

Understanding Children Today

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Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people ~Luke 2:52

This essay explores what faith formation leaders need to know as they journey with children during this important decade. This includes taking a look at the four areas that impact development, identifying ten key learnings that will help ministry leaders understand the child's faith development more deeply, and celebrating the gifts children bring that can enrich the life and faith of their surrounding community.

Children are always learning—every moment of every day they are observing, taking in information, and discovering new insights. Understanding how children grow and learn is essential in knowing how they experience and respond to God. Faith formation requires that the adults coming alongside children have a deep understanding of the children they are in ministry with and how God is working in their lives. We are on this journey together.

God is present and active in the lives of every child we meet. When you meet a child, just as with all people, you have an opportunity to experience and share Emmanuel, *God with us*. This chapter is an invitation for you to watch for God in the children you are in ministry with and to join children in the holy work of responding to God's presence and love. More often than not, children can reveal God's holy presence to us—we just have to be paying attention.

Faith Formation

Childhood is an exciting time for faith formation. Full of wonder and curiosity children have all they need to connect to the divine and to share God's grace and love with others. We cannot give children faith. Children are not cups to be filled but instead, children are born with a capacity for faith that needs encouragement, guidance, love, and support (Furnish 76). As children grow they take in information and make meaning out of their daily experiences. Children are continually watching and learning from the world around them. Impacted by nature and nurture children's bodies and brains grow in response to their physical, emotional, and social environments. People and relationships have a significant impact on how a child grows and learns. Therefore family, friends, faith communities, and other social communities have the opportunity to nurture, teach, support, and learn from children as they grow, develop, and learn.

Faith formation leaders have the important task of coming alongside children as they grow in their relationship with God and neighbor. We are accompanying children on the discipleship journey. Faith formation is not about us nor is it about what we might give to the children in our faith community. Instead faith formation is about how an individual grows in his or her relationship with God and neighbor and how this relationship impacts how the individual participates in the world around them. Our task is to shepherd and to guide—modeling faith practices and inviting children to practice them

with us. Together we develop tools for connecting to God and neighbor—deepening our faith and strengthening our work in the world.

Children can show us who they are—we just have to pay attention. The information in this chapter helps us understand what children might be experiencing as they journey through life. The ten key learnings give us insight into how a child’s body, brain, personality, and faith develops. This is all helpful information to assist us in the work God calls us to. However, we must remember that every child is different so part of our work is to get to know each child—their gifts, their strengths, their challenges, and to find ways to journey with them as they grow in God’s grace and love. As you learn more about children, our hope is that your respect and love for the youngest members of God’s creation will deepen and that your ministry with children will be strengthened.

Developmental Overview

Children are constantly growing and changing. They are also continually discovering and learning. Children learn from their experiences and their social interactions with others. Children develop and respond to what they see, hear, taste, touch, and feel. As children grow they are impacted by their surroundings, the people who care for them, their community, their culture, and their social reality. Each of these variables impacts how a child develops and shows up in the world around them.

Development is impacted by both nature and nurture. Human development involves an individual’s biological capability to organize information and make meaning but is also impacted by a person’s interactions with the world around them. Human Development is process where biological and cultural processes work together. Cognitive and physical development alongside personal experience impacts how children develop, grow, and learn. This holistic understanding of children emphasizes the importance of ensuring a child has all they need to be healthy. It also highlights the need for children to grow in a safe and nurturing environment where they are surrounded by others who will guide, teach, challenge, and support them throughout their lifelong development process. While every child develops at his or her own pace, there are some guiding parameters that help us understand what a child might be experiencing at a given time in their development. As children grow and learn they ask essential questions of the world around them:

0-2 years: Am I safe, and can I trust you?

In the first 24 months of any child’s life they are looking to their environment and learning who and what they can trust. They are in need of care and protection and quickly learn when they are safe, when they are cared for, and when they are loved. This is essential for leaders in ministry to understand as they seek to welcome the youngest members of the body of Christ. The hope in these two years is that children will grow to trust their care givers and to feel safe at home and in their faith community. The work in this stage is to create a safe space where trust and love is developed. The gift children bring to this stage is vulnerability. To be vulnerable is to open oneself to the world around you recognizing that no one successfully gets through life alone. As Brene Brown in *Rising Strong* asserts “vulnerability—the willingness to show up and be seen with no guarantee of outcome- is the only path to more love, belonging, and joy.” (Brown, loc 126). Children are born vulnerable. They

begin life from a place of openness and dependence. Our work is to ensure that in that place of vulnerability they learn that they are safe and loved.

2-4 years: What can I do?

