

# **Nurturing Your Child's Relationship With God**

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As someone who consciously decided at a young age to follow Jesus, the realization of God's ability to reveal Himself to the very young is imprinted in my mind. As you may know, children operate out of their feelings more than their minds. As their minds develop, their view of the world and of God changes. The movement from a seeing, touching, imitating faith to a believing, choosing, acting faith is increased.

With this in mind let's take a brief look at Erickson's Stages of Growth, and the implications for nurturing your child's relationship with Jesus Christ.

**Stage One: Trust vs. Mistrust, Ages birth to 1**

In this stage the child's understanding is vague. The child will respond to the parents and an environment of nurturance and love. This safe atmosphere creates the foundation of an ability to view God as loving and trustworthy.

**Stage Two: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Ages 1-2**

Oh, the terrible two's! As any parent can attest, in this stage the child is beginning to understand his/her ability to be separate. With this understanding in mind, kind and firm parental responses may be helpful. This phase is an extension of the initial trust in a loving Creator and Savior who is able to see the larger picture and plan He has for us.

**Stage Three: Initiative vs. Guilt, Ages 3-6**

It is during this phase of development that the child begins to integrate the connection between behavior and consequences. Initially, they behave out of fear of punishment. As they come closer to age six, they shift to behaving out of a desire to please. Providing simply-themed Bible stories becomes helpful along with simple scripture verses. Visual aids help in that they are something the child can touch and feel. At this stage, the child's thinking is very black and white and she needs to know Jesus loves her no matter what happens. Affection withheld increases an unhealthy sense of guilt.

**Stage Four: Industry vs. Inferiority, Ages 7 – 12**

Early on in this stage, elementary school children in particular, are literal in their thinking. The child's learning curve is great, and these years provide multiple experiences in which they develop skills that stay with them into adulthood. In your interactions with these children, focus on describing God according to His actions, outlining facts about God and how they apply to our daily lives. Children

can pray making specific requests, and transition into their own personal conversations with God. Sin becomes specific acts of behavior more than an internal attitude. Through it all, the child is developing a conscience and begins to understand the moral decisions in their circumstances.

#### Stage Five: Intimacy vs. Isolation, Ages 12 – 18

It is during these years of development, that your children have the ability to see God as a personal friend. The abstract thinking skills are developing-- increasing the ability to understand attributes of God such as: mercy, omnipotence, and symbolism. Introspection increases as well. Prayer continues to be conversation and the overall plan of God's involvement in our life becomes more meaningful.

No matter what stage your child is in, there is great hope through your own example of walking with the Lord. With these stages in mind, parents can live out the reality of what they have come to know about having faith in God. In doing so, you provide the best possible nurturance for your child to grow up in and embrace their own personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Resources: The Spiritual Needs of Children by Judith Allen Shelly  
Sharing Faith With Children by Sara Covin Juengst  
Children's Ministry by Lawrence Richards

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