



Ages and Stages of Youth Development

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December 2021

Ages and Stages of Youth Development refers to common characteristics of children and adolescents as they enter different phases of development through the years. This includes physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

Physical Development: refers to growth of the body and development of motor skills

Social Development: refers to how youth interact with others, and respond in social settings

Emotional Development: refers to dealing with feelings including recognizing, expressing and handling feelings

Cognitive Development: or intellectual development refers to how children learn including thinking, reasoning and memory concepts

An understanding of how youth develop helps parents and individuals working with youth more effectively interact, build positive relationships and create experiences that foster healthy development.

While there are common characteristics of youth within an age range, it is important to remember all youth are individuals and therefore development will be unique to each child. The ages and stages of youth development serve as a general guide to support positive youth development.

Ages and Stages of Youth Development: Early Childhood 5-8 years old

Characteristics	Helpful Tips
Physical	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » In a period of slow, but steady growth. » Learning to master physical skills. » Able to control large muscles better than small muscles. » Will learn best if physically active. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Provide physically active experiences such as running, playing games and painting. » Provide opportunities to practice both large and small motor skills, placing more attention on large motor skills. » Use projects that can be completed successfully by beginners. Meals and art/craft activities will get messy.
Social	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Learning how to be friends, may have many friends. Arguments occur, but do not last long. » Focused on self, but starting to have more concern for others. » Boys and girls may enjoy playing together, but by the end of this phase usually prefer to play in same gender groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Small group activities give children the opportunity to practice social skills while also allowing for individual attention. » Role playing or make believe can help teach social behaviors such as empathy helping youth imagine what other people think and feel. » Include activities that encourage children to participate in mix-gender groups.
Emotional	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Becoming more secure when away from parents, but still seek adult approval and affection. » Sensitive to criticism; don't like to fail. » Go out of way to avoid punishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Be positive! » Focus on cooperation not competition. Use cooperative team games where there is not a winner or loser. » Celebrate and emphasize success. Failures should be minimized with some level of success found in each activity. » Offer support and encouragement.
Cognitive	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Concrete thinkers. Have to see, hear, touch, smell or taste it in order to think about it. » Enjoy the 'doing' part of tasks and activities rather than the finished outcome. » Eager to try something new, naturally curious, but have a short attention span. » Focus best on one thing at a time. Multi-tasking does not work well. » Enjoy collecting items and learning to sort into categories. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Use activities that engage the senses. Instead of using only words, demonstrate activities. » Focus activities on the process rather than the finished product. » Encourage exploration and inquiry. » Plan a variety of activities that take a short time to do. » Encourage collections by allowing to make special storage boxes or books.

Ages and Stages of Youth Development: Middle Childhood 9 to 11 years old

Characteristics	Helpful Tips
Physical	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Steady increases in large muscle development, strength, balance and small muscle coordination. » Full of energy, moving all the time. » Variety of differences in maturity level with girls maturing faster than boys. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Provide active learning experiences. » Encourage physical involvement. Plan activities that allow youth to move about. » Include hands-on activities and projects that involve making or doing something. » Avoid competition between boys and girls.
Social	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Enjoy group activities and cooperation. Group and club membership is popular. » Prefer to be with members of same gender. » Admire and imitate older youth. » Continue to work for parent and adult approval. See adults as authority and follow rules out of respect for authority. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Use group learning experiences often and cooperative activities. » Allow for same gender groups. » Involve older youth role models to work with this age range and serve as mentors. » Work closely with this age group and provide guidance and support.
Emotional	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Comparison with other youth is difficult and erodes self-confidence. » Want everything to be fair or equal. Often judge in absolutes, e.g., something is wonderful or disgusting. » Feelings of competence (having capabilities and skills) enhance self-concept. » May show independence through disobedience, back talk and rebellion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Avoid comparison with others. Instead, help youth identify their own successes by comparing their past and present progress. » Emphasize successes and minimize failures. People learn better and try harder if believe in self. Provide correction quietly if needed- on-on-one. » Provide opportunities that challenge yet let youth succeed. Recognize efforts, give positive feedback and look for successes. » Provide opportunities for independence by giving choices about activities. Provide individual attention.
Cognitive	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Still thinking in mostly concrete terms. By end of this period starting to move toward logical and abstract thinking. » Motivated and eager to try new things. Extremely curious. » Attention span is increasing, but often have many interests which change rapidly. » Will do best when work is presented in small pieces. » Academic abilities, interests and reasoning vary greatly. » Interest in hobbies, collections and favorite subjects emerge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Provide active, hands-on learning experiences. » Do not answer all questions. Encourage exploration and finding some answers on own. May want to share findings with group. » Variety helps keep them engaged with rapidly changing interests. » Use many learning experiences, but keep brief and use simple, short directions. » Offer activities that appeal to a wide range of abilities so that children have a chance to succeed. » Help form groups/clubs with common interests as appropriate.

