



Understanding and Working With Youth

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Certain characteristics are common to youth at each age level. While the rate of development may vary, the order of stages does not. Every young person is unique. However, there are various needs and milestones universal to all youth. Keep these in mind when working with youth to promote successful development.

Development is sequential, continuous and gradual. Each stage is distinct, characterized by abilities and attitudes that are different from the stages before and after. Youth develop at different rates, so age and grade level are not perfect predictors of maturity. What one youth is capable of doing may be too difficult for another of the exact same age.

4 Developmental Stages

- **Early Childhood:** Ages 5 to 8 (Grades K to 3)
- **Middle Childhood:** Ages 9 to 11 (Grades 4 to 6)
- **Early Adolescence:** Ages 12 to 14 (Grades 7 to 9)
- **Adolescence:** Ages 15 to 18 (Grades 10 to 12)

Age appropriateness refers to how effectively a program matches its learning objectives based on the predictable sequences of youth development. Each developmental stage has four areas of development impacting individual learning.

4 Areas of Development

- **Physical:** Growing and maturing of body and brain
- **Social:** Interacting with others and responding in social settings
- **Emotional:** Understanding, recognizing and expressing emotions
- **Intellectual:** Thinking, learning and processing information

Growth in these four areas may proceed at different rates in an individual. For example, a youth who is advanced physically may be average in terms of intellectual ability and below average in terms of emotional and social growth. Youth may need different learning experiences in each of these areas to help them reach their full potential.

Remember: Youth develop at their own pace, and not all characteristics will be observed in every individual of the same age or developmental stage.

Guidelines for Events and Activities

- Include time for youth to learn by doing
- Offer a variety of learning experiences to include different learning styles: auditory, visual, verbal, physical and logical
- Build on past experiences and apply learning to new experiences
- Provide opportunities that motivate and challenge youth in each area of development

Importance

Selecting applicable and suitable activities is critