

Developmental Characteristics of Young Adolescents

Adolescence is a critical time of identity formation. With the onset of puberty comes an explosion of growth—physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual. Understanding the nature and scope of adolescent development and responding appropriately requires patience, empathy, and a sense of humor. Young people “progress” through adolescence, no two following the same pathway. Most sixth graders show signs of emerging traits, while many eighth graders exhibit more pronounced characteristics. The characteristics listed on this tip sheet are descriptors, not predictors.

As a parent or guardian, you are the *primary* influence in your child’s life during the formative years of early adolescence, regardless of what she or he may say. Your child needs you to stay engaged in her or his life while also giving her or him space to grow. Communication is the key: listen and keep the conversations going. Whether serious or silly, conversation matters!

Physical



- experience onset of puberty, develop secondary sex characteristics
- grow rapidly, are often clumsy and uncoordinated
- become highly self-conscious, body image can affect self-image
- fluctuate between hyperactivity and lethargy
- need physical activity

Cognitive-Intellectual



- develop ability to think abstractly, but many still think in literal terms
- develop critical thinking skills and become more self-aware, self-critical
- exhibit increased communication skills
- become argumentative and demonstrate an intense need to be “right”
- develop decision-making skills and want a voice in their choices
- show intense focus on a new interest but lack discipline to sustain it

Emotional



- are unpredictable emotionally, are sensitive and prone to outbursts
- are vulnerable to emotional pleas and can be easily manipulated
- exhibit an increasing capacity for empathy
- experience increasing sexual feelings, may engage in sexual behavior without realizing consequences

Social-Interpersonal



- display a more developed social consciousness
- are more aware of relationships and have a strong need to belong
- exhibit desire for independence and autonomy
- experience a shift in dependence on family to dependence on peers
- able to critically compare parents with others
- seek deeper friendships based on shared interests, loyalty
- experience increased interest in opposite sex, though may often feel uncomfortable and awkward with the other sex

Moral



- tend to be legalistic, focusing on “rules” and “fairness”
- retain moral beliefs of parents but begin to test rules of childhood
- are influenced by the values of peers
- form a more personal conscience, seek moral criteria that make sense to them
- exhibit a stronger sense of responsibility toward larger society

Spiritual



- exhibit “affiliative faith” (faith identity shaped by family and community)
- are open to service opportunities primarily to connect with peers, test skills
- can be open to new prayer experiences
- seek adult role models who live their faith authentically
- desire a deeper relationship with God
- begin moving away from religious imagery, beliefs, and practices of childhood; may begin to explore new images of God

Being an Empathetic Parent

- In which areas of development is your child strong? struggling? How can you support his or her growth or express understanding for his or her struggles?
- Recall what it was like to be her or his age. What is it like for her or him today? How can you relate? What is different?
- Years from now, when your child reflects on his or her teen years, how will he or she remember you? How does your child’s relationship with you help to shape his or her identity and beliefs?

(The information on this tip sheet is from *Discovering: Coordinator’s Manual*, by Thomas Zanzig, with Brian Singer-Towns [Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1999], pages 72–76. Copyright © 1999 by Saint Mary’s Press. All rights reserved.)