

Handout: Developmental stage theory for UU religious education

Anyone who has spent time with children knows that they change as they grow older. Developmental stage theory says that certain changes generally take place at more or less predictable ages.

Cognitive and affective development

Jean Piaget did the groundbreaking work in developmental psychology. Piaget said we could predict with a fair degree of accuracy when most children would gain certain cognitive and affective abilities. Piaget was a “structuralist,” that is, he theorized that human beings develop according to an internal structure. Therefore, the role of the educator is (in part) to help individual children develop through pre-determined developmental stages. Piaget’s developmental theories were hugely influential on UU religious educators in the mid-twentieth century, and remained dominant in Western Europe and North America through most of the twentieth century.

Towards the end of the Cold War, Western educators began to discover the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. While Piaget concentrated on the development of individual children, Vygotsky was interested in how children develop in the context of groups. Vygotsky observed that there was a difference between what children could do on their own, and what they could do with the help of older children or adults—this difference is the “zone of proximal development” or ZPD, which is defined in his book *Mind in Society* as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.” Vygotsky has *not* been influential in UU circles, despite his emphasis on collaboration and group learning.

Psychosocial development, faith development

Psychosocial development is the way persons mature in their interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions. The most useful models of psychosocial development for religious education are the models by Erik Erikson and Robert Kegan. Erik Erickson theorizes that humans go through eight developmental stages (his wife later added a ninth) as we mature over our life spans. Erikson popularized the term “identity crisis” in his book on adolescent development, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, and his work on adolescents, while dated, is still worth reading.

Robert Kegan’s work can be traced back to Law-

rence Kohlberg’s model of moral development; but Kohlberg was criticized by Carol Gilligan and others as focusing exclusively on men and boys. Robert Kegan modified and expanded Kohlberg’s work to take into account feminist critiques of Kohlberg; Kegan also drew on his own experience as both a teacher and a psychotherapist. Kegan’s book *The Evolving Self* was influential on UU religious educators in the 1990s—particularly Kegan’s observation that humans tend return to the same problems in meaning-making over the course of their life span—and the book remains useful today.

Of lesser interest is James Fowler’s work. Building on Piaget and Kohlberg, Fowler outlined a theory of faith development in his book *Stages of Faith*. Fowler theorized six stages of faith development. Fowler’s work faces the same limitations noted above for Piaget (too much focus on cognitive development, overly individualistic) and Kohlberg (possible sexism). Furthermore, Fowler does not adequately define what he means by “faith,” and his research methodology lacks statistical validity.

Criticism of developmental theories

Religious education scholars like Gabriel Moran and Robert Pazmiño have been critical of any developmental theory as applied to religious education. Pazmiño and Moran argue that anyone, of any age, can have direct experiences of God (or, as some might say, of the transcendent mystery of the universe). Moran has also argued that the very concept of development leads to the uncomfortable sense that children aren’t fully “developed,” and therefore may not be fully human.

A number of scholars have argued that any developmental theory should be able to accurately predict developmental changes. Yet since all developmental theories are really designed for large, statistically valid, groups of individuals, it is not clear whether developmental theories can be usefully applied to individuals. Several critics have also pointed out that many developmental theories appear to be affected by cultural, racial, gender, or other kinds of bias. Also, developmental theory remains a theory, and as such should always be subject to further testing and empirical observation.

In spite of the criticisms, developmental stage theory can be a useful practical tool for Sunday school teachers and youth advisors. It can be useful to have a general idea of what to expect from different age groups. And developmental theory can help us to understand which types of activities may work best with which age groups.

Practical Developmental States for UU Religious Education

	<i>Social skills</i>	<i>Cognitive abilities</i>	<i>Skills and abilities important in UU communities</i>	<i>Religious experiences</i>	<i>Good choices for congregational activities</i>
<i>Babies</i>	Focussed on self and parents/guardians	Begin to talk	Love and joy	Security, love	Loving care
<i>Young children (up to age 5)</i>	Parallel play develops towards having real friends Family very important	Not a strong division between fantasy and reality	Sing simple songs Listen to stories Sit in some worship services Ask to go to church	Lots of questions about “God” and other big religious questions Probably can have transcendent experiences	Play Hear stories Learn how to be in a group Ask questions and be listened to seriously
<i>Primary (ages 5-7)</i>	Peer friendships Imaginary friends Boys and girls begin to strongly separate Little institutionalists, school and church as institutions begin to be important	Beginnings of reading and writing Memorized arithmetic	Know songs and hymns Sit in worship services Guided meditation Memorize things (e.g., church covenant)	May have transcendent experiences, including direct experiences of “God” Early understanding of what it means to be part of a religious community	Play Hear stories Guided meditation Simple yoga Ask questions and listen to answers
<i>Elementary (ages 7-11)</i>	Best friends important Self-sufficiency and competence Institutions and persons held to standards of fairness and justice	Increasing facility with reading and writing Can listen to talks and lectures	Participate in meetings Understand worship services and sermons Know facts about religion Ask good questions about fairness and justice Initiate social action projects	Experiencing religion as institutional Like to know about religious rules and religious facts Experiencing common worship and other group experiences as communal	Play group-building games Hear stories Discussions about their questions Social action projects Learn facts Plays to be performed
<i>Intermediate (ages 11-14)</i>	Family and institutions begin to become secondary to shared internal experiences with peers and other trusted adults Girls and boys begin to mix Sexuality re-emerges as a potent force	“Concrete operational” thinking — understanding more complex concepts	Question things that are “givens” Understand feminism Come to terms with homophobia Do social justice Open to new ideas and new concepts Speak in public Basic leadership skills	Experiencing the religious dimensions of friendship Experiencing the religious dimensions of sexuality May have profound religious experiences which they want to make sense out of	Conversations Check-ins Questions and question boxes Social education, social service, and even direct action Group-building games and initiatives Worship services Spiritual practices
<i>High school (ages 14-19)</i>	Progressive social separation from family of origin, progressive integration into peer group and (ideally) into wider community	Full abstract thinking develops — “formal operational thinking”	Serve on committees Pledge Participate fully in worship Hold congregations to high standards Meet with peers and adult role models Classes that require formal operational thinking	May seek out peak experiences Seek experiences that require full acceptance by adult religious community	All the above plus: Opportunities for actual leadership (serve on committees, board, serve as worship associates, etc.) Classes and discussions, often at the level of adult RE