

Understanding Children and Adolescents

Knowing and understanding the young people served by the Club is essential for all youth development professionals. Successfully developing and implementing quality programs requires a broad understanding of the general qualities characterizing young people of different ages and gender. In addition, you should learn as much as possible about the backgrounds – socioeconomic, educational, racial and cultural – and families of the youth being served. Following is some general information about the developmental characteristics of children and adolescents. Specific information about the young people in the community you serve is necessary to supplement these descriptions.

It is important to remember that the descriptions presented here are only a guide. Young people grow and develop at their own rates. Understanding the developmental characteristics of an age group is extremely helpful when designing programs. For example, activities requiring a long attention span are not usually suitable for younger children. It is also important to remain alert and responsive to individual differences among young people.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH

Following are examples of developmental characteristics of young people ages 6-9, 10-12, 13-15 and 16-18. While reviewing the developmental characteristics, write down some of your own observations about each age group, using the space provided at the end of each section. Discuss your observations and their program implications with other members of your staff.

Ages 6-9

Physical Development

- High energy and activity level.
- Show increased competence in motor skills. Boys may outperform girls in activities using large muscles (e.g., throwing, kicking), while girls are often better at skills requiring flexibility and balance (e.g., jumping rope) and fine movements (e.g., drawing).
- A great deal of overlap exists between boys and girls at this age. Gender differences are often quite small.
- Instruction in fundamental motor skills is needed for both boys and girls.
- Work hard to develop new skills. Enjoy practicing acquired skills.
- Physical growth is slow and consistent. Boys are slightly ahead of girls in both weight and height.
- Less developed motor skills and attention span require short, simple physical activities.
- Engage in low-structured, self-directed, competitive play. Can accept very simple rules, directions, limits and supervision.

Cognitive Development

- Eager to learn and learn best through active participation.
- Thinking becomes more creative and flexible and is beginning to consider several aspects of a situation instead of focusing on just one (e.g., when playing a game, rules are understood).
- Can reason well enough to understand adult expectations and requests for appropriate behavior.
- Show increased ability to pay attention and are getting better at attending to the relevant aspects of a task and ignoring distractions. (Hyperactive children may need help keeping their attention focused.)
- Start to feel that their opinions count. (It helps develop self-esteem).

Emotional Development

- Very susceptible to having hurt feelings and are highly emotional.

- May show fear of going to school.
- May have limited attention span.
- Need reliable, consistent adults around them.
- Need praise and approval to be assured that adults are concerned about their welfare.
- Desire instant gratification.
- Eager to please adults.

Social Development

- Like group activities.
- Anxious to please and show consideration of others.
- Begin to experience a new awareness of individual differences.
- Prefer playing with other children or adults, rather than being alone.
- An increasing amount of time is spent interacting with peers, most often in single-gender groups.
- Play groups tend to be small in number.
- Need to learn how to make and keep friends with boys and girls.
- Can be sympathetic and emphatic.

Other Developmental Characteristics

(Record your observations.)

Ages 10-12

Physical Development

- Puberty starts. This is a period of rapid growth and bodily change: fidget, squirm and have trouble sitting still. Require lots of physical activity.

- The growth spurt (puberty) generally begins two years earlier in girls than boys. By age 11, most girls have caught up with or surpassed boys in both weight and height.
- Begin to show bodily changes associated with puberty.
- Need opportunities to achieve and be recognized for their competence.
- First experiences with team sports are appropriate.

Cognitive Development

- Experience inconsistencies as they adjust to a new mind and body.
- Shift from immature to mature thinking. Begin to discover the power of logic and reasoning.
- Exhibit ability to imagine beyond immediate environment (e.g., imagine a world without war).
- Realize that fairness cannot be quantified and measured.
- Conversation leads to an exchange of ideas. Are better able to understand other people's points of view.
- Like to spend more time talking with their parents. It is important that they feel their opinion counts.
- Girls are more communicative than boys.

Emotional Development

- Start seeking independence and establishing individuality.
- Want a voice in decisions affecting their life.
- Likely to show awkwardness, self-consciousness and bouts of low self-esteem.
- Begin developing mature relationships with siblings.
- Become self-conscious of their appearance. Girls often feel less attractive.
- Need praise and approval to be assured that adults are concerned about their welfare.
- May feel self-conscious (that everyone is looking at them).

