



Developmentally Sound Teaching
A Teacher's Guide to Facilitating Religious Education
FEZANA Religion Education Committee
Persis Driver
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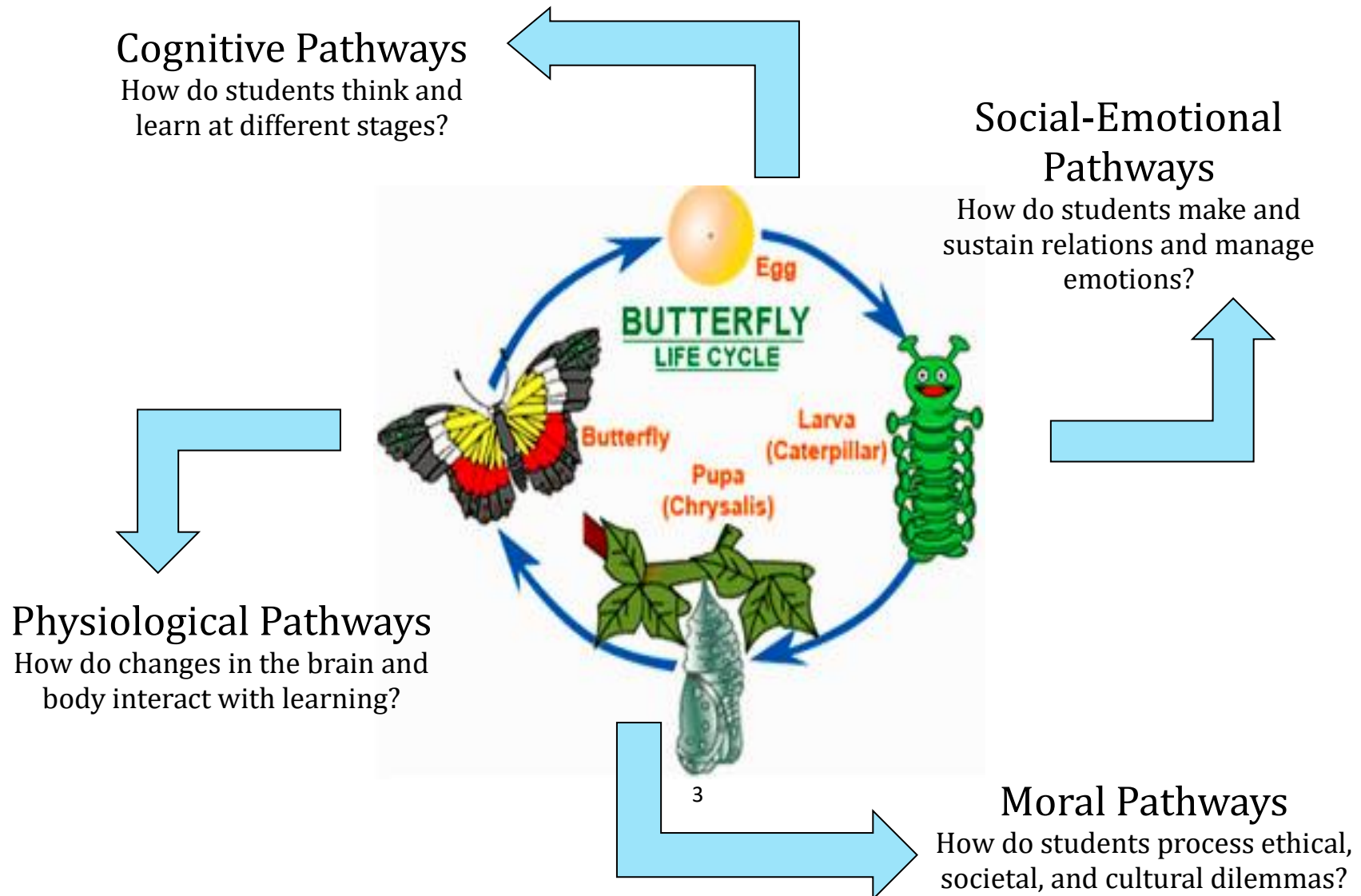


Preface

Zoroastrian religious educators of children and youth, across the globe, are constantly designing innovative and exciting learning opportunities for students to immerse themselves in a deeper understanding of our profound religion. This brief guide provides one possible way in which teachers can augment their efforts by incorporating a focus on the developmental strengths of the students they work with. There are many ways to think about development but for the purpose of this teachers' guide we use age as a marker of transition between different groups commonly found in religion classes. While there are several tips, strategies, and techniques outlined in this guide, here are some things to consider before diving in.

- Development of individuals from early childhood to late adolescence involves many changes in physiology, cognition, interpersonal relations, and emotions. And while at different ages individuals may exhibit specific behaviors and thinking necessary for learning, there are individual differences within each age. Hence, from a teacher's perspective, it is important to understand each individual students' needs while also having a strong comprehension of the needs of the entire age group the child/youth fall within.
- Although this guide provides tips that match the needs of different age groups, it is worth the time for teachers to review the material in all age groups, especially the age groups immediately preceding or following the one they teach. Teaching practices that engage all the senses and encourage students' belonging and control are highly effective for learners of all ages. Yet the activities and content that use such practices can be made progressively more complex to match the developmental needs of students as they grow and change.
- Age by itself does not determine what a child/youth can or cannot do. Qualitative differences at different stages and the unique characteristics of students at each stage can provide guiding points for our interactions with students. But it is important to consider these on a continuum and acknowledge the individual variations rather than view these as absolute categories.