In years 2-4 children begin to seek independence, testing their newly acquired skills and working to develop new ones. Perhaps you have heard a toddler say “I can do it” as they struggle to pull their shirt over their head, or try desperately to put the shoes on not understanding that they are putting the wrong shoe on the wrong foot. In these moments the work of caregivers and ministry leaders is to encourage children as they seek autonomy—patiently showing children how to successfully accomplish various tasks and giving them space to practice and perfect these life-skills. In moments of frustration and impatience it is easy to simply do the task for the child, or when the child messes up and spills the milk, it is often human nature to get angry or frustrated. However, the holy work in this stage is to patiently guide, model, and encourage the child as they seek to develop a new skill. The goal is to avoid shaming children when they mess up as this can lead to self doubt and uncertainty. The hope is that as children grow they will build confidence in who they are and what they are capable of accomplishing by themselves and with the help others. The gift children bring to this stage is courage—the desire to try and to successfully accomplish new tasks and responsibilities. When nurtured with encouragement, love, and care children will develop faith and trust in themselves and their ability to make a difference in the world around them.

4-5 years: Is it ok for me to explore?

As children continue to grow and become more autonomous they begin to look for ways to engage in the world around them. They begin to ask—is it ok for me to explore? Can I touch this, or taste that? This work often begins around age 4 or 5. The work of caregivers and ministry leaders in this stage is to create a safe place for children to explore, to use their five senses, to touch, taste, see, hear, and smell the world around them. It is also an important time to guide children as they explore setting appropriate boundaries and modeling how to explore with care. The risk is over protecting the child and limiting their explorative instinct. Instead of constantly saying “no” or “do not do that” we can change our words to “let me help you,” or “I wonder what might happen if you do that?” The gift children bring to this stage is curiosity. We can stimulate their curiosity by providing space for imaginary free play, reading to children and wondering with them as they engage in the story, or simply exploring the world with children seeing anew the world around us through their eyes. It is important to take a child’s emotions seriously as they explore the world around them. They move between fantasy and reality very easily so we must pay careful attention to their emotions including their fears or their frustrations. This is an excellent time to model how to deal with strong emotions helping them learn how to deal with conflict and begin to solve problems.

5-12 years: How can I succeed?

Exploring the world around them and developing new skills, children begin to see how their actions impact the world around them. Children in this age group are also learning that the choices they make and the work they do brings about positive and negative consequences. Responding to positive affirmation or negative rebuking or criticism, children begin to make the connection between their

actions and the impact they can have on the world around them. They begin to seek approval from others—wanting to succeed. This can often lead to children around the ages of 5-12 years becoming competitive, argumentative, or quarrelsome when they lose, or think they have failed. Children look to others in their community for approval—positive affirmation that they are on the track to success. During these years children begin to develop more physical abilities. They like to move, and play becomes increasingly important. Our work is to create space and opportunities for children to try new things, to encourage them when things do not go their way, to model appropriate ways to respond to failure, and to affirm them when they try something new, learn a new skill, or show appropriate behavior in response to their experiences with others. The gift children bring to this age is play. They enjoy learning new things. Through free play children continue to explore the world around them and learn how to successfully maneuver through life’s hurdles and obstacles. Through play children practice their relational skills learning how to engage with others. They learn how to win and how to lose gracefully. They learn how to acknowledge, honor, and respond to their many emotions. They also learn new skills such as reading, writing, drawing, riding a bike, or dribbling a basketball. Children learn these skills by watching and playing with others. Play provides children time to practice these physical, social, and emotional skills. Our work as caregivers and ministry leaders is to provide space for free play, opportunities to try new things, and to model behavioral skills for dealing with success, disappointment, and frustration.

It is important to remember that children will develop and grow on their own time schedule in response to their experiences in the world. As children grow and learn, our role is to model good practices and encourage them as they practice different tasks and life skills. The gifts of vulnerability, courage, curiosity, and play provide children tools for interacting with and learning from the world around them. These tools are also gifts for the community who journey with these children. As ministry leaders we have an opportunity to learn from and to be blessed by children who are vulnerable, courageous, curious, and playful. When we journey with children we have the opportunity for them to share with us who they are, and at the same time we have the opportunity and responsibility to show and teach them what is important to us, the things we enjoy, and the tools we need for emotional, spiritual, and physical health. When we understand how children learn we, as ministry leaders can: partner with and support families; teach and guide children using appropriate and helpful teaching methods; and we can share this knowledge with others as we train other leaders in our churches and faith communities. This is the holy work God calls us to as we grow in faith and discipleship together.

Four Factors of Development

There are four factors that impact how children develop and grow. Human, Family, Social and Cultural, and Faith Development all impact every individual’s personhood—who they become in response to their individual makeup and experience in the world.

