



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## **A Parent Guide for Middle School Years, PART 4 THE SPIRITUAL 'TWEEN**

All people are spiritual though not all consider themselves “religious,” nor do all worship within a faith tradition. Our first experiences of God are linked to our parents when, as infants, we are blessed beneficiaries of their touch, anticipatory care, and dependability. Infants who experience warmth and love can develop the capacity for caring and attachment to others. Our first image of God is linked to our parents and caregivers.

Early in his life Dr. James W. Fowler became interested in how people differed from each other and how their faith developed throughout their lifetime from childhood to adulthood. He combined theological insights with interviews, Piaget’s theories of how children develop the capacity to think and reason, Erikson’s stages of psycho-social development, and Kohlberg’s observations on developing moral reasoning ability. Putting together these perspectives, Fowler was able to describe six stages of faith. Tween-stagers experience the first three stages. Dr. Andrew Kille, lecturer and writer in the field of psychology and biblical studies, provided the stage-profiles that follow.

**IMITATING STAGE:** From pre-school years to age 6/7, children operate within stage one, known as **Intuitive/Projective Faith**. It is *intuitive* (*instinctive, automatic*) because their faith is not based on reason or logic, but on immediate experience and leaps of intuition. It is *projective* because the child is self-centered and projects (*transmits, relays*) his or her viewpoint onto the outside world. The development of imagination is the strength of this stage, as well as the danger. Children engage in “magical thinking.” They may believe that their thoughts control events around them, leading to feelings of guilt. Fantasies of danger or threat can be so real as to cause terror.

**STORY STAGE:** Around the age of eight, children start to distinguish between what is “real” and what is “pretend.” This signals the beginning of stage two, **Mythic/Literal Faith**. Children are fascinated by stories (*mythic*). Because they are concrete thinkers they interpret stories *literally* (*undisputably, as a matter of fact*). Stage two children (ages 8-11) tend to be rigid in their thinking and strict in their understanding of rules and customs. They are not yet able to stand aside and reflect or critique. Their strength is the gift for storytelling; their danger is perfectionism or a desire for control.

**BELONGING STAGE:** Tween-stagers transition into stage three, **Synthetic/Conventional Faith** and they continue to mature in this stage throughout high school years. Adolescents grow aware of others; peers become very important; and they are very sensitive to the opinions of their peers. Tweens find that other people have different ways of understanding themselves and the world. They may even experience conflict within their own self-understanding. They must decide which values will guide their lives. Faith at this stage, then, is *synthetic* because it involves *piecing together* a coherent sense of one's self from a host of possibilities. Faith is *conventional* (*accepted, predominant, typical*) because *community* values and attitudes are highly influential in shaping that faith. Stage three faith is deeply held but it is not very self-reflective. Tweens and older adolescents can state clearly what they believe, but they may have difficulty saying why. The strength of this stage is the development of a personal sense of faith. The danger is that the desire to please others, particularly peers, can keep the tween from seeking his or her own integrity.

### **Proactive Parent Practices**

- Provide repeated opportunities for the tween-stager to function within stage three, synthetic/conventional faith.
- Recognize that tweens are forming their own faith and that it may be different from the faith of their parents. If tween-thought conflicts with the faith practices of parents, avoid an “either-or” battle by adopting a “both/and” attitude. Translation? Demonstrate respect for tween thinking/faith choices while maintaining the expectation of respectful tween participation in the spiritual practices of the family, i.e., Sunday Mass, Sacrament of Penance, Grace before Meals, etc.
- Talk with your tween about your own faith journey and how your faith has grown or changed over the years.
- Understand that the beliefs, attitudes and values of the Christian community that tweens experience will be the foundation on which they build their faith identity.
- Give Scripture a place of prominence in the home. Use the Sunday Mass readings for family faith sharing. Encourage spontaneous prayer, journaling, and guided meditation.

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