Incorporating an understanding of how we grow and change along 4 major developmental pathways can assist educators in designing teaching techniques, lessons, and learning environments that capitalize on the strengths that students bring with them to any class.





A Brief Snapshot of Developmental Strengths at different ages

Ages	Cognitive Development	Physiological Development	Social-Emotional-Moral Development
Up to age 7	A convergence between developing language skills, thinking in terms of symbols and an inability to focus on multiple aspects and think abstractly lays the perfect groundwork for imaginative role play and complex storytelling.	Rudimentary fine and gross motor skills transition into stronger hand eye coordination as riding bikes and playing video games becomes easier. Include tactile and physically active forms of learning.	An egocentric orientation coupled with fledgling perspective taking skills emphasizes an inward focus on the self and detailed dialogues. Make them the heroes of stories and allow them to talk instead of doing all the talking.
~ 7 to 11	The ability to classify, and compare objects highlights a belief in the stability of the world. Thinking is rational and sequential yet concrete and making a leap into the abstract realm needs greater effort and explicit scaffolding. Be sure to use hands-on artifacts that they can manipulate and make meaningful connections across concepts to maximize deep learning.	Gender differences emerge as the body begins to prime for puberty. Boys begin developing greater muscle tissue while girls develop greater body fat. Girls begin adolescent growth spurt around 11 years while boys begin around 13/14 years. Be conscious of how you use physical space during sessions to maximize engagement.	Emerging perspective taking abilities are crucial for maintaining close friendships, resolving conflicts through peer mediations, and testing their newfound individuality through “talking-back.” Take advantage of the other-orientation and incorporate group activities and social interactions.
~12 to 18	Hypothetical reasoning and formal logic make a strong combination for grasping abstract concepts, developing a scientific and critical mindset, and fighting for a cause. Engage their passion by demonstrating how religion can be used to support a just and fair world.	A growth spurt during early adolescence followed by a pruning of brain connections not used regularly, means to make knowledge stick, it is important to make them “use” the knowledge rather than listen to it. A maturing limbic system and prefrontal cortex sets the stage for civic engagement and community service kinds of activities.	Identity development becomes a central theme and understanding how one fits into the larger, local, and global context takes precedence. Emphasis is on the constant struggle between establishing an identity distinct from others while trying to maintain close family, community, and friendship ties. So, demonstrate how religion can provide the safe, non-judgmental home base for them to always come back to.

Read more: Bjorklund, D. F. (2005). *Children’s thinking: Cognitive development and individual differences* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth;
 Steinberg, L. (2013). *Adolescence* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill: Columbus



Preparing for Success

Basic questions for ALL teachers to reflect on before the beginning of each class

Have I primed and cued my students to help them minimize distractions?

Incorporate novelty, emotional appeal, personal relevance into every single lesson.

Am I cognitively overloading students' memory systems?

Focus on 1-2 big ideas with younger children moving on to no more than 4-5 ideas by adolescence in every lesson.

Are my instructional scaffolds flexible enough to engage all the senses?

Give the students choices and let them lead the way when possible.

Is my assessment flexible enough to accommodate multiple perspectives?

Give students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding in diverse and creative ways.

Am I teaching within students' most optimal zone of learning?

The Zone is the sweet spot where students are learning something that is at just the right level of interest and challenge.

Do I have clear objectives for students?

Design clear, measurable goals for students to leave each class with so they can communicate these with their family members and others.

Am I spiraling my lessons?

Subsequent classes should revisit the same concept with greater levels of complexity and make explicit connections between what students are learning in each class.



Early Childhood: Thinking & Feeling like a Child in Religion Class

Grades: preK – 2nd

Some Important Developmental Vocabulary

Sensorimotor – The brain’s ability to process information using the five senses.

Symbolic – The child’s use of language or math or other symbols to process information.

Egocentric – The child’s attempt at understanding the world through their own lens rather than taking multiple perspectives.

A religion class teacher decides that it is time for her students to begin having important conversations about abstract moral issues like honesty, truth, and respect. She leads her class into a story about a dentist’s son, who falls into a whole lot of trouble as he weaves a web of lies while trying to cover up a much smaller lie. Seeing how engaged her students are, she decides to push the boundaries a little by tackling a more complex dilemma of how sometimes truth can be hurtful like when you point out something unflattering about another person’s abilities or appearance. As she assesses her 20-minute lesson using a simple questioning strategy, she asks if anyone could recap why truth can be hurtful. Neville replies, “Ms. Bhatena, when you are sitting in a dentist chair and he takes that drill out and puts it in your mouth, it sure does hurt. *Tooth* can be very painful sometimes!” The child had just had his first cavity filled the day before.