As we lean on science for deeper understanding into development it is important to remember that “no one lives a ‘normal’ life” (Kelcourse xii). Developmental research provides us with the ability to “become conscious of the realities within us and around us” (Kelcourse xii). We can become conscious of how our bodies, families, culture, and faith impact how we grow and develop. Studying development offers information that helps us understand what an individual might be experiencing

and offers us wisdom that helps us develop respect and empathy for those we are in ministry with. Developmental research also gives us tools for faithful ministry as we seek to journey with the children in our care. We can faithfully journey with children when we take the time to get to know them and to understand how they are responding to their body, their family, their culture, and their faith community.

The next section takes a look at the four factors of development and highlights 10 learnings that emerge out of each of these social science areas. Each of these 10 learnings identify wisdom that we need to know as we join children in the process of faith formation. We will take a look at these learnings and how they impact children as they grow and develop from birth to ten years of age. Although we are looking at the child as a whole we recognize that each of these learnings might impact children differently depending on where they are in their development process. For this reason we will identify ways these learnings can help us understand younger children (birth-5) and older children (6-10) always remembering that every child develops according to his or her own body and experiences. Alongside each learning we identify a gift that children bring to the faith formation process that help them with the work of development. These are values, skills, and tools that children offer their family, faith community, and the world. With these gifts children can teach and impact the world around them while they discover ways to use their gifts to respond to God's grace and love. Finally, the next section will link the developmental learnings to the eight formation processes demonstrating how each of these faith formation essentials reflect the learnings offered by developmental knowledge.

Human Development

Humans develop in response to our physical, cognitive, and emotional capacities and experiences. This is often described as human development. Many theorists have spent much time researching and writing about how people develop and grow in response to their physical and mental capabilities. Science, including the social sciences, offers understanding into how persons grow as they seek understanding from biology and psychology. Human development asks: What do we know about a person's physical and cognitive, emotional, and psycho social growth? How do children grow in response to their own bodies capabilities? What tools do children need to live well? The goal then "is not outer restoration but inner reform" (Erikson). Understanding human development gives ministry leaders clues as to what children are experiencing as their bodies grow and develop. This helps us journey more intentionally with children working to ensure they have the space, the encouragement, and the guidance they need to live healthy and meaningful lives.

1. **Safe Space.** Children need to know that their world is safe. Trust is of utmost importance for children, especially in the early years (0-5). Infants and toddlers need to know that they can trust those who care for them including their faith community. Therefore safety and safe places are essential for health and wholeness as the child develops. As the child ages they will begin to make conclusions on what and who are safe in contrast to who and what are not safe. It is our job to help children learn to trust us, their community who loves them. Parents, caregivers, church communities and other important people and places in an infants life must focus on being a person and a place that children can trust. needs safe loving place, growing and exploring the world around them. The gift that children bring to this work as mentioned earlier in this chapter is

vulnerability. This gift allows children to be open and receptive to the world around them. As children age their experiences help them learn who they can trust and who they cannot trust. Their experiences also teach them what is safe and what is not safe. When we are intentional in building trustworthy relationships and safe places for the children in our care, then children in their vulnerability remain open to all the possibilities that these people and places offer. This includes trusting the message that God loves them, that their family loves them, and that church is a safe place. **Caring Relationships** is the faith formation process that ensures children see their home and their faith community as a safe place. As children grow their experiences help them believe God loves them and so their narrative begins to develop from “God loves me” to “I can trust God.” **Caring relationships** help them move from understanding “I am loved” as a young child to “I can treat others the way I want to be treated.” When children feel safe they remain open to all the possibilities that come from being surrounded by God’s love and grace. In return they begin to find ways to share that love and grace with others.

