God's rules and guidelines for living. Because they have reached the age of reason, second graders are better able to understand that the Eucharist is not ordinary bread and wine, because Jesus said it was His Body and Blood. Second graders are concrete thinkers and need many hands-on activities and practical explanations. Our approach to teaching the sacraments should be step-by-step and very concrete. This is a good time to learn the steps of the rites, parts of the Mass, and basics of what the Church teachers about the sacraments.

Third Grade. Children this age have entered what social/developmental theorist Harry Stack Sullivan called the "chumship stage," when same-age peers become very important and children often have "best friends." For this reason, it is an ideal time to focus on the parish community. Third graders are more aware of the larger world, so this is a good time to talk about the larger worldwide Church and how it is organized. The sense of the larger community makes third grade an ideal time to do some learning in pairs or cooperative groups. To do this effectively, catechists should make sure the tasks are well defined, that each participant has a unique role, and that time limits and transition times are given.

Fourth Grade. Fourth graders are beginning to internalize standards of behavior. Their consciences are growing quickly, and they are gaining a sense of "right" and "wrong" that goes beyond just what might bring them punishments or rewards. This is a great time to work with them on what it means to be disciples of Jesus. Fourth graders are good at using their reasoning skills, but they still don't have a

firm grasp on hypothetical reasoning. This means they have difficulty imagining things or situations they haven't experienced. Role playing or acting out making good choices in a moral dilemma will be especially effective, since all of us are more likely to do the things we practice.

Fifth Grade. Fifth graders are growing in their ability to understand symbols and signs. This makes 5th grade an ideal time to take an in-depth look at the sacraments and rites of the Church. Fifth graders are also in a stage of identity development in which they begin to seriously consider who they will be when they are older. This makes this age an important time for learning about vocation and the Sacraments at the Service of Holy Communion. It is helpful to ask children this age to consider what God's plan for their life might be, and encourage them to seek that plan in the talents and opportunities God has given them.

Sixth Grade. Children in sixth grade are growing in their abstract thinking ability and have made grade strides in reading and writing ability. This makes sixth grade an ideal time to study Sacred Scripture and begin to connect the events of salvation history. The use of Bible timelines can assist children with this. Children in sixth grade are also becoming young adolescents, so this is an important time to strengthen Catholic identity through study of our faith ancestors and basic doctrines. Studying the saints and how they articulated and defended the Catholic faith can be helpful.

Seventh and **Eighth Grade.** The continued physical growth of the middle school years brings identity issues and questions. Middle school students are often highly insecure and self-conscious. They are looking for reassurance that they are "normal" and a sense of belonging with others. They also want to see the faith is relevant to them. If

they cannot make connections between their faith and everyday life, they may question the importance of what they are learning in a catechetical setting. Focusing on discipleship – following Jesus – can address the identity issues at the stage, while continued focus on the Church as community (and how they can actively participate in the Church) can help students feel a sense of belonging.

Alive In Christ is written with all of these things in mind. The scope and sequence of the program is developed in such a way that the seven themes recur each year with different developmentally appropriate emphases. That is why it is important in a parish program to follow the text. Sometimes catechists have a favorite topic that may not be part of the year's content, but they choose to make it part of their plan. It's OK to share this with the children, but make sure they do not miss an important part of the overall content. Be sure you take a look at the whole scope and sequence, found in the front pages of your Catechist Guide. There you will see when and where certain things are placed in the whole plan of catechesis. Sometimes, too, catechists will leave out the activities, usually because they feel they don't have enough time. When that happens, young people do not have the opportunity to appropriate the material into their understanding or behavior. They may have the information, but they may not have the sense of the theme or the ability to apply it in their lives. When in doubt always follow your guide.

Reflection Questions

- What are the developmental characteristics of the age group?

- How can I create a developmentally appropriate environment for my learners?