Neville, a preschooler finds it difficult to *decenter* from what he is thinking about at any given time to fully grasp what his teacher wants him to understand. Coupled with a focus on self, the outcome is not unexpected. Yet stories, art projects, and concept maps with the self as the focal point are some ways in which educators use this inward orientation to facilitate learning. So, the critical questions for teachers to ask themselves when working with this group is – *Am I engaging my students’ senses? Am I creating a learning environment that leverages their developmental characteristics such as a focus on the self, and using this as a strength in the classroom?*

Inspiring/encouraging students:

Preschool aged children are in the process of transitioning from using a *sensorimotor* way of thinking (a way that uses their senses) to a “symbolic” way of thinking (using language). Their fine motor skills (eg: holding a pencil) and gross motor skills (eg: riding a bike) are also developing rapidly. Additionally, children this age can be *egocentric* meaning that they interpret the world around them through the lens of their “self” and may find it difficult to decenter from their own perspective. Hence the best way to keep children excited about religion class would be to:

- Engage their senses and language to learn about the symbols of the religion. Zarathushtra, Fravashi, Atash, Khordeh Avesta are understood as examples of concrete symbols (not abstract concepts) that can be understood because these symbols can be seen and touched all around. Incorporating songs, music, games, outdoor play, and art while teaching can **engage the senses** and play to their strengths.



- Stories that involve them **personally** can be more meaningful than abstract stories.
Example: When teaching about Ashem Vohu, ask them to narrate a story about when they lied, cheated, or did something wrong. What were the consequences (if any)? How does that connect to the idea of ASHA in Ashem Vohu?
- Art that uses them as a focus can be more engaging than drawing an abstract symbol.
Example: Rather than have them draw a fire or a fravashi, ask them to draw a picture of themselves and their family praying in front of a fire. If the setting is a home, then guide them to draw a Divo to represent the fire and if the setting is in the fire temple, then draw an Afargan. This kind of activity serves multiple purposes. First, art engages the senses and keeps the **focus on the self** and second it expands the understanding of fire as a **“symbol”** that can be represented in different ways. This would make it easier to teach a more complex idea later of fire as a symbol of knowledge and ASHA.

Handling difficult students challenging situations:

There are no difficult children, but challenging behaviors that at this age, are often a result of frustration and/or fatigue at not being able to understand, participate, or articulate ideas. Attention spans on average are around 10 minutes and working memory capacity (the part of your memory system that needs to be active when learning, interpreting, and reproducing information) is limited to around 3-4 bits of information. Yet this can be easily stretched when learning is interesting and challenging! Challenging behaviors arise when teachers do not take these developmental needs into account while designing lessons. In this case, consider the following practices.

- Switch the modality of learning every 10-12 minutes. This means a class of 30-40 minutes may need 2-3 different forms of learning every 10 minutes. Moving around the room, switching partners, interspersing stories, songs, and artwork, can keep the class moving and allow little time for children to act out.
- Improve children’s working memory by using repetition and elaboration. Eg: Use the same songs or tune multiple times until mastery is reached. Remind students repeatedly of what was learned in the previous class. Or use a story they have already learned such as “The Ant and the Grasshopper” to teach the lesson of working hard and helping others which is at the core of our “Yatha Ahu Vairyo” prayer. This helps them by conserving their memory capacity so they can focus on what is important - the religious concept rather than wasting that mental capacity on understanding a completely new story.

Parental involvement for this age group

Parental involvement at this age is key to retention especially in religion classes that meet only once or twice a month. Children’s long-term memory (which is what religion class teachers rely on in the hope that children will remember what they have learned 15-30 days back) is strengthened only through repetition and reinforcement. Such reinforcement can be given by parents. Some tips for engaging parents can be:

- Parents can be invited to sit in/listen in on the class. This serves two purposes – parents and children can use the same vocabulary when discussing the class lessons and children

are less likely to misbehave if they know they are being watched by parents. Seeing parents attend class can also reinforce the idea that we are all life-long learners.

- Parents can be given explicit questions to ask their children immediately prior to and after each class. This helps prime children to get ready for class (and can help with initial settling down when class begins) and monitor for understanding at the end.

Summary Tips

What can you do to help the child with more detailed representation?

- *Focus on SELF! - Encourage personal stories of truth, cheating, dishonesty*
- *Focus on symbols – Fravashi, Atash, Sadra/Kusti*
- *Pray in front of the fire before making them draw a picture of their class praying in front of the fire.*
- *Switch modality of learning every 10-12 minutes*
- *Strengthen working memory by repetition & elaboration*
- *Begin pushing to expand the individual mindset to focus on others*



Middle & Late Childhood: Thinking & Feeling like a Child in Religion Class Grades: 3rd – 5th

Some Important Developmental Vocabulary

Competence – The perception that one can master challenging and complex tasks

Operational thinking – A way of processing information by focusing on the relations between how things work.

Concrete operations – The ability of the mind to use logical principles in solving problems involving the physical world.

A religion class teacher asks her students in 5th grade to articulate in 1-3 sentences, whether being a Zoroastrian is important to who they are. Here are some of the responses:

- *Being a Zoroastrian has helped shape me to be a better person, because it reminds me to be a good person every day. Being a Zoroastrian makes me feel unique at school with my friends, in a special way. When I say my prayers, I feel calm and safe.*
- *Something I like specifically about Zoroastrianism is that it is based on science and on being a kind and helpful person.*
- *Being a Zoroastrian is an important part of me because it really defines who I am inside. I really like that in the Zoroastrian religion we learn about what we were in the past through stories and tales. I also love how it doesn't feel like a chore to learn about our religion, but instead it's a really fun and engaging lesson that I am always looking forward to.*
- *I love to read and learn about history, and I am interested in the Shahnameh stories. Being a Zoroastrian is a big part of who I am because I don't quit. I never let myself do things that are unforgivable. Even though I don't know everything there is to know I am still very proud of myself.*