2. **Purpose.** Children need to be affirmed as important and whole just where they are. We are not waiting for children to “grow up,” but instead we must affirm their value in the here and now. As children grow and learn they begin to discover their meaning or **purpose**. Younger children begin this work as they seek autonomy. You might often hear “I can do it!” as a toddler struggles to put on their shirt, or “I walk!” as they struggle to put one foot in front of the other. In the early years this is the work that helps children investigate and learn what they can do. As children grow they take these learnings and begin to discover their own gifts and capacities for productive work (Fowler 67). From day 1 children are learning and practicing new physical and cognitive skills that help them impact the world. Children enjoy meaningful work, making a difference, serving others. Our role as ministry leaders is to provide opportunities for children to try new things, to encourage children to contribute to the community, to create space for children to serve, and to affirm children as they discover their gifts and begin to share them with others. However the risk is if children are not included or encouraged, or if they fail at a task and are not encouraged to try again. They begin to pull away becoming more isolated and less willing to try again. Our role is to encourage, invite, and guide. If something doesn’t go as planned, acknowledge the disappointment, frustration, etc., and then find a way to invite the child to try again, helping him or her discover or imagine another way. The gift that children bring to this work is that of **helper**. Children want to participate, to help, and to be part of the bigger picture. Younger children can be encouraged to share, help, or lead a prayer. Older children can build on these helpful skills by identifying areas where they can help and then creating ways they can be helpful. Older children thrive when persons invite them to identify a need in their community and then to find ways to respond faithfully. The faith formation processes that closely align with this learn are **Rituals and milestones and serving, working for justice, and caring for creation**. Rituals and milestones affirm and celebrate children’s gifts and the work they are doing in and for the world. Serving, working for justice and caring for creation give children an opportunity to practice using their gift as helper, affirming their purpose and meaning in their community.
3. **Opportunities to try new things.** As children grow they are taking in information, trying new skills, and learning new things. Our role is to give them safe places to listen, learn, practice using different skills. These are the moments when children start discovering and responding to the world around them. A child might reach for a crayon curious about it’s color, texture, and/or

purpose. The first instinct for a young child might be to put that crayon in their mouth—the mechanism they have used for from birth to explore and assess a specific object. We can lovingly guide and direct the child as we show them how to use the newly discovered tool. We must be careful not to shame or guilt the child, telling them in a harsh tone “no” as they place the crayon in their mouths only startles an infant. Instead we can guide them using our words and actions showing them in a soothing voice how the crayon might be used. As children grow we can continue to model best practices as we remind them that crayons are not meant for eating, nor are they meant for coloring on walls. Instead we can use them to create all kinds of fun new creations using the paper or other tools provided. Creating a safe space for children to learn and grow, along with a helpful guide encourages children to live into their wonder and curiosity safely as they discover all that God’s good creation holds. As mentioned earlier, the gift children bring to this work is **courage**—the desire to try and to successfully accomplish new tasks and responsibilities. Our work in ministry is to encourage children to try new things- Young children might be encouraged to hold or open the Bible. As children get older they can be encouraged to find scripture in the Bible or to read silently or aloud to the group. Young children can learn different ways to pray and as they grow they can begin to pray aloud, lead a group prayer, or write a prayer for the congregation to say together. Younger children can be encouraged to share their wonderings and as they grow learn the art of story telling either through oral tradition, journaling, or drawing. Many of the eight faith formation processes give children an opportunity to try new things and to develop new skills. **Learning the tradition, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, and Worshiping** are just a few.

Family Development

A person’s growth and development is also impacted by the persons who nurture and journey with them on a daily basis. For the purposes of this chapter we identify this social construct as a family. This narrative recognizes that families— “in all their diversity and complexity and challenge— have responsibility and potential to nurture each other not only for their own benefit but as a cornerstone of community and society.” In using the word family, it is important to note that we focus on “family functions (such as companionship, care, childrearing, and the economic stability) more than family forms” (Roberto 10). Family development theorists ask the question: What is the family’s role in a child’s development? A child’s family, caregivers, and close friends are the significant relationships that can have the biggest impact on children. These are the persons children in a safe environment grow to trust, love, and respect. In response children will watch these role models, observe their actions, learn from their observations, and practice behavior that they see modeled and/or hear encouraged. Understanding how a child’s family impacts their physical and spiritual growth reminds us as ministry leaders of the importance of nurturing, guiding, and supporting families in this holy work. As ministry leaders our job is to journey with families, providing them with information, resources, tools, prayers, and support.

4. **Relationships are key.** Children need us! **Caring relationships are essential to a child’s health and wholeness.** A child’s caregivers are one of the most important aspects of their early development. From birth, children are working on learning who to trust in their new environment. Children desperately need caring relationships—people that infants, toddlers, young children, and older children can trust and rely on for their care and safety. Children thrive when they are in a

