



**A GUIDE FOR MINISTRY LEADERS,
PARENTS, AND CAREGIVERS**

SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN AND TEENS



Christian Reformed Church
**Faith Formation
Ministries**

crcna.org/FaithFormation

SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN

While each child's developmental path is unique, there are common patterns. These descriptions are designed to support congregational leaders, parents, and caregivers as together we seek to help children come to know and love God.

For free coaching and help with meeting children's ministry challenges in your congregation, contact the Faith Formation Ministries Children's Ministry Catalyzer or one of our Regional Catalyzers (crcna.org/FaithFormation/coaching).

For information on how children might experience the Lord's Supper at each age level, visit the Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper toolkit (crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits).

PRESCHOOLERS . . .

- have a growing sense that God is very special and real.
- tend to have a 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 and that they can love and trust him.
- enjoy frequent repetition of Bible stories.
- can recite simple prayers, and may add their own ideas.
- generally do the "right thing" out of fear of punishment or to win approval.
- sense that church is a good place to be.

5- AND 6-YEAR-OLDS . . .

- have a very real spiritual nature, a strong sense of who God is, and often relate to Jesus as their friend.
- are aware of right and wrong, and begin to experience guilt and understand forgiveness.
- understand God's love and our response within the context of everyday experiences. By and large they are still concrete thinkers.
- can be delighted and awed by Bible stories and often use their imagination to ask questions.
- can express their love for Jesus in words and actions.



7- AND 8-YEAR-OLDS . . .

- are capable of understanding basic salvation concepts and of making a commitment to Jesus, but may do so simply out of a desire to please adults.
- often express opinions and feelings about God and church and ask many “why” and “how” questions.
- often include prayer in their daily routines. Their prayers are frequently self-centered but are sincere and offered in faith.
- often still see issues in black and white.

9- AND 10-YEAR-OLDS . . .

- are developing a conscience: a personal sense of right and wrong that often expresses itself in judgments of what’s unfair or unjust.
- may be able to deal with moral questions in terms of motives and consequences, love, loyalty, promises, and so on.
- may show an increasing concern for people who are hungry, homeless, or poor.
- are open to learning about other cultures and accepting differences in others.
- understand why we pray and are often able to make up spontaneous prayers.
- are more inclined to look inward than younger children are, and may ask questions and wonder about making a commitment to Christ.



SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TEENS

Anyone who parents teens or works with them knows that they are a diverse group whose spiritual growth varies widely. While this list of spiritual characteristics isn't definitive, it is representative of common patterns that we see between the ages of 13 and 18.

Three big questions teens of all ages ask are

- Who am I? (this is an **Identity** question)
- Where do I fit? (this is a **Belonging** question)
- What difference do I make? (this is a **Purpose** question)

For free coaching and help with meeting your congregation's youth ministry challenges, contact the Faith Formation Ministries Youth Ministry Catalyzer or one of our Regional Catalyzers (crcna.org/FaithFormation/coaching).

PRETEENS AND YOUNG TEENS . . .

- resonate with the truth that God knows and cares for them personally as individuals.
- are able to commit themselves to Christ and to a life of Christian gratitude and service. Public profession of faith is a very real possibility at this age.
- are idealists, quick to point out faults and failures at home and in the world, quick to spot injustices, and eager to become involved in worthy causes. They can be blind to how this idealism applies to their own behavior.
- are beginning to see things from others' perspectives, and so become very interested in what others think of them. This interest may manifest itself as self-absorption.
- experience community both in person and online. They may feel closer to the people they interact with online than the people they see every day. They may also be one kind of person in real life and a completely different person online.
- are developing their own beliefs and values in the context of peers, school, media, and church, but are very concerned about conforming to the group or culture.
- need to know they're important to God and to the church right now, not just when they get older. It's important to provide opportunities for them to serve and use their gifts in your congregation.
- often admire and imitate adult faith models as a way of establishing their own identity.
- may be struggling with doubts and questions about their faith, feelings that often intensify in older adolescence. Their faith still likely reflects the faith of their parents, but they have begun to make it more personal and individual.

OLDER TEENS . . .

- are often intensely independent and may resist parents' attempts to inquire about or guide their spiritual life. But, paradoxically, their parents remain the major influencers of their faith formation.
- are developing a greater understanding of the mystery of faith, the deeper layers of meaning in the Bible, and theological discussions about faith.
- are beginning to question existing leadership structures and may have a low tolerance for anything they perceive to be “fake” or inauthentic. Be yourself when interacting with them, and seek their input when planning ministry with and to their age group.
- are beginning to distinguish between organized religion and personal spirituality as their worldview broadens. Some may describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” but this does not necessarily mean they have rejected their faith or the church at large.
- need to sense that they belong and are accepted as they are. They can be deeply alienated from the church if they perceive the church is rejecting them or people close to them on the basis of their lifestyle or beliefs.
- often wrestle with intense feelings of shame from a variety of sources: unmet expectations imposed by adults; addictions to pornography, drugs, or alcohol; sexual thoughts and behaviors. These young people are looking for Christian adults to give them hope and help and to share healthy coping mechanisms.
- develop greater compassion and empathy as they learn about the world around them. In response, they tend to want to express their faith through action. Providing meaningful opportunities for service is critical. Faith-forming experiences like SERVE (YouthUnlimited.org/serve) are deeply effective for this group.



FAITH FORMATION MINISTRIES

Faith Formation Ministries encourages and equips local Christian Reformed ministry leaders in their calling to shape intentional, lifelong faith in their context. To support you, we offer a wide variety of resources and free personalized coaching.

COACHING

Our Regional Catalyzers, Youth Ministry Catalyzer, and Children's Ministry Catalyzer are available to consult with your church on faith formation challenges. And their services are free of charge!

Our catalyzers

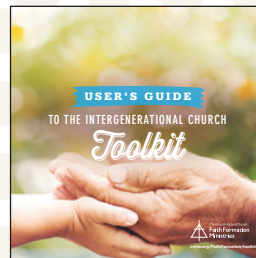
- provide short- or long-term coaching.
- offer workshops on a variety of faith formation topics.
- connect you with resources.
- help you evaluate your church culture and existing faith formation initiatives.

Visit crcna.org/FaithFormation/coaching to learn more.

RESOURCES

Check out our online toolkits—curated resource collections that include hundreds of practical faith formation ideas for ministry leaders (crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits). Subjects include:

- Children's Ministry toolkit
- Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper toolkit
- Intergenerational Church toolkit
- Professing Our Faith toolkit
- Faith Storytelling toolkit
- Building Blocks of Faith toolkit



Our Ten Ways tools are one-page resources that provide a springboard for conversation, training, and planning around various faith formation challenges. Titles include

- Ten Ways to Engage Kids in Worship
- Ten Ways to Talk with Someone about Their Faith
- Ten Ways to Build a Stronger Youth Ministry
- Ten Ways to Connect with Children and Teens in Your Church
- . . . and more! View them at crcna.org/FaithFormation/recommended-resources/ten-ways-tools or order from FaithAliveResources.org.

