



How Kids Develop

Ages and Stages of Youth Development

Children Show Common Characteristics of Youth Development

Certain characteristics are common to Children at each age level. Although children differ in the rate at which they develop, the order of the stages does not vary. While it is extremely important to remember that every child is unique and special in his or her own right, some needs and interests are universal to all children to ensure successful development.

We all need to:

- Experience a positive self-concept.
- Experience success in what we attempt to do.
- Become increasingly independent.
- Develop and accept our own sex and gender identity.
- Give and receive attention.
- Experience adventure.
- Be accepted by people of different ages-peers as well as those in authority.

These needs continue from infancy through old age. Other needs vary for different children and different ages.

Age appropriateness refers to how well a youth development program matches its educational offerings with the universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children. Children's development proceeds in stages. Each stage is distinct, characterized by abilities, attitudes, and priorities that are qualitatively different from those of preceding and subsequent stages.

From kindergarten through high school, youth pass through four developmental stages. Specialists often identify these stages as:

- Early Childhood: Ages 5-8
- Middle Childhood: Ages 9-11
- Early Adolescence: Ages 12-14
- Middle Adolescence: Ages 15-18

Please remember: Children develop at their own pace, and not all characteristics will be observed in all children at the same age or at the same stage of development.

For each child, consider uniqueness, needs and interests.

To do this, keep in mind the following two basic development principles.

1. Age is not a perfect predictor of maturity. Most children go through a predictable order, but ages at which they do this will vary enormously. An activity that is well within the capability of one child may be much too difficult for another child exactly the same age. Providing a choice of activities or providing multiple levels of difficulty within one activity is the ideal.
2. Growth may proceed at different rates in various developmental areas within an individual child. A child who is advanced physically may be average in terms of mental ability and below average in terms of emotional and social growth. A child may need different experiences in each of these areas to reach his or her full potential.

Ages 5-8, Early Childhood

Understanding and Working with Youth: What are they like?

Characteristic of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Are at a period of slow, steady growth.	Use active learning experiences
Learn best if physically active.	Provide activities that encourage physical activity: running, moving, playing games, cutting with scissors, painting, pasting, brushing, and assembling.
Are learning how to use their bodies by mastering physical skills.	Use small and large muscle activities.
Are more interested in process than product. Interested in doing activities other than creating a specific product or “doing well” in the activity.	It’s okay for 5- to 8-year-olds to only work on a project rather than complete it.
Are wrapped up in self.	Make-believe activities allow youth to imagine clearly what other people think and feel.
Are learning how to be friends. May have several “best friends.”	Provide a balance of activities, which can be done alone or in small groups that allow for individual attention.
Boys and girls may enjoy playing together.	Involve both sexes in activities.
Thinking is concrete.	Use the senses to help children experience things.
Are easily motivated and eager to try something new.	Plan a wide variety of activities. Plan activities that take a short time to complete, with each experience building on previous activities. Provide a variety of short and specific learning activities involving concrete concepts.
Deal with here and now. Interest span short.	Free time should be planned and encouraged. Move from once activity to another. Alternate high and moderate activity with low. Be very specific and clear with instructions.
Are naturally curious and want to make sense of their world.	Allow for exploration and spontaneity in activities.
Sensitive to criticism. Don’t accept failure well.	Provide positive encouragement and assistance. Plan many concrete learning activities in which success can be experienced. Set up situations that foster cooperation and teamwork rather than competition.
Have strong desire for affection and attention of adults. Are moving from dependence on parents to dependence on another adult.	Plan for small group activities with an adult for each three to four youth.
Seek adult approval because not confident enough yet to set their own standards	Offer support to the young people

Ages 9-11, Middle Childhood

Understanding and Working with Youth: What are they like?

Characteristics of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Are quite active with boundless energy.	Emphasize active learning experiences.
Like group activity. Group and club membership is important.	Emphasize group-learning experiences.
Like to be with members of own sex.	Encourage learning experiences to be done with members of the same sex.
Have interests that often change rapidly, jumping from one thing to another.	Encourage many brief learning experiences.
Usually do best when work is presented in small pieces.	Need simple and short directions.
Need guidance from adults to stay at a task to achieve their best performance.	Work closely with this age group.
Admire and imitate older youth.	Encourage apprenticing with older youth; consider using mentors or partners with older youth.
Are easily motivated and eager to try something new.	Provide a wide variety of learning experiences.
Do not like to keep records and do not see the value in them.	Need assistance and close supervision in completing records. Keep recording simple and basic.
Like symbols, ceremonies, and songs.	Hold initiation and installation ceremonies for new members and officers.
Are extremely curious, 9- to 11-year-olds constantly ask "why".	Do not answer all their questions. They will learn by finding some answers on their own. Encourage a few to find answers and report to the group.
Enjoy cooperation.	Plan activities so that youth work together sometimes.
Show independence by disobedience, back talk, and rebelliousness.	When you notice these characteristics, allow youth to show independence. Ask them in which activities they would like to participate, and give individual attention. Provide choices.
Need recognition and praise for doing good work.	Present recognition in front of peers and parents.
Have feelings of competence that enhance self-concept.	Provide activities that will let youth succeed. Recognize them for their accomplishments.
Don't like comparisons with others.	Instead of comparing youth to each other, compare present to past performance of the individual.
Can direct a single familiar activity.	Need adult support.
Have limited decision-making ability.	Need adult guidance. Need to know steps and how to carry them out modeled.