For most children at the intermediate elementary ages, thinking becomes more symbolic as they develop a complex set of literacy (reading and writing) and operational (math and logic) skills. Stories, role-playing, collaborative presentations, and explicit connections of religion with science and math uses their developmental strengths to make learning about Zoroastrianism fun and relevant. So, the critical questions for teachers to ask themselves when working with this group is – *Am I providing a range of manipulatives for students to create their own knowledge of Zoroastrian concepts and ideas in concrete and abstract ways? Am I creating a learning environment that allows for collaboration and reflection?*

Inspiring/encouraging students:

Religious educators of children at these ages have the critical task of designing educational experiences that are likely to have a significant impact on student's willingness to persist with religion classes later in life. Classes need to be fun and exciting but also deep and meaningful. They need to be challenging but just enough so that they are interesting and manageable. And they need



to support strong connections among children that will hopefully last a lifetime. Educators may benefit from using the following techniques to encourage and inspire students.

- “**Active learning**” or the ability for children to engage with their learning in hands-on ways is at the core of a strong learning experience for children this age. Such teaching, in which children are learning by doing rather than listening, has two benefits. First, it supports students’ sense of **competence**, a primary motivation that drives children as they are trying to gain confidence in their own abilities to succeed and accomplish tasks. Second, it almost always involves some form of engagement with others either through collaboration/cooperation or presentation and this supports a sense of **belonging**, another motivational need, which when fulfilled can drive participation, interest, and high levels of learning. *Example:* After sharing stories from Shahnameh allow children to write and act out their own scripts using similar characters, tone, themes from the Shahnameh. This takes time and patience but when children see the final product, they are likely to be filled with a sense of competence at accomplishing a solid product and belonging at working with their peers.
- The development of **complex literacy** skills also makes learning the meanings of prayers developmentally appropriate and therefore most educators focus on teaching the interpretations rather than rote memorization of prayers. However, long term memory often depends on how well information is **organized** into meaningful chunks. So rather than just teaching each individual prayer and meaning, try to think about the different groups/kinds of prayers that exists and then teach about how each group serves a purpose. *Example:* Prayers like manthras (Ashem Vohu, Yatha Ahu Vairyō) are meant to be quick and repeatable because their purpose is to create a meditative effect. Others such as Tandarosti or Hazangaram ask for blessings, while some such as Jasa-me-Avangehe Mazda demonstrate loyalty to religion. Teach prayers in chunks for long term memory.
- Children at these ages can **disconnect reality from fantasy** with much greater ease as they are beginning to think abstractly and take multiple perspectives. Shahnameh stories can be introduced here while making sure that students are clear about the difference between history and mythology. Another reason why Shahnameh stories are developmentally appropriate for children is because children’s thinking about moral dilemmas at these ages often includes a **fixed orientation** where behaviors are judged based in rules, laws, and accepted norms. So, it makes sense that King Jamshed finally loses everything when he becomes too egotistic. Or that Sam, who is disowned due to the color of his hair, finds justice and love.
- Most thinking at these ages is still very **concrete** but gradually transitioning into complex, operational modes. Hence, any learning that uses manipulatives (ie, any tangible object that students can use to develop their own understanding such as play money, weights, scales, etc.) is likely to have a stronger and longer lasting impact. *Example:* When learning about the sadra and kusti, allow students to understand the math behind how a kusti is woven by making them do the math first! Give them 72 strands of thread (or any objects) and ask them to figure out how many strands would be needed in each group if they were to create 6 groups (answer = 12). Then connect the idea of 12 strands to the 12 words of Ashem Vohu and the 6 groups to the 6 Amesha Spentas. Children at this age can easily work this problem without ever learning division but the physical activity can improve long-term memory.
- Finally, the development of **empathy** is a critical developmental strength at this age. Hence it is important to emphasize the “values” in stories, prayers, and history because unlike young



children who may think of moral dilemmas in terms of rewards and punishments (eg: we should not do bad things because we will be punished), in middle to late childhood, individuals may be able to incorporate more **multidimensional thinking** such as ASHA means being righteous not just for a reward but because it is simply the right thing to do and it leads us closer to making the right choices.

Handling difficult students challenging situations:

If we treat children like sponges or clean slates, we take away any sense of initiative, creativity, and innovation that the child has in their way of thinking. We fill them with self-doubt, cynicism, and guilt at making mistakes or at their sense of wanting to do things for themselves. This is why Zarathustra explicitly talked about not wanting to make his teachings burdensome on a person's daily life, or judgmental about the way someone leads their life. Gathas are "mantra" – thought provokers. They stimulate one's thinking faculty and guide it onto the track to think precisely. At the heart of accepting his teachings is the "principle of choice" or Ahuna Vairya (the most sacred of the Gathic hymns), the idea that life is an incessant cycle of choosing between right and wrong, each path leading us closer or away from God. ***So, educators need to model his teaching in class!*** Behaviors such as a lack of engagement, disinterest, and creating distractions in the class can all be better understood if we see them as children reacting to being asked to listen passively and absorb information or being compared to others.