Social Development

- Have a desire to fit in. Being well-liked is important.
- Are likely to form cliques with others.
- Want to be with friends without adult supervision.
- Feel that peer pressure is constantly present.
- May begin experimenting with alcohol, smoking and sex.
- Appreciate that conversation leads to an exchange of ideas to better understand other people's point of view.

Other Developmental Characteristics

(Record your observations.)

Ages 13-15

Physical Development

- Puberty continues. Boys begin their growth spurt, and typically surpass girls in height and weight by age 15.
- Controlling acne and body odor are concerns for many teens.
- Regular exercise and games help develop coordination, reduce stress and provide an outlet for excess energy.
- Develop habits that affect their lifelong level of physical fitness.
- Motor skills increase through physical activity.
- Develop clumsiness due to rapid physical development.
- Understand how to prevent illness, but are often unable to apply this knowledge to themselves.

- Many begin to smoke, drink or take drugs at this time.
- Extremely aware of differences between their own development and that of their peers, and may be sensitive.
- Learn to understand appropriate physical risks.
- Develop poor eating habits.

Cognitive Development

- Begin abstract thinking. May be deficient in problem-solving, analytical thinking and writing.
- Learn from doing; expand their knowledge, experience and competence through academic activities and achievement.
- The distance between those who are succeeding and those who are failing in school is magnified.
- Girls may begin failing at school.
- Parents start to have less influence.
- Decreased evidence of creativity and flexibility.
- Evidence of peer conformity ("fitting in").

Emotional Development

- Crave freedom.
- Adept at "masking" their true state of mind.
- Often give neutral responses about whether they are happy or sad.
- Intense desire for privacy.
- Rapid hormone and body changes can lead to lowered self-esteem and confidence.
- Seek independence but still need structure and limits from parents/adults.
- Experience sexual desire and begin experimentation.
- Need praise and approval to be assured that adults are concerned about their welfare.

Social Development

- Friendship and romance become increasingly important.
- Realize that others have different points of view. Outlook may be colored by self-interest.

- Begin to define who they are.
- Show increased communication and negotiation skill.
- Experience an increase in capacity for meaningful relationships with peers and adults.
- Begin to explore rights and responsibilities.
- Peer pressure is at its peak.
- Want to be with older teens.
- Same sex groups socialize together.
- Parents start to have less influence.

Other Developmental Characteristics

(Record your observations)

Ages 16-18

Physical Development

- Boys' growth has doubled since age 12. They are considerably taller and heavier than girls.
- Learn to take and manage appropriate physical risks.
- Have increased appetite. However, eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia may appear. Females are more likely to suffer from these disorders.
- Life patterns may become consistent at this age.

Cognitive Development

- Begin to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills.
- Want to think out their own decisions.
- Are concerned about issues relating to the purpose and meaning of life.

- Can manipulate a number of variables at once.
- Are developing an identity involving career choice, beliefs and values.
- Very limited evidence of creativity.
- Increased evidence of peer conformity.
- Need new experiences.

Emotional Development

- Never outgrow the need for parents' love, care and respect. Generally maintain strong ties with their families.
- Develop a sense of personal identity and continue to develop their self-esteem.
- Self-competencies such as coping, decision-making and stress management are developed.
- Thinking/worrying about their adult life increases.
- Friendships are based more on real intimacy – sharing thoughts and feelings – rather than simply doing things together.
- Are experiencing strong sexual feelings.

Social Development

- Highest degree of independence developed and demonstrated.
- As susceptibility to peer pressure declines, parent-teen conflicts decrease.
- Cooperation and communication increases.
- Quest for identity takes on a form of exploration and experimentation.
- Take up causes (e.g., local community agendas, environment, volunteer work).
- Are obsessed about their appearance (brand-name conscious).
- Want to distinguish themselves from the crowd.
- Begin forming heterosexual groups and pair up socially. Strong same-sex friendships also continue to exist.
- Typically have a large circle of acquaintances and small circles of intimate friends.