

MEETING THEIR NEEDS
AT EVERY STAGE





UNDERSTANDING CHILD AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

by Jennifer Hooks

As a camp leader, you spend a good portion of your time, energy and resources assessing ways to make camp experiences real faith-growing moments in the lives of children and teens. In fact, many camp directors could probably write a book about how children develop, especially as it relates to when kids are ready to process different kinds of information. For others, their understanding of child development could be intuitive, and could use a little extra insight. And some camp directors and staff may just be following their instinct when it comes to child development, leaving them missing the mark in some areas. ▶

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No matter where you are on that spectrum, everyone could use a refresher when it comes to understanding how children and teens develop. Being equipped with this knowledge, both you and your team will be able to plan teaching and activities that align with the developmental stage of your audience, ensuring that you're on target most of the time.

"Our tendency is often to focus on correct theology [in educational settings], which is very important," says Kristen Ivy, co-author of the new book *It's Just a Phase — So Don't Miss It* (Orange). But, she notes, that can lead to forgotten realities about kids' developmental abilities and their stage of faith growth. "We talk a lot about the tension between good theology and good child development. Those two can — and need to — happen at the same time."

Ivy co-wrote the book with Reggie Joiner, founder and CEO of reThink (thinkorange.com). "We have a lot of educators on staff and people who've worked with families for a long time in different capacities," says Ivy.

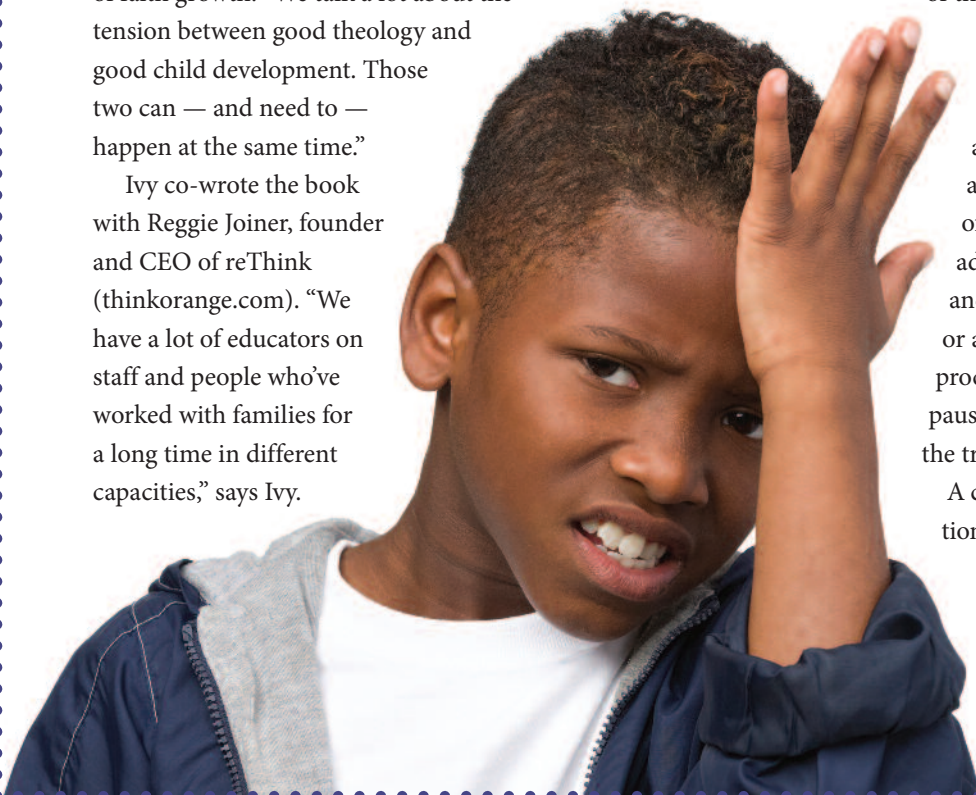
"But it can be hard to explain why we do things the way we do in our curriculum, especially to a leader who doesn't know child development but has gone through seminary." She notes that the same goes for camp leaders and counselors who may be well-versed in creating dynamic camp programs and experiences but who don't have in-depth knowledge of the developmental stages of children and youth.

The Importance of a Pause

Even though many camp directors and leaders may not have educational background in child and adolescent development, they can follow Ivy's advice to make age-appropriate connections that will have a net-positive impact on the spiritual development of the kids they work with.

"It's most important for camp leaders and counselors to know that there's *always* something going on under the surface with a kid or a teenager," says Ivy. "They don't always think like we think as adults, and so often we take what they're saying through an adult filter. But by taking a moment to pause and think from the perspective of the child or adolescent is a good starting place. They process information differently, so we have to pause before we begin trying to communicate the truths we want them to understand."

A classic example of misaligned communication is when a preschooler went home concerned because the leader had told kids Jesus lived in their heart. The child wanted to know if Jesus had a door He opened to come in and out of the child's heart when He went to other people's hearts. "We





may be saying something that's entirely true, but if kids are not hearing it correctly, then it's a miss."

