

Stages of Faith Development

Source: James W. Fowler & Mary Lynn Dell

Intuitive-Projective Faith: *(Toddlerhood and Early Childhood - TOT into Early Elementary)*

This is a time of monumental brain development. Children are curious about other children and are experimenting with side by side play. Their imaginations respond to story, symbol, dream and experience and they are forming images that help them make sense of the world around them. At this age they may not be able to understand cause and effect and do not distinguish between fantasy/make believe and the facts. Stories that clearly illustrate good versus evil help them to begin to acknowledge the urges within themselves that pull them both in both directions. These stories help them identify with the feelings of being able to overcome “evil.” Since children of this age are very literal and are like sponges soaking up all around them, it is important to give them images of a kind and compassionate God who helps people choose to be loving. This will create the potential for them to form an image of God that is good and kind and to lay the ground work for self-empowerment.

Mythic-Literal Faith: *(Middle Childhood and Beyond - UNIKID into TWEEN)*

At this stage, children are refining their motor skills and small-muscle control. They are developing concrete operational thinking. This means that operations of thought can now be reversed so they are better able to understand cause and effect. They also begin to be able to differentiate between their experiences and the perspectives of others. They still rely on the images of the world they created in the previous stage but are now developing the ability to use logical forms of thinking.

Children in this stage are still learning to recognize, interpret and manage strong feelings and impulses. God is not yet personal. God is seen as something that sets the rules of fairness and moral reciprocity. God is modeled after a consistent and just but caring parent. Children in this stage have strong beliefs in cosmic sense of fairness and believe that goodness is rewarded and badness is punished. In this stage, stories and symbols used are interpreted literally. They are not yet able to think abstractly about the story and so do not examine the story for its deeper meaning.

Synthetic-Conventional Faith: *(Adolescence and Beyond - Older TWEEN to middle school)*

Puberty can begin between 8 and 13, usually appearing at younger ages in girls. At these ages there are many rapid body changes and developments. This stage also brings in cognitive functioning and the children are developing the capacity to use abstract thinking. They are also developing mutual interpersonal perspective taking (*Selman, 1974, 1976*): “I see you seeing me; I see the me I think you see.” And the converse can also be appreciated: “You see you according to me; you see the you, you think I see.”

Since there is still a lack of “third person” perspective taking, adolescence may create their self-image based on how they interpret how others view them. Their beliefs and feelings about God can also be influenced by the interpretation of their life experiences and by the beliefs of their peers and family members that they are attached to. God can be described as having many personal qualities and often is a reflection of what is happening in their life and how they feel about themselves. God is changeable in this stage.

Lacking the third-person perspective taking - the ability to know that it is possible to acknowledge that both the beliefs of self and others can exist simultaneously - they rely heavily on significant others in order to confirm and clarify who they are.