- When children are actively involved and collaborate in creating knowledge for themselves and others, there is often little time left for them to act out. Additionally, when children are immersed in projects and activities that are interesting, peers who cause distractions are avoided and such behavior discouraged by the children themselves. Such natural consequences are far more effective than any external reprimands or consequences a teacher can provide. So, an educator is best served by trying to make their lessons as hands-on (*Example:* asking students to create a human web of life to simulate a delicate ecosystem when discussing the concept of Gaetha) using manipulatives and real-world problem solving rather than lecturing.
- Being a child in religion class can sometimes seem disconnected especially when classes only run once or twice a month. Hence, any attempt to help children connect the information they are learning goes a long way in making class seem meaningful. *Example:* When teaching about a SES (tray used for religious occasions), explicitly connecting each element to the elements of nature and then to the Amesha Spentas creates a logical step-by-step learning process that is likely to stick. [Gulabaz with rose water -> Water -> Haurvatat]. Children's thinking at these ages is highly sequential and such logical "flows" of information can be very effective. Another *example* of connecting information would be teaching festivals in a way that each Zoroastrian festival can be connected to a more commonly known festival to discuss how multiple cultures learn and grow together [Eg: Mehrgan, festival that celebrates friendship, love, and relations -> Thanksgiving]

Parental involvement for this age group

Parental involvement at this age is key for modelling and building trust in the idea that what is being learned in class is relevant and worthy of attention. It is difficult for children to see value in learning about a divo or a SES if they have not seen that practice being used at home. Prayers may

seem meaningless or unimportant if they do not see caregivers wearing a sadra and kusti. While the presence of parents in religion class may not be necessary or even desired, parents play a very important role in reinforcing ideas through actions. Some tips for engaging parents can be,

- Parents can be provided with information that children are learning because many adults (including myself) are still learning about the religion. So, building parents' confidence in being able to discuss topics or playing the role of a listener and learner when their children teach them what they have learned can be very important in establishing the legitimacy of what is being learned.
- Like reported in the previous section, parents can be given explicit questions to ask their children immediately prior to and after each class. This helps prime children to get ready for class (and can help with initial settling down when class begins) and monitor for understanding at the end.

Summary Tips

What can you do to help the child with more detailed representation?

- *Focus on making connections between what is being learned*
- *Use manipulatives for hands-on and active learning*
- *Move from art to writing*
- *Switch modality of learning every 15-20 minutes*
- *Strengthen working memory by making religion relevant to school and life*
- *Create interpersonal relations through collaborations rather than competitions*
- *Support a sense of competence and belonging*



Moving into Adolescence: Thinking and Feeling like a tween in religion class. Grades 6 – 8 (Middle School)

Some Important Developmental Vocabulary

Prefrontal cortex – CEO of the brain, responsible for planning, strategizing, and judgment

Abstract thinking – The ability to understand and think with complex concepts that although real, are not tied to concrete experiences, objects, situations, or people.

Scaffolding – Teaching technique that involves breaking a complex idea into smaller, easily manageable chunks and providing adequate tools and structure to learn each chunk before moving to the next.

Autonomy – A need for control over the course of one’s learning and life.

Farida loves to teach middle school aged children because she can have deeper and more meaningful conversations with them about concepts they might have already learned, like the Amesha Spentas or the Gathas. So, she leads an engaging lesson on Ancient Persian culture, and its influence on the modern world. She discusses how the Achaemenid period is credited with initial innovations in irrigation, refrigeration, math, and perfumes! She also demonstrates how the principles of human rights popularized by Cyrus the Great may have influenced the thinking of American founding fathers such as Abraham Lincoln. After an engaged discussion, Katy, a 7th grade student seems slightly frustrated when she asks, “Mrs. Irani, why don’t our textbooks talk about this in school?” Farida decides to stop her lesson and spends the rest of the class discussing how history is often known through the lens of the person writing it. Thereafter, when she developed lessons on Persepolis, or Alexander’s burning of Persepolis, or other historical topics, she was careful to always bring in multiple sources for her students to consider, highlighting the subjective nature of history itself.

Katy, an early adolescent, made a critical observation using logic and rational thought. She is also ready to examine the same fact from multiple perspectives because the concrete thinking of the previous years is gradually changing as she can think abstractly. These perspective taking abilities are crucial for deeper understanding of religious concepts but are also the reason for so many adults’ frustration when their tweens “talk-back” or argue about everything including religion 😊! So, the critical questions for teachers to ask themselves when working with this group is – *Am I taking advantage of this other-orientation in tweens and incorporating social interactions in my class? Am I encouraging argument and respectful critique to make sure multiple voices are heard?*



Inspiring/encouraging students:

It is very important for teachers of early adolescents to be empathic of the incredible changes occurring during this time. Tweens are at an exciting age when their bodies and minds are in a state of flux, and whether the changes are gradual or dramatic, it is a time of adaptation for all our kids. As changes related to puberty and the prefrontal cortex of the brain coincide, it is natural to see changes in their moods, impulsive behaviors, and ability to plan and control their learning.