The Ultimate Filter: Empathy

It's not unusual for an adult who's struggling to effectively connect with children to grow frustrated or confused. *Why aren't they getting it? Why do I have blank stares?*

"The whole *Phase* project is really a project exploring empathy," says Ivy. "The most important thing is to, again, pause and consider the child or teen you're speaking to. A number of counselors worked with us on this project, and one said something I thought was brilliant. She said, 'Every action has a reason or purpose. So if you begin to look at a kid or teen that's acting out, begin by asking yourself why. Why is he or she acting out? What are they seeking? What are they hoping to get from their actions?'"

Ivy goes on to say that the best interactions with kids begin by trying to pause on our adult thoughts and feelings and considering kids' thoughts and feelings. "That's how we develop that empathy," she says.

"When it comes to kids, it's also really important to remember that kids are keen observers. They notice

everything that's happening with the adults around them — how we act, how we speak, our attitude, our looks, everything. But while they're keen observers, they're often poor interpreters. They don't often understand what was intended by our actions. They're underdeveloped at interpretation and kind of grasping at understanding underlying meanings. They may understand what's happening better than you realize they do, but they might have a hard time grasping why it's happening. Continually explain what's going on and why it's happening to give kids a better context for understanding."

The Challenge of Expectations

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we get it wrong with kids. When adults have unrealistic expectations of kids' abilities there can be lasting implications.

"This is two-fold," says Ivy. "The danger in underestimating a child's capabilities is that the child will feel like you don't respect him or her as a person. What happens is that you're talking down and teaching ▶

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—KRISTEN IVY



EXTRA INFO

STAGE-BY-STAGE FROM *IT'S JUST A PHASE*

Foundations of development from birth through 18

BIRTH THROUGH PRESCHOOL

Embrace kids' physical needs. At this phase, children are motivated by **safety**. Early in life, it is key that they know God's love through the care of loving adults around them. In early childhood, it is key that they meet God's family through loving relationships. The questions kids have at this phase are:

Am I safe?

Am I able?

Am I OK?

KINDERGARTEN THROUGH FIFTH GRADE

Engage their interests. At this phase, children are motivated by **fun**. In the early elementary years, it is key that they learn to trust God's character. In the later elementary years, it is key that they begin to experience God's family. The questions kids have at this phase are:

Do I have your attention?

Do I have what it takes?

Do I have friends?

SIXTH GRADE THROUGH EIGHTH GRADE

Affirm their personal journey. At this phase, preteens are motivated by **acceptance**. Early on, it is key that they begin to own their faith. In the later preteen years, it is key that they begin to value a faith community. The questions kids have at this phase are:

Whom do I like?

Who am I?

NINTH GRADE THROUGH AGE 18+

Mobilize their potential. At this phase, teenagers are motivated by **freedom**. In the early teen years, it is key that they are encouraged to keep pursuing authentic faith. In the later teen years, it is key that they discover a personal mission. The key questions kids have at this phase are:

Where do I belong?

Why should I believe?

How can I matter?

What will I do?



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down to the child. So it's important to always begin with a mutual respect and dignity. Show kids respect so they know you see who they really are. And challenge them in an age-appropriate way. If you don't challenge them, they feel you don't see them as capable."

On the flip side, expectations that are too high can also be detrimental. "If you overextend their capabilities, they can get frustrated, they can shut down, they can check out," says Ivy. "Kids in school will say, 'I'm really bored.' What they often actually mean is, 'I'm confused. Nobody bothered to pause to explain it to me. The concept is over my head, so I'm going to check out.'"

"Expectations that are too high or too low can be really dangerous. You have to pay attention in the moment. You have to read kids' emotions. Are they having fun? Staying engaged? Are they sticking with it? If they start acting out or fading out, then the question is, why? Is it too challenging? Not challenging enough? Every phase is different, and every child is different."

Indicators Your Expectations are Misaligned:

- Kids say they're bored.
- Kids are acting out or checked out.
- Discipline becomes an issue.
- Kids seem disinterested.
- You ask a question and get zero response.
- A child attempts to "take over" and lead the group to do something "more fun."
- You see little to no effort in the activities.
- Kids finish projects way too quickly or take way too long.

The Precious Moments

In a camp setting where children are only connected to adults or leaders for a week or so, it can be even more critical to have a basic-but-solid understanding of development.



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"You're getting just a little slice of the whole life of a kid. But you also see and know that God is going to be at work in this kid's life long after camp is over," says Ivy. "You're intersecting with kids for just a slice. In some cases, they'll feel like so much happened at camp, while other times they'll feel like not much happened. But when counselors and leaders have an understanding of the children they work with and know all kids need to be affirmed on their personal faith journey, those adults can walk away knowing that they played a small role in affirming a child's life. You can know that you made a difference and that God will use that experience long after the week is over to do something incredible in the child's life." ●



Jennifer Hooks is the managing editor for *Children's Ministry Magazine* (www.childrensministry.com) and children's ministry resources at Group. She writes and contributes to numerous articles, books and resources, including *Sunday School That Works* (Group). Email her at jhooks41@gmail.com.

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