

Childhood Developmental Characteristics & Basic Messages About Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS BIRTH THROUGH AGE 4

1. Children think and understand in concrete terms. They are literal-minded. They do not understand abstract concepts, symbols, or figures of speech. They have difficulty understanding things they have not experienced.
2. Two-to-three year olds are learning to order their world. They can identify girls and boys and men and women based on external appearances. They have learned from adults and peers the “gender” of toys and certain clothes.
3. By the age of 3 – 4, children have a sense of their own gender identity and are increasingly aware of anatomical differences. They continue to order their world and begin to form stereotypes based on what they have learned from the media, family, and social interactions.
4. Children are self-centered – the world revolves around them. Their thoughts and their language are ego-centric. They don’t know much about anyone but themselves and they are unaware of another person’s perspective
5. Children are curious and ask a ton of questions. They also have a short attention span. They need basic information in the form of simple and concrete answers--not comprehensive or graphic explanations. Their questions often come from something they have heard or experienced.
6. Preschoolers not only use words to express themselves, they also use play and pretend to express themselves and to experiment with the world. Play is children’s work.
7. Children absorb what’s going on around them; they are learning all the time through their own experiences and observations.

BASIC MESSAGES ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD, BIRTH THROUGH AGE 4

- ▶ Love makes a family. Families can look different, not all are like ours.
Some examples are:
 - single parent families families with a mom & a dad
 - families by adoption blended families
 - families with 2 moms families with 2 dads
 - multiracial families families that live in two places
 - families with no children families with 1 or 2 or many children
 - families that include grandparents, relatives or others
 - families with people from different countries/backgrounds
 - families with foster parents and many more...
- ▶ Each person is a beloved child of God. God created you and loves you just the way you are.
- ▶ God created each of us to be special. People are special in many different wonderful ways. It makes the world an interesting place.
- ▶ Name calling hurts people’s feelings.
- ▶ People can do lots of things—just because you are a girl or a boy does not mean you can only do, or say, or wear, or like certain things.

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AGES 5 – 8

1. Children still think and understand in concrete terms
2. Children's thinking is still centered around themselves – they see things in terms of how they relate to their own lives
3. Early in this stage, children, actively using the gender scripts they have constructed, think behaviors apply only to one gender or another. Gender stereotypes and roles limit children's dreams and experiences. However, they can adapt their constructs if given enough examples through books, storytelling, or repeated exposure to real people.
4. Children early in this stage believe they can be anything and do anything. It is normal for a 4 – 6 year old to think they can grow up to become the opposite sex, or a puppy, or a princess. By about age 7, they understand the concept of gender stability and know a person's gender is not going to change.
5. Children have an increasing ability to describe their experiences and talk about their thoughts and feelings
6. Children have less focus on themselves and a bit more concern for others.
7. Children are curious.
8. Children are observant of what is going on around them and can reflect on and talk about what they see and hear
9. Near the end of this stage, children's attachment to stereotypes may subside a bit and a fuller expressions of self and gender are possible.

BASIC MESSAGES ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY FOR MIDDLE CHILDHOOD, AGES 5 – 8

In addition to the basic messages for early childhood, the following can be added:

- ▶ Human beings can love people of the same gender and people of the other gender.
- ▶ There are men and women who are heterosexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the other gender.
- ▶ There are men and women who are homosexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the same gender.
- ▶ Homosexual women are also known as lesbian women. Homosexual men are also known as gay men.
- ▶ A bisexual person is someone who can be attracted to and fall in love with either women or men.
- ▶ A transgender person is someone born with a girl's body but has always felt like a boy inside. OR Someone born with a boy's body but has always felt like a girl inside. So they want their outsides to match their insides.
- ▶ Families come in many different forms. Sometimes two people of the same sex choose to make a life together. They make a commitment and love and care for each other. Some choose to raise children.
- ▶ People deserve respect regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- ▶ Making fun of people by calling them gay (i.e. homo, fag, queer, etc.) is disrespectful and hurtful.

OLDER CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AGES 9-11

1. Children's thinking is still concrete--a few limited abstract concepts and symbols may begin to make sense near the end of this stage.

2. Children can apply some logic to think things through and can understand some cause-and-effect reasoning (but often with crucial gaps in thinking)
3. Children are forming stronger, more complex friendships and peer relationships. They want to fit in. This desire grows stronger as adolescence approaches and may motivate children to limit their free expression of self and gender in order to fit in.
4. Children are becoming more independent from their family.
5. Children are becoming more aware of their bodies and are more self-conscious as puberty approaches. They may begin to worry if they are “normal.”
6. Children in the upper years of this range can identify with others and can empathize with the feelings of others. They can have a strong desire to help others.
7. Children are still very curious. Their curiosity is often stronger than social inhibitions—they are unembarrassed to ask because *they really want to know*.
8. Children have been listening and observing the world around them for more than nine years....so they know *a lot* about *a lot of things* (more than you'd probably suspect!)

BASIC MESSAGES ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY FOR OLDER CHILDHOOD, AGES 9-11

In addition to the basic messages for early and middle childhood, the following can be added:

- ▶ Each person is a beloved child of God with unique ways of expressing who they are.
- ▶ Sexual orientation is a person's physical, emotional, and or spiritual attraction to another person
- ▶ There are men and women who are bisexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with people of either gender.
- ▶ Gender identity is a person's deep inner feeling of gender--being female, male, both or neither--regardless of anatomy.
- ▶ A transgender person is someone whose gender identity does not match their biological sex.
- ▶ Sexual orientation and gender identity are separate distinct parts of who we are.
- ▶ The origin of people's sexual orientation or gender identity is not known.
- ▶ Bisexual people, lesbians, gay men, heterosexual people, and transgender persons are alike in most ways.
- ▶ Gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people's relationships can be as fulfilling as heterosexual people's relationships.
- ▶ Lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual people can adopt children or have their own children.
- ▶ Some people are afraid to share that they are gay, bisexual, transgender or lesbian because they fear they will be mistreated.
- ▶ Discrimination, disrespect, name-calling and ridicule are NEVER OK. All people should be treated with respect.