- The tween brain is in a state of transitioning from thinking very concretely about the world to being able to think **abstractly** while taking multiple perspectives into account at the same time. Hence this is the perfect time to revisit the same concepts they might have learned earlier as children, but to add greater complexity to a topic. *Example*, the concept of Navroz that kids might have learned earlier as the festival of spring and rebirth, focusing on the Haft Seen table as a symbol, might now be reexamined through the lens of history (How does the art at Persepolis reflect the essence of Navroz?), mythology (What does King Jamshed's story truly symbolize?), and culture (What are the practices that are still followed and those that are abandoned?).
- Remember that the **pre-frontal cortex**, ie the part of the brain that controls our impulses, ability to set goals, and follow instructions is still developing! We often ask our tweens, "What were you thinking?" The answer may be quite simply "too much." Their brains are in the process of becoming more efficient at processing information, so be patient and be ready to provide a **scaffold** or support whenever possible. *Example*, we might want kids to understand that Zoroastrianism under the Parthian rule became more decentralized and as a result there was a corruption of how "God" was perceived during that time. Rather than state this, we can get them to this realization by asking a set of questions that gradually increase in complexity such as, (1) "Why do you think the Parthians wanted to be perceived as closely related to the Achaemenids?" (2) What do you think a group of people in positions of authority would do if their own beliefs clashed with those of the people, who they conquered but wanted to peacefully rule over? (3) How could the Parthians have encouraged a connection between Greek gods and goddesses and the Persian yazatas and spirits? (4) What might have happened to the way Zoroastrianism was practiced because of such connections? The list can go on, but the advantage is that tweens are learning the concepts using critical thinking and questioning which makes them believe that they have control over their learning.
- Finally, remember that for all individuals, long-term memory is strengthened when we make **meaningful connections to real life**. This is why teachers encourage students to create mnemonics, songs, or patterns when learning a difficult concept. Similarly, whenever possible, describe how religious practices and rituals may have a historical, cultural, or philosophical connection. For tweens, their growing sense of **autonomy** means that getting them to generate the patterns and mnemonics themselves may be beneficial than providing them with one.



Handling difficult students challenging situations:

Challenging behaviors at this age are often due to a lack of perceived freedom and a misplaced sense of being constantly judged by others. Religion can often feel prescriptive especially when we must learn about a series of prayers, rituals, ceremonies etc. all of which have strict rules to follow. To preempt and avoid such thinking that may lead to behaviors that appear challenging, it might be worth trying the following.

- ***Build trust.*** Early adolescence is a time when the *egocentricism* that was evident as a young child often reappears. This means that tweens often feel judged by individuals around them. Coupled with the fact that changing bodies often make for a higher sense of consciousness about the self, we can understand why some might react sensitively or impulsively to even the slightest criticism or correction. Hence it is critical that a religious education class should be a “safe space” where all ideas and thoughts are accepted, even if they do not conform to “what the religion says.” A big reason why we see a decline in participation during this age is because religion can sometimes come across as being dogmatic with no scope for flexibility and change, yet tween’s developmental needs are all about changing and modifying! So be flexible, be empathetic, and be critical.
- ***Build community.*** Perspective taking is a skill that is developing at a high rate and these skills are crucial for maintaining friendships, understanding complex literature, and resolving conflicts. As teachers, we can leverage this development by creating greater opportunities for students to collaborate and form friendships in our classes that could potentially last beyond the religion class. The advantage of this is that these bonds may be strong enough to motivate tweens to attend religion class even on days when they might feel like skipping.
- ***Build awe.*** History is an excellent addition to the curriculum at this point because tweens are old enough to have matured beyond the mythologies of Shahnameh but still young enough to be awed by the real-life drama of the kings and queens and the larger-than-life battles. Even the most seemingly disinterested tween can often become engaged when discussing topics such as “styles of warfare,” “battle strategies,” and “court intrigue.” Once hooked, we can sneak in the lessons of morality, responsibility, changes in language, texts, and customs.

Parental involvement for this age group

Physical presence of parents in the classroom may sometimes be a deterrent to open and honest conversations. Yet parents play a most critical role at this age in providing legitimacy to what tweens are learning in class. Think of the multiple hats parents can wear:

- ***Student.*** Parents can become a student, allowing the tween to educate them on topics they may have limited knowledge about. Demonstrate an interest in the topic so that the tween believes that they are contributing to your knowledge. Which tween doesn’t like knowing more than their parents?
- ***Critical thinker.*** Ask questions about the topic that model how to think more deeply about concepts.



- *Personal connections.* Help tweens make personal connections with the topic by discussing how the topic might relate to your and their life experiences.
- *Demonstrate value.* Show tweens why learning and practicing what they learn may be challenging but can have value for their mental and physical health.

Summary Tips

- *Focus on MEANING & PURPOSE to SELF & OTHERS!*
- *Focus on moving from concrete to abstract – Fravashi, Atash, Sadra/Kusti*
- *Move from art to writing*
- *Switch modality of learning every 15-20 minutes*
- *Strengthen working memory by making religion relevant to school and life*
- *Include concrete community service events and discussions*
- *Model collaborative learning, personal stories of struggle with religious beliefs*



Adolescence: Thinking and Feeling like a teenager in religion class. Grades 9 – 12 (High School)

Some Important Developmental Vocabulary

Formal logic – Ability to solve problems using hypothetical thinking and deductive reasoning

Limbic system – Part of the brain involved in emotional and behavioral responses

Possible selves – Multiple future selves that adolescents can see themselves growing into

Metacognition – The ability to think and reflect on one’s own thinking

Disequilibrium – When our beliefs are challenged and require to be changed/adjusted to incorporate new information

Agency – Adolescents’ belief in their own ability to effect change in themselves or others