Ages and Stages of Youth Development: Early Adolescence 12 to 14 years old

Characteristics	Helpful Tips
Physical	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Rapid changes in physical appearance. » Growth spurt occurs across a wide range of ages and begins earlier for girls than boys. » Hands and feet grow first leading to uncoordinated movement at times. Voice changes common during this time. » Show more concern about body image, looks, clothes and grooming. » Form interest in their bodies, sex and sex process. » Interested in sports and physical games although often quit formalized sports due to new interests, too much pressure or other reasons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Be sensitive of feelings and avoid comments that criticize or compare youth physically. Can also watch for youth making fun of others and put stop to it. » Be open to talking about physical changes as young teens may be uncomfortable with and embarrassed by changing body. » Be patient with grooming behaviors that seem excessive. » If appropriate prepare opportunities to help youth discuss and learn body development and/or human sexuality as normal, natural process to ease anxieties associated with changing body. » Encourage active, fun learning opportunities not slanted towards physical power.
Social	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » More concerned with social graces and being liked by peers. » Gaining skills in social relations with peers and adults. » Dependence on opinions of parents or other adults shifts to dependence on opinions of peers. » Becoming interested in activities that involve boys and girls. » Peer pressure starting to emerge. » Interested in getting outside their own community and exploring. » May have older youth or adult idols- public figures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Encourage learning experiences related to understanding oneself and interacting with others. » Groups and clubs provide an opportunity for early teens to feel social acceptance. » Provide opportunities for social interaction with peers and adults. » Understand shift from dependency on parent's to peer opinions is a sign of growing maturity not rejection of family. » Provide opportunities for boys and girls to work together without feeling uncomfortable such as planning group activities, parties, fundraising, etc. » Use peer pressure in a positive way by having the group give encouragement to individuals. » Provide learning experiences outside their community either live or virtual. » Provide opportunities to partner up and be guided by positive older youth.
Emotional	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Can be extremely self-conscious and critical. May experience bouts of low self-esteem. » Emotions can be up and down. Changes in hormones and thinking may contribute to mood swings. » Be better able to express feelings through talking. » See themselves as always center stage. Compare self to others. » Seek privacy. » Desire independence, but still want and need parent and adult help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Plan a variety of opportunities for achievement. Concentrate on developing individual skills- competence leads to confidence. » Accept the feelings they have without trivializing. Remember early adolescents can be a time of drama and feelings may seem extreme to adults. Accept their feelings and be careful not to embarrass or criticize. » Avoid singling them out in front of others or comparing to others. » Find time to talk with individually to help work through problems or discuss issues.
Cognitive	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Intellectual development is expanding to include more abstract thinking (thinking apart from concrete realities, specific objects, or actual instances.) » Becoming skilled in use of logic and cause-and-effect. Are ready for more in-depth longer learning experiences. » Can take responsibility in planning and evaluating their own work. » Can set short term goals, generate options and predict some possible outcomes. » Adult ready-made solutions may be rejected in favor of finding solutions on their own. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Adults who provide supervision and guidance without interference can have a great influence on youth. » Provide opportunities to ask and question things, encourage predicting and problem solving. Help youth find solutions on their own. » Perfect time to let youth take ownership by creating and planning activities and projects. Expect follow through on their duties. » Can begin to give real-life problems to solve. Let them make decisions and evaluate results so they can learn from mistakes and celebrate achievements.

Ages and Stages of Youth Development: Middle Adolescence 15 to 18 years old

Characteristics	Helpful Tips
Physical	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Physical changes are usually accepted. Have overcome physical awkwardness, but some boys still growing rapidly. » Often concerned with body image. Acne, weight, and exercise are also common concerns. » Impressionable where physical appearance is concerned and may be easily misguided by advertising and media emphasis on physical appearance. » Seem to know their physical abilities and talents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Avoid comparison of stature, shape or size or any comments criticizing physical appearance. » Provide experiences related to healthy living including body image, etiquette, grooming, etc. » Still be willing to answer questions about physical changes.
Social	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Desire status among their peer group. » Although they want to be part of a group, also want to be recognized as individuals. » Interested in co-ed activities and dating. » Often want adult leadership roles. » Learning how to make commitments and follow through. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Create a climate of peer support. » Emphasize personal development and leadership skills. » Involve in planning their own programs (including coeducational and group oriented) activities. Hold accountable for success or failure of plans. » Guide, council, provide suggestions or several alternatives rather than giving directions or detailed instructions.
Emotional	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Are beginning got know self as individual. Personal philosophy begins to emerge. » Developing confidence. Feelings of inferiority and inadequacy are common. » Gaining independence and developing firm individual identity. Looking for ways to express uniqueness, but still want approval from peers. » Developing own set of values and beliefs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Allow youth to explore and express their own philosophies. » Counter feelings of inferiority and inadequacy by encouraging youth and helping them see their positive worth. » Let them assume more responsibility and follow through. » Provide opportunities to help explore their identity, values and beliefs. » Encourage them to work in youth/adult partnership to achieve common goals.
Cognitive	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » High level of abstract thinking and problem solving abilities. Can consider many perspectives of a given issue. » Able to imagine how their behavior can impact the future. » Developing community consciousness and well-being of others. » Like to show what they have learned, demonstrate their knowledge and teach others. » Will lose patience with meaningless activities. » Need life planning guidance as beginning to think about leaving home for college, work, career to pursue, and other important decisions about their future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Put youth in real life problem solving situations. Allow to fully discover ideas, make decisions, and evaluate outcomes. » Encourage civic projects that are a service to others. » Provide opportunities to share knowledge and teach others. » Involve them in advisory groups, decision making groups. » Provide vocational and career exploration activities. » Introduce youth to other settings through tours, trips, day visits, etc. May include conferences, visiting businesses, colleges, etc.

Glossary:

Fine motor skills: small movements that use the small muscles of the fingers, toes, wrists, lips, and tongue, they include the use of precise coordinated movements in activities such as writing, buttoning, cutting, tracing, or visual tracking.

Gross motor skills: bigger movements that use the large muscles in the arms, legs, torso, and feet, includes the ability to use large muscle groups to coordinate body movements involved in activities such as walking, running, jumping, throwing, and maintaining balance

Concrete thinking: relating to or involving specific people, things, or actions rather than general ideas or qualities, naming a real thing or class of things

Abstract thinking: relating to or involving general ideas or qualities rather than specific people, objects, or actions
E.g. the word poem is concrete, poetry is abstract

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