

Keeping Young People Engaged

Keeping young people engaged is the primary task of the catechist and, when done effectively, maintains discipline, which comes from the same root word as *disciple*, meaning “one who follows.” To help young people follow Jesus, you may wish to use some of these strategies for keeping them engaged.

Create an Engaging Atmosphere

Establish a few rules or guidelines for your group, display them, explain them, and enforce them consistently. Keep young people on task from the moment they enter the room. Vary the activities and call on those with wavering attention, by assigning tasks and responsibilities, or by asking questions to reengage them.

Prepare

Prepare, organize, and identify clear expectations. Have all materials ready before you begin and wait to distribute them until directions have been given and are understood. Check your seating arrangement and adjust it as needed. Young people are more likely to become disengaged when they feel anonymous, so learn and use their names.

Respond Appropriately

Reinforce and affirm good behavior. Show respect, understanding, and a sense of humor when appropriate. Clearly identify any specific improper behavior you intend to address. Speak and act with confidence, firmness, and calmness. Avoid unwanted side effects by not panicking or losing your temper. Remain fair and flexible. Avoid using an ultimatum that would “paint a child into a corner” with no way out. Consult your principal, catechetical leader, parents, and colleagues in serious situations.

Use Nonverbal Communication

Move your gaze to all areas of the room and make eye contact with every young person. Often eye contact alone can correct improper behavior and reengage a young person. Move around the room and attempt to be present and proximate to all areas of the learning space. Avoid interrupting a chapter to confront misbehavior. Instead, use nonverbal communication such as tapping on the back of the chair, tapping on a table or desk, or standing next to or behind a young person who seems disengaged.

Getting to Know a Junior High Young Person

As young people mature, they become increasingly capable of comprehending more complex ideas and concepts. *Finding God* for junior high links faith formation to a young person’s developmental level by using language and age-appropriate activities.

Profile of a Junior High Young Person (Ages 12–14)

Junior high is a time of profound and rapid growth when young people are entering a stage in between childish and mature behavior. More than ever, peers are becoming a very strong influence. At the same time, key adults continue to play crucial roles in their lives, especially when they are facing a difficult situation. Young people at this age can think in abstract terms and are capable of critical reflection. This is a critical time in their development, when moral guidance and faith tradition can provide structure and stability. Junior high is a time when young people need opportunities to discern their gifts. Girls begin to develop more quickly than boys, meaning that boys sometimes struggle to behave in a socially correct manner. In general, young people at this age are increasingly self-reliant and independent.

Show respect, understanding, and a sense of humor.



Young people at this age are increasingly capable of a more mature approach to their faith.

Psychological and Intellectual Development

Young people at this age

- are increasingly capable of abstract and logical thinking, making them capable of a more mature approach to their faith
- often experience awkwardness, inconsistency, and low self-esteem as they strive to formulate a sense of identity and seek to achieve a balance between uniqueness and conformity
- seek to be less dependent and more self-directed but still want support, guidance, and encouragement from significant adults
- are hungry for active-learning experiences and are capable of reading adult-level material and of categorizing the information
- often have short attention spans despite being intensely curious about a wide range of issues
- often seek peers who share racial and ethnic traits in order to bolster their own emerging sense of identity while also seeking heroes that they can imitate
- intensely desire approval from peers and will engage in attention-grabbing behaviors in order to receive it
- experience moodiness due to physical and hormonal changes and are developing at widely varied paces, resulting in great diversity of ability

Moral Development

Young people at this age

- are beginning to encounter decisions that have serious moral consequences and are becoming increasingly sensitive to issues of right and wrong
- take notice of any gaps between the moral conduct and Christian faith of adults and may begin to exhibit resentment toward authority
- experience tension in the formation of conscience due to sexual development
- continue to rely on rules and expect others to do the same while at the same time becoming more independent and more likely to question authority
- are developing a social conscience and a set of values, making them often idealistic and passionate about social justice
- rely on a sense of loyalty, concern, and trust as a basis for making moral judgments
- have a simple “justice” approach to morality, meaning that they believe that good actions should be rewarded and bad actions be punished