safe and loving environment. Therefore the role of families and the persons caring for children in a faith community is essential for development. Children need to know that they are surrounded by people who love and care for them. By being present with children, listening to them, taking care of their basic needs, offering hugs and an environment full of love and support families can create a healthy space for children to grow and learn. As children grow, relationships continue to be important. For younger children they observe and learn from those most closely connected to them—their immediate family and their caregivers. As a child ages and their brain develops they become increasingly aware of their families and the differences between self and friends. For older children relationships with family and caregivers remains essential along side new relationships with peers and other adults outside of their family. Relationships have “great significance for social and moral development... [relationships enable] the child to begin to take account of differences of perspective between them self and others” (Fowler 64) As children interact with their family and their surrounding community they start to develop an understanding of me and them, or us and others. Positive and caring relationships are key in helping children understand and learn how God calls them to interact with others. Older children yearn for role models—persons they can observe who might teach them new skills and show them different ways of showing up in the world. They continue to mimic and practice the behaviors they see modeled for them noticing those who are different. For this reason it is important that children are surrounded by strong role models who can help show them the way. Intergenerational relationships are important for all children and become increasingly more important for children from five to ten. The gift children bring to the work of developing relationships is a **relational awareness**. Children are equipped to respond to their interactions and experiences in the world and with God. Children are aware of “being in relationship with something or someone” (Hay 109). This is often referred to as relational consciousness or relational awareness. According to research done by David Hay and Rebecca Nye, children have the biological capability to recognize relationship, claiming and expressing awareness of relationships in four dimensions: child-God, child-people, child-world, and child-self (Hay 115). The faith formation process that reflects this learning is of course **caring relationships**. As parents, caregivers, or ministry leaders our most important job is to ensure children have persons in their life who love them, who care for them, and who are faithful shepherds and guides. It is also important to ensure children have the opportunity to build relationships with peers as they learn how to build caring relationships of their own.

5. **Practice makes perfect.** As children grow they need space to practice the skills that they are observing and learning. Children need space to “try out new behaviors, exaggerate, modify, abbreviate or change the sequence of behaviors” as they try new behaviors and develop new skills (White bread 15). As the old saying goes, practice makes perfect. In order to increase competency and improve performance children need time, space, and permission to practice what they are learning. Families can also model new skills and invite children to practice these skills at home. Whether it is giving an eager toddler his or her own broom and inviting them to help clean, or inviting an older child to help cook dinner, every moment is an opportunity to learn and practice new skills. The risk, however, is that we can quickly overwhelm our children with lessons, activities, and structured play. While a moderate number of lessons or scheduled activities can be beneficial for children, research increasingly shows that “children being over-supervised and over-scheduled, with decreasing amounts of time to play with their peers or parents, is likely to have an adverse effect on children’s independence skills, their resourcefulness and the whole range of

developmental benefits” (Whitebread 12). Since families often have the most influence over a child’s schedule and routine it is important that the days be ordered in a way that provides space for children to process and practice all they are observing. Children are constantly taking in information. Therefore one of the families role is to help children take a break from learn and observing and to provide opportunities for them to reflect on, respond to, and practice what they have been experiencing. The gift children bring to this work is **play**. Play is the work of the child. This is not structured play as described above, but is what many describe as free play—unstructured time where children can make their own decisions and have permission to initiate their own activities It is through free play that children find ways to process and practice the information they take in and the skills they observe during the day. Over the years in ministry I have lost count of how many parents tell me that after participating in holy communion or baptism at church their children return home only to reenact all that they saw, heard, and experienced. Play is how children reflect on and responds to the world around them. This is where they consider the rules, push against them, and create new ones as they seek to find their way in the world. Time should be given for free play—an opportunity for children to play with minimal rules and regulations. The opposite of structured play, scheduled activities, plotted out crafts, or detailed lesson plans. Free play offers children an opportunity to investigate the world around them, to imagine, to problem solve, and then to discover ways to respond. **Rituals and milestones, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, and worshiping** are the faith formation processes that provide children an opportunity to observe new skills as well as space to practice these skills.

- 6. Explore the world together.** As children grow and begin to walk and explore it is important for us to create a safe space for children’s exploration. This might be the backyard in your home, the playground at a local park, or the sanctuary in the church. Engaging all five senses is important. Faith formation requires the use of sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste. For young children faith does not just get passed down in a story that someone reads to the child, but instead faith formation is experiential. Children should be invited into the story as they experience all the story has to offer. Use of various manipulatives and visual images are helpful when working with children. Providing pieces for children to touch and move as they respond to all that they are hearing and seeing offers children an opportunity to connect to the lesson as they process the information presented. Also, children need space and time to respond to what they have experienced and learned. Often times children are presented with an object lesson—a game or a craft that is supposed to help the child absorb the day’s lesson. However, what is truly needed is an opportunity to creatively respond in their own way. Children should have permission to choose how they want to respond. Journaling, drawing, building, and acting out the story are a few responses a child might choose. The gift that children bring to the work of exploration is **curiosity**. Children are innately curious, especially in their early years. Full of wonder, children eagerly survey their surroundings looking for something new or exciting that might catch their attention. The faith formation processes that create space for exploration and wonder include **church year seasons, praying and spiritual formation, caring relationships**. Objects and symbols open a child’s eyes to God as they explore the world around them. Pointing out where and how you see God as well as identifying a specific object or symbol helps children make connections and remember what they are seeing and experiencing. Studying and watching for the church year seasons, praying and engaging in spiritual formation, and exploring with those they are in

relationship with are all fruitful ways for a child to explore and learn from the world around them—using their curiosity to help them experience God’s amazing creation.

