

Developmental Characteristics of Young Adolescents

Adolescence is a critical time of identity formation. With the onset of puberty comes an explosion of growth of many kinds: 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.

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

Intellectual

- develop the ability to think abstractly, but many still think in literal terms
- develop critical thinking skills and become more self-aware and 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 the 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

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

Spiritual

- exhibit “affiliative faith” (faith identity shaped by family and community)
- open to service opportunities primarily to connect with peers and test skills
- 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 a Teacher and Mentor

- Consider the students in your class and the six areas of growth. In which areas are they strong? Struggling? How can you support their growth?
- Recall what it was like to be their age. What is it like for them today? How can you relate? What is different?
- Years from now, when they reflect on these times with you, how will the students remember you? How will their time with you help shape their identity and beliefs?

