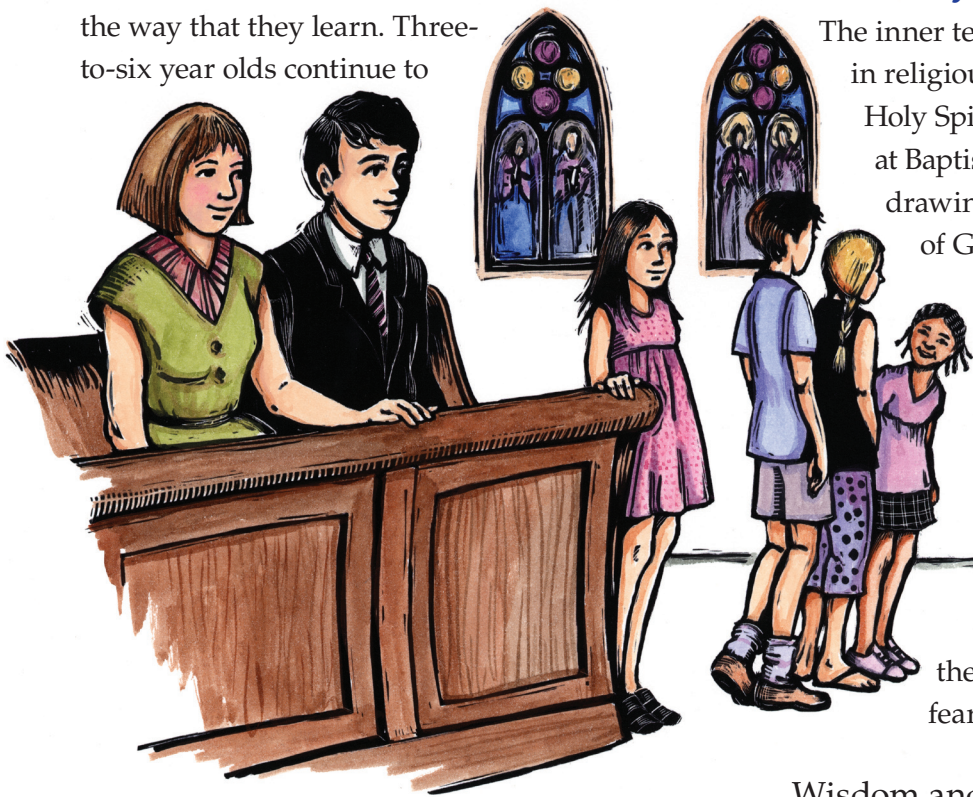


# Religious Capacities and Needs (Three to Six Years)

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In the first three years of life, children learn an enormous amount. But between ages three and six, children have a new hunger for perfecting the abilities and skills they have already gained and for learning more about themselves, others, and the world around them.

Children in this age group are very different from adults, and even from older children, in the way that they learn. Three-to-six year olds continue to



have a marvelous capacity to absorb what is going on around them, such as in their ability to learn language. They are taking in more than we realize, and so their environment—the simple things and activities available to them—are as important as the lessons we give them.

Children this age also learn by doing. They learn through all their senses, especially through touching and manipulating things with their hands.

Children are born with an inner teacher, an innate drive to move, explore, and learn. We cooperate with the inner teacher by placing developmentally appropriate objects and activities before them as well as by matching the lessons we give them to their interests and abilities.

## The Holy Spirit

The inner teacher becomes even more important in religious development during this time. The Holy Spirit, given to the child in abundance at Baptism, becomes the child's inner teacher, drawing the child to God. Just as the Spirit of God within Jesus was revealed in certain spiritual gifts, this same Spirit is at work within the child, producing these same gifts even if some of them are only in germinal form: "The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:2, 3).

## Wisdom and Understanding

Young children are very wise. They are drawn to what is most real and most essential. Their capacity for wonder enables them to enjoy things at a physical level and at a spiritual level simultaneously. They need things to be very concrete, but at the same time they accept, and at some level understand, mystery—even the "big mysteries," such as life and death, the kingdom of God, the Incarnation, and Jesus' real presence in bread and wine.



## Within and Beyond the Family

### Counsel and Strength

Little children have the beginnings of the gift of counsel in their ability to know the truth and speak it directly. And they who are smallest and weakest also have great strength, in the way that they accept their dependence on our love and God's love and in the way that they welcome the gift of God's strength within them.

### Knowledge

Children's way of knowing is deeper and more complete than merely understanding information; it involves their hearts and bodies as well as their heads. For them, knowledge is synonymous with closeness and intimacy, the way the Good Shepherd says of his sheep: "I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14).

### Fear of the Lord

The way young children "fear the Lord" can be a valuable lesson on what this phrase means. Their fear of the Lord is their capacity to be in complete awe of God and to respond to God's love with their own love and enjoyment.

### Delight

The final gift of the Holy Spirit is called "piety." Piety means loving and revering God the Father and all of his children. This love comes so naturally to young children, who have a great capacity for relationship.

These spiritual gifts are also spiritual hungers. Young children need help drawing near to God and to the richest and most nourishing realities of our faith: Jesus, his presence and action in the sacraments (particularly Baptism and Eucharist), and the mystery of the kingdom of God.

We parents are our children's first and most important teachers. The way we care for them communicates both our love and God's love for them. The ways we help them learn to do things for themselves and to participate in the daily life of the family builds their self-confidence and sense of belonging. The loving way that we respond to each other in the family and to others lets our children see faith in action. But young children hunger for more than this. They need to listen with us to God's word, pray with us, and participate in the worshipping life of the Church.

During this second phase of early childhood, children also need to go beyond the family. We take them to playgroups and to school in response to their need for learning and growth in a social setting. Should we not also find or help create a special place in the Church for their spiritual growth? Such a place would have child-sized furnishings and materials that respect their way of learning by doing. There, children's capacity for silence and reverence along with their need to make "joyful noises" could be cultivated. There, children could grow in their relationship with God and be helped to participate in the life of the Church.

As parents of young children, we can take great comfort in God's having given them (and us) an inner teacher, the Spirit who can and will do for them all that we can't and whose "power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). Thanks be to God.

### For Further Reading

Cavalletti, Sofia. *The Religious Potential of the Child*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992.  
Ramshaw, Gail. *Sunday Morning*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993.