Ages 12-14, Early Adolescence

Understanding and Working with Youth: What are they like?

Characteristics of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Are concerned about physical development, being liked by friends, social graces, and good grooming (even though they don't like to admit it).	Encourage learning experiences related to understanding oneself and getting along with others. Be willing to talk about physical changes.
Change at different rates, according to highly individual "clocks." Can be painfully self-conscious and critical. Are vulnerable to bouts of low self esteem.	They need many varied opportunities to achieve and to have their competence recognized by others.
Are self-conscious with many needing help to overcome inferiority complexes.	Concentrate on developing individual skills.
Have intense feelings related to sex. Keen interest in their own bodies, especially sex and sex processes	Prepare opportunities to help youth discuss body development as a natural and normal process. Provide the opportunity for discussion of human sexuality to ease anxiety associated with a developing body.
Experience emotions that are on a roller coaster ride. Change in hormones and changes in thinking contribute to the mood swings.	Accept the feelings that they have. Remember that early adolescents are known for their drama, and their feelings may seem extreme at times.
Desire a sense of independence, yet they want and need their parents' help.	Encourage youth to work with adults and older teens to complete learning experiences and apprenticing.
Like fan clubs. Many have older or adult idols.	Encourage youth to work with or apprentice to older teens and adults. Create partners or mentors.
Still depend on parental guidelines.	Involve youth in deciding on own group rules. Give them parameters to follow.
Are beginning to question authority and values of parents.	Be willing to spend time to discuss values and morals.
Peer pressure mounts, first from same sex, then from opposite sex.	Use peer pressure as a positive influence. Use the group to influence non-participation. Have the group give encouragement to individuals.
Are interested in activities involving boys and girls.	Encourage learning experiences involving boys and girls.
Are interested in sports and active games.	Encourage active, fun-learning experiences.
Are ready for in-depth, longer learning experiences.	Encourage deeper exploration of leadership roles; encourage more detailed recordkeeping of leadership experiences.
Can take responsibility in planning and evaluating their own work.	Allow members to plan activities. Expect follow through. Help them evaluate the outcome. Let members have responsibility for group activity.
Can plan their own social and recreational activities.	Form planning committees to plan parties and other social activities. Give experience in working in groups.
May avoid difficult tasks.	Help youth choose tasks at which they can succeed. Encourage them to participate in all tasks. Assist youth in eliminating their fears. Help them succeed in solving and participating in difficult tasks.
Want to get outside of their own community to explore.	Provide learning experiences outside of the community.
Are getting over the age of fantasy. Beginning to think of what they will do when they grow up, but are often unclear of needs and values.	Relate life skills to career choices. Provide opportunities to learn about college and career options
Gain skills in social relations with peers and adults.	Provide opportunities for interaction with peers and adults. Provide activities that would foster social interaction.

Ages 15-18, Middle Adolescence

Understanding and Working with Youth: What are they like?

Characteristics of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Have high social needs and desires.	Put more emphasis on personal development (mental and social) wherever possible.
Want and need a strong voice in planning own programs.	Provide suggestions and several alternatives rather than detailed instructions.
Need freedom from parental control to make decisions.	Make youth aware that in these situations they are making decisions for themselves or a group like themselves.
Want adult leadership roles.	Emphasize guidance and counseling from adult leaders rather than directions. Recommend liberal use of discussion method.
Quite interested in coeducational activities.	Plan coeducational and group-oriented projects or activities.
Strong desire for status in peer group	Make sure youth are encouraged by peers. Help establish a climate that is conducive to encouragement.
Are restricting areas of interest; patterns of interest becoming more definite.	Projects can have considerably more depth. May need to suggest related areas to give youth a broader outlook.
Reach high levels of abstract thinking and problem solving. Can choose purposes, make plans, carry them out, and evaluate the results.	Put youth into real life problem-solving situations. Allow them to fully discover ideas, make decisions, and evaluate the outcomes.
Have widespread feelings of inferiority and inadequacy.	Counter the feelings of inferiority and inadequacy by encouraging youth and helping them to see their positive worth.
Are beginning to know self as individual. Personal philosophy begins to emerge.	Allow time for youth to explore and express their own philosophies. Use activities that have them search for experiences that will allow them to identify their philosophies.
Are developing community consciousness.	Recommend civic projects that are a service to others.
Are developing a growing concern for the well being and progress of other individuals and groups.	Encourage interest in and discussion of community and world problems in which they express concern.
Need life planning guidance.	Include activities and information regarding life planning.
Are beginning to think of leaving home for college, employment, marriage, etc.	Put emphasis on consumer and financial management.
Many will leave the community for employment, and many who go to college will not return to their present communities after graduation.	Need to introduce youth to other settings through tours and trips to state and interstate conferences.
Are interested in travel and adventure.	For incentives, provide trips, rather than medals and ribbons.

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