Social and Cultural Development

Social and Cultural Development ask the question: How do persons interact with and learn from the world around them? In this field, social scientists study the social and cultural implications on development in order to learn how children learn from their community. A child’s social and cultural surroundings impact what life skills and tools they develop. Children are apprentices. They learn from others as they observe and practice various life skills and develop tools for survival (Rogoff, 7). This retrieval of knowledge and skills does not occur as a result of specific and focused teaching, i.e. the handing down of wisdom from the community of elders, but instead reflects the participation of children in the practices of the community. Children learn from their active participation in the world around them, influenced and shaped by those who stand next to them, work alongside them, and invite them to engage in the activity at hand as a capable and willing participant. Children can develop skills “slightly beyond their competence... with the assistance of adults or more skilled children” (Rogoff 14). When skills, traditions, and rituals are modeled for children and when children are invited to learn and practice those skills, then children develop tools specific to their community and their culture. Children and adults can teach and learn from each other. This means that relationships are essential to development. Children need persons in their community who will model and teach different skills and tools. Children and the social world are mutual involved, each learning from and teaching the other (Rogoff, 177). Children raised in a culture where survival requires that young people work and contribute to the family learn tools such as gardening. Children who are surrounded by storytellers hear stories as they learn to share and tell stories too. While children will have their own personality, interests, and skills, they also have the capacity to learn the skills and traditions of their culture. Through observation and practice children can acquire the skills, tools, and the traditions of those who surround them.

This is true for children growing up in a digital culture. Children learn how to pay attention to and interact with screens by observing others. Just as a child learns to dribble a basketball by watching someone play basketball and/or when they have someone who teaches or coaches them in this skill, children can also learn to watch movement on a screen, tap buttons on a phone in order to bring about a desired result, and can learn to read from a tablet. All of these skills are modeled in a digital culture and many children practice these skills daily. However, “there is good reason to limit access to screens during the first two years of life. Infants and toddlers do not generally learn vocabulary from videos and clearly learn best from exploring their surroundings and interacting with others. Furthermore, there is some evidence that excessive ‘screen time’ in early childhood is associated with poor attention and self-regulation” (Rvachew, 1). “According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children under 2 should not be watching TV, videos, or DVDs at all... parents should instead encourage more interactive activities such as playing and talking in order to improve their listening and social skills” (National Center for Health Research). In a digital culture where children are constantly watching others in their community “playing on screens” it is even more important to practice screen sabbath, putting away the screens, providing space for free and unstructured play, reading with children from books, modeling and practicing skills such as gardening, cooking, and sports. Learning to type on a keyboard, creating science experiments, or practicing computer programing are also skills that can and

should be passed down to children in a digital age. These physical actions build a child's dexterity, keep them physically active, help them develop social skills, and ensure physical, mental, and emotional health as they grow and develop.

Social and cultural development helps us as ministry leaders see how a child's community impacts their development. This wisdom also highlights the need for human to human interaction, strong relationships, and space to model and practice the rituals, traditions, and important skills of our community with children. We are called to journey with children's we teach and learn from one another through our presence and our actions.

7. **Work is important.** Work is an activity that is done in order to achieve a purpose or result. It offers every person an opportunity to experience and respond to God's presence in their lives. Every person's work is different. God calls us to Holy work, where we pay attention to God's presence in our lives and where we respond by loving God and loving neighbor. No matter our vocation we have an important role in transforming the world and building the kingdom of God. This call to work includes persons of all ages. Therefore, children are also called to Holy work. As discussed above play is often a child's work—the space and time where children can explore, imagine, discover, and create ways to respond to God's love. It is essential that we value and respect a child's work, whether it is a game they create, a Lego creation they build, a drawing, or any task they choose to engage in. It is in this space and time that we have an opportunity to “see ourselves as human beings”, discover and practice the rules of our society, identify and solve problems, and find new ways to engage in the world around us. This process of work offers an opportunity “to discover our deep identity as Godly creates, created in the image of God” (Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* 7-8). We must also create space and provide time for children to do their work. The gift that children bring to their work is **wonder**. Wonder engages children in the process of identifying the work they feel called to do and then seeking ways to understand and respond with faithful action. As children wonder they discover and practice using the Christian language, they work to make sense of their surroundings, they grow in their understanding of the world, and they identify how God is calling them to respond. Each of the eight faith formation process: provide children an opportunity to identify and engage in the work God calls them to. As ministry leaders part of our job is to provide children with choices and to guide them as they choose their work. Some may choose reading the Bible, others might choose leading in worship. It is important to give children permission to choose their work based on their individual interests and skills. Exposing children to all eight offers them an opportunity to discover which is their favorite.
8. Children are **Justice Seekers**. As children grow they begin to develop a moral compass as they observe the behaviors of others and begin to determine an idea of what is right and wrong. Younger children assert their need for justice as they learn the rules and begin to respond when rules are broken or an injustice is done. Toddlers may cry or lash out in anger when a toy is taken a way or they might move to give another child a hug if they see someone who is upset or crying. They are learning to share, the help, and to be kind to others. They are starting to gather information that helps them understand what is right and what is wrong, what is fair and unfair. Over time this transforms into the ability to identify what is just and what is unjust. As children grow their moral compass continues to develop. They continue to observe the world around them