Darius has been working with high school aged youth conducting religion classes, emphasizing the teachings in the Gathas. He tries his best to use visuals, audio renditions, explain meanings and connections to life, but he often notices some extreme behaviors such as goofing around or sleeping. Teaching online during a pandemic made things worse when some students did not switch their cameras on or rarely participated in group work. He decided to pull aside a student, Firuza, and inquire about what he could do to make class more fun and interesting for the students. She mentioned that she thought the classes were interesting but that most of her peers were just involved in so many activities outside of school and coupled with thinking about college applications, extracurriculars, and finding time to relax and socialize, religion class just did not seem like a priority. She and some of the others were highly active in the music programs in their school as well. Also, for many teenagers, weekends were the only time to sleep and class in the morning meant they had to give up that one day of sleep. Darius took the feedback and made a few changes. First, he moved class from early morning 9am to 11am, allowing the youth to participate and then find time to go out for lunch together. He also taught a lesson on the musicality of the Gathas, demonstrating the metrics involved in the way they were composed. Firuza gave him a thumbs up after class and one of the students mentioned, “*Zarathustra was a musician – cool.*”

Firuza, a ninth-grade student is trying to reconcile multiple aspects of her identity as she envisions the opportunity cost of being in religion class v. participating in activities that may seem to have a more immediate and tangible return for her future self. Outwardly to many adults, this may seem like an attempt to make an excuse for not participating in class. Contrary to this stereotype, she is actually using her hypothetical thinking abilities to evaluate her choices in a scientific and rational manner. Educators who struggle with the age-old question of, “why do teenagers stop attending religion class?” may benefit from asking themselves two critical questions – *Have I generated and articulated the value of being an active member of religion class? Have I provided adolescents with choices that support their sense of agency?*



Inspiring/encouraging students:

Adolescents, as they move through their high school years may experience the push and pull of wanting to assert greater control over their life choices while remaining strongly connected to caregivers. We can think of this as the “yo-yo” stage where teenagers need to feel confident to venture out and explore new opportunities by themselves while having a safe and reliable base to always come back. While families are the most obvious home bases, religion and faith-based communities can also provide stable connections that we can leverage to sustain long-term commitment and learning. Keeping adolescents engaged with the religion is even more important at this stage because of what we call the “use it or lose it” principle - Neural connections in the brain that were in overproduction during the middle school years are now going to be pruned with greater regularity for the entire adolescent years. This means that the information that individuals think about and engage with regularly is likely to stay for a long time while that which is not used, will be pruned away.

- One interesting fact about the developing teen brain is that the ***limbic system***, which regulates emotions tends to develop at a much faster rate compared to the ***prefrontal cortex***, which regulates goal setting and rational thinking. An outcome is that youth often overestimate their ability while underestimating risk. This can help us understand why teenagers may take certain risks that the adult mind has learned to avoid. Yet, this developmental outcome can also present incredible opportunities for educators if they can get the youth emotionally invested in their learning. Adolescents are more likely to attend class and be engaged when their passion and risk-taking is channeled into civic opportunities that tie community service to the educational experience of a religion class. ***Example: Gaethâ***, from gay, “to live,” is the living world of mankind and animals. It is the earth as a self-contained, organic whole, a living organism for which we, as its self-aware, intelligent evolutionary offspring, have a profound responsibility to promote and to protect from all harm, especially from that which has been induced by our own self-centered ecological ignorance. Asho Zarathushtra is the first person to clearly envision the interrelatedness of all life on earth. He is the world’s first concerned environmentalist. So, if teaching about a complex concept such as Gaetha, highlighting the role of Zoroastrians as Ecological Scientists is important. Participating in creating a sustainable (maybe edible) community garden, coordinating with city and local organizations for cleaning marshlands, or designing a nature camp for younger children are some ways in which hands-on experiential learning can be tied to religious education in a way that makes religion seem relevant and urgent.
- Those educators who teach the Gathas will attest to the idea that what makes the Gathas universally relevant even today is that they were never meant to be prescriptive. Instead, Zarathustra’s teachings are suggestions and guides for individuals to adopt a code of life that can lead them to the ideal state of righteousness and good (Eg: Asha, Ushta, Yaozda, etc.). The Gathas then are perfectly matched to adolescents’ developmental need to assert greater control over their lives. Educators are more likely to actively engage youth in religion classes if they can teach about the Gathas as tools for empowering teenagers in



making challenging decisions about life and school, and as guides for assessing risk and working collectively for a greater good. This is particularly doable at this age because adolescents have developed “*metacognition*” or the ability to think about their own thinking which allows them to reflect on such abstract ideas.

- Adolescents can envision *possible selves*, meaning they are thinking not just about “who am I?” but also about “who will I be 10, 20, 30 years from now.” The greatest challenge for educators is to make sure that adolescents’ possible selves are connected to their Zoroastrian culture, history, and beliefs. A good first step may be to expose youth to highly successful Zoroastrians in diverse fields such as medicine, social sciences, teaching, politics etc. Yet, this may not be enough. It is important to focus not just on the achievements of these individuals but on how Zoroastrianism may have influenced their thoughts and actions. Models do not need to be famous. Engage successful entrepreneurs, care professionals, STEM specialists, from within the community to not just talk about their careers but to provide strong discussions on how faith can be a stabilizing force in a life fraught with challenges, risk, and hard work. Such messages are likely to resonate strongly with youth thinking about their own futures.
- Finally, the adolescent mind is naturally attuned to thinking about *universal principles* of justice, equity, and care. They have also developed a sense of “*formal logic*” or the ability to argue, critique, and analyze information using detailed streams of logic, facts, and emotion. Youth today are growing up in a world where protests and solidarity marches designed and executed by other youth is a norm. So, there is great potential in discussing how principles of gender equality existed since the times of Cyrus or the silent and overt struggles, lived experiences, and protests of Zoroastrians in Iran through centuries and even in the current climate. Adolescents are now increasingly aware and capable of questioning the infallibility of their parents and other authority figures. As annoying as that can be, it is an incredible strength that can be leveraged for learning deeply.