and begin to make moral judgments as they assess the actions of other. Older children become the moral actor—aware of and taking into account “the interests, needs, and claims of others” (Fowler 66). “That’s not fair” becomes a common response, as is a child’s need to play by the rules, and the act of tattle telling. These are our justice seekers. They want things to be right, just, and fair and are beginning to be able to determine what is right and good based on their experiences in the world. Rules are increasingly important as are the need for those rules to be followed. It is important to remember that as older children (5-12) begin to develop this tool they are still working concretely and logically. Clarity about expectations is important, as is working to make sure care is given to ensure expectations are followed. Children are also testing the world around them to see if a rule sticks or if what another person says holds true. Therefore consistency is also important. As caregivers and ministry leaders we must work to ensure our actions reflect our words. The gift children bring to this work is **empathy**. Children have a deep concern for others. This gift is revealed in a young child’s desire to help others, to offer hugs, or to offer words of comfort. Older children show this gift as they pay attention to others and start identifying injustice and by offering compassion to others. The faith formation process that offers children an opportunity to do this holy work is **Serving, working for justice, and caring for creation**. Through this process our justice seekers have opportunities to use and develop their gift of empathy as they find ways to love God and neighbor in all they do.

Faith and Spiritual Religious Development

Faith and Spiritual Religious Development theorists ask: What do we need to know about faith development and religiosity and spiritual growth at this stage? Work in this area reveals that faith is a process. From the beginning God is actively present in the lives of children. We are directly connected to God (Rahner 33). Therefore, every moment of every day is an opportunity for children to connect with and respond to God’s presence and love. From the first breath children are engaging in faith formation, taking in God’s creation, responding to the world around them, and discovering and practicing using tools that help them respond to all the world offers. Christian faith then can be seen as a process, “a forming or re-forming of human faith (Fowler 3). Children are born with a capacity of faith. Therefore faith is not something we receive, nor is it something we can give. Faith is a gift from God. It is a continual process of discovering and rediscovering who we are as children of God. So when we think about children and faith formation we must recognize that the work is not to get or give faith but instead is to develop faith as we strengthen and deepen our relationship with God. Faith formation is the process where a person is growing in a deep trust in God and a strong responsibility to neighbor. “As part of our partnership with God, parenting brings the great opportunity and adventure of nurturing the awakening and forming of faith in our children through experience, through story, through teaching and example, and through affiliation with the community of faith” (Fowler 9). This is the holy work of parent, caregiver, and ministry leader. We join children in the process of faith formation, connecting with God and practicing the faith together. In this life long process with the help of God and others we discover who we are and who we are called to be. While this might change over the course of a lifetime we live into our trust in the Divine who continues to guide and continues to call.

9. **Ritual and Liturgy** are essential for a child’s faith development. Liturgy, coming from the Greek word *leitourgia* is often translated as the work of the people. This is what we do in order to be in

relationship with God and neighbor. The words, symbols, and actions we use form our liturgy. This is the language we use to express our faith and communicate with God and each other. Each of these pieces of our work (words, symbols, and actions) are helpful and essential to a child's development. When we invite children to practice religious language, look for objects in the world that remind them of God, and respond with works of mercy (actions that extend God's compassion and mercy to those in need) they are able to discover their role in this world as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Children thrive when they are invited into this work and given an opportunity to learn the tradition and practice the liturgy. They will begin to learn the words, recognize the symbols, and find ways of sharing God's love with others. Ritual is an important part of this developmental process too. Ritual is a series of actions that are repeated regularly according to a prescribed order. When we create a liturgy and use it over and over again we are creating a Holy ritual that allows us to practice being in communication and relationship with God and neighbor. This is true for children too. Children thrive on routine and structure, or in the churches' language, ritual. The gift that children bring to this work is **order**. As young children develop they are seeking to make sense of the world around them to find some order in all they are experiencing. As they get older they start to logically put these pieces together trying to understand how the world works. The same is true for faith development. Children need opportunities to observe and practice the traditions of the faith. To participate the liturgy and to create their own rituals that help them connect to God and neighbor. It is essential that we do not shame them but instead model our traditions, and then invite and encourage children to participate and practice until the liturgy becomes familiar and the ritual becomes their own reoccurring practice. **The faith formation processes that help with this include rituals and milestones, learning the tradition, and worshiping.**

10. Story is an essential part of faith development. Combining much of what we learn in all four areas development story provides children an opportunity to practice cognitive skills, build relationships and learn from others when they share stories with members of their community, and story provides a entrance for children to step through as they learn who God is and who they are as children of God. Reading books and telling children stories is continually recognized as one of the most important activities for language and literacy learning in early childhood (Rvachew 1). Children enjoy hearing the stories of others and they also enjoy telling their story to anyone who will listen. Story helps children collect information as they develop their own language and understanding. Babies enjoy stories from birth and benefit from the warmth of the story teller, and the sound and rhythm of the storytellers voice. Toddlers love to hear their favorite stories over and over again and often surprise caregivers by memorizing the story as they entertain themselves by flipping the pages and repeating the story again and again. As words develop preschoolers take joy in telling their story and it is important that we listen. We can wonder with children as they share their thoughts and feelings. As children get older story provides an opportunity for their imaginations to consider different view points and experiences giving them a depth of knowledge and wisdom on which to build their own understanding, personality, and identity. Story helps children cope with their feelings, develop confidence, and discover new ways for showing up in the world around them. Story provides a child to process and share how they are experiencing God helping them make memories that will support their lifelong faith formation process. If you choose to read to children from an e-book or a digital application it is important to make sure to engage with children, interacting with them as you read. Children thrive from the colorful images, the

kinesthetic action of turning pages, the sound of the human voice, eye contact, and the space to stop and wonder about all they are hearing and experiencing. When using digital media it is important to “pick e-books with clear learning goals. If there are sounds our additional interactive features make sure they enhance the story and do not distract children from the flow of the story. (Rvachew 2). Researchers still agree that the best practice for story telling is reading from a real book or to use 3D manipulatives to help tell a story. This gives a child something they can touch, feel, and use to recreate the story again and again. The gift children bring to this work is **imagination**. Imagination is essential in the learning process and can advance cognitive development. “Children are natural learners” (Robinson). Using their imagination, children learn about historical events, different cultures, or people that they will never meet. Imaginative play is a way for children to discover the world that surrounds them. It is also a tool that children use to connect to God and to engage in a relationship with an entity that they may not be able to see, touch, feel, hear, smell, or taste. The faith formation processes that help children use their imagination and engage in story are **reading the bible, learning the tradition, and worshiping**. Each of these aspects of faith formation provide children space to hear stories of the faith and to share their story with others.

Conclusion

Each of these developmental factors affect how all people grow and learn. Our physical, emotional, social, and faith environments impact how we show up in the world and how we connect with God and neighbor. Studying these four developmental factors helps us identify what children need from the world and also identifies what gifts they bring to the world. Each of these developmental factors affirm that we grow as an individual, alongside our peers, family, intergenerational faith community, and world. This is true for our physical, emotional, social, and faith development.

The ten key learnings help us begin to identify essential pieces and actions that are needed for healthy development. These key learnings give us insight that will help us identify how we can support and guide children as they develop and grow. Each of these learnings also remind us of the gifts children have for this work. Children are not empty vessels that we need to fill—banks that we need to deposit information into, instead children are equipped and ready for holy work. They need our help in developing and practicing the tools that will ensure they can do this work well throughout the entire life cycle. Our work as faith formation leaders is to encourage children as they grow and learn, helping them find ways to use their gifts to help others. To model the traditions of the faith, to tell the stories, and to invite children into the community. Later chapters in the book will help you discover specific and practical ways for working with children as they develop and grow.

Summary

Key Developmental Learning	Gift	Faith Formation Process
Create Safe Space	vulnerability	Caring Relationships
Discover Purpose	helper	Rituals and milestones; serving, working for justice, and caring for creation
Try New Things	courage	Learning the tradition, praying and spiritual formation, reading the Bible, and Worshiping
Build Relationships	relational awareness	Learning the tradition; praying and spiritual formation; reading the Bible; Worshiping
Practice	play	Rituals and milestones; praying and spiritual formation; reading the Bible; and worshiping
Explore	curiosity	church year seasons; praying and spiritual formation; caring relationships
Work	Wonder	all
Seek Justice	empathy	Serving, working for justice, and caring for creation
Participate in ritual and liturgy	order	rituals and milestones; learning the tradition; and worshiping.
Engage in Story	imagination	reading the bible; learning the tradition; worshiping