Handling difficult students challenging situations:

Challenging behaviors at this age are often due to a lack of control and autonomy that youth may feel especially when confronted with the challenges in their personal lives and in the larger social and global settings. Religion can sometimes feel irrelevant or out-of-touch when it seems disconnected with realities of everyday life. To preempt and avoid behaviors that may lead to disengagement from class and community, it might be worth educators’ time to put on the following hats.

- *Become a salesperson.* Firuza’s feedback in the scenario above is a common thought among youth who may be struggling to maintain a balance between educational and extra-curricular activities, work and life. It is important for educators to articulate clearly the value of their lessons and projects. This can be done in 3 ways: - (1) demonstrate utility – show students how learning a religious concept can be useful to their short and long-term goals (2) connect to personal interest – Darius created a lesson on the musicality in the Gathas because she knew that a number of her students came with a basic understanding of



music (3) demonstrate why religion is important to who they will be – adolescents are visualizing their future selves, explicitly show them how and where religion can fit into the picture.

- *Become a magician.* Adolescents can have a sense of “personal fable” or an inflated belief in their abilities. This is great as it allows them to dream big and set excellent goals for their future. However, this can also sometime shut them off from listening or embracing new information. Anything an educator can do to create a sense of **disequilibrium** where the information presented makes adolescents challenge their knowledge or their own way of thinking is likely to get a great deal of engagement and awe.
- *Become an advocate.* Adolescents, now more than ever, are surrounded by messages of social justice and critical consciousness and feel emotionally ready to champion causes (Eg: climate change, racial equity, gender parity, etc.) that they believe are important for a just, humane, and equal society. Subsequently they are more likely to connect meaningfully with educators who can demonstrate a similar intention and drive to advocate for personal and societal change. Allowing them to learn the process of problem-solving in class and generate solutions grounded in the Zoroastrian teachings followed by concrete steps to follow through on these solutions can provide a strong model that builds a sense of **agency**, empowering them to think of class as a place where they learn how to be responsible agents for change. *Example:* discussions on the importance of ecological conservation and climate change can be followed with real world connections with organizations such as the Phenology Friends of FEZANA to put into practice what is being learned in class.
- *Become a student.* A strong key to reaching adolescents is to create an environment in class that affords them **choices and control** over their own learning. Placing them in the position of an instructor, decision maker, or guide to teach, create a challenging activity, or debate ideas while the teacher listens and learns can be a powerfully empowering tool.

Parental involvement for this age group

Similar to the tween years, physical presence of parents in the classroom may sometimes be a deterrent to open and honest conversations. Yet parents play a most critical role at this age in providing legitimacy to what teens are learning in class. Think of the multiple hats parents can wear:

- **Student.** Parents can become a student, allowing the tween to educate them on topics they may have limited knowledge about. Demonstrate an interest in the topic so that the tween believes that they are contributing to your knowledge. Which tween doesn’t like knowing more than their parents?
- **Critical thinker.** Ask questions about the topic that show how to think more deeply about concepts.
- **Personal connections.** Help teens make personal connections with the topic by discussing how the topic might relate to their future selves.
- **Demonstrate value.** Show teens why learning and practicing what they learn may be challenging but can have value for their mental and physical health.

Summary Tips

- *Engage the future, possible self*
- *Channel the emotions – create disequilibrium*
- *Debate and argue - issues in which they have invested interests, and issues that they have knowledge on. So, give them materials before asking them to debate topics*
- *Push for realism*
- *Empower them for change*
- *Highly critical and self-reflective - Adolescents are now increasingly aware and capable of questioning the infallibility of their parents and other authority figures*
- *Engage abstract thinking by challenging them to design community service projects and activities for adults and children*

A final thought on reaching multiple students at the same time

Now that we have considered the developmental strengths and challenges at different ages, one question that educators often have is about how to reach students who may be at different stages of learning within the same classroom. This ties back to what we talked about in the beginning of this guide – individual differences in students should be respected and individual needs need to be emphasized in any good learning environment. One simple way of doing this is by what we call “differentiation” (Tomlinson). This includes realizing that every lesson may need us to:

- ***Differentiate the content.*** Focus on incorporating multiple ways of delivery when teaching the same group. Lectures coupled with readings at multiple levels of literacy, videos, graphic organizers, peer buddies, and small groups that work on topics at their level of understanding can go a long way in reaching all students equally.
- ***Differentiate the process.*** When designing tasks and activities to teach a concept, consider incorporating multiple ways of teaching the same topic – journaling, collaborative groups, projects, role-playing, storytelling, all play to different strengths and incorporating different processes can create a more inclusive lesson where all students feel competent.
- ***Differentiate the product.*** When requiring students to demonstrate their knowledge, rather than relying on simply asking them to answer questions (a typical part of religion class), provide students with choices for ways to show what they know. Creating a board game, writing essays and stories, presentations, teaching younger peers or older adults can all be great ways accomplish the same goal of assessing if students have understood a topic without forcing them to respond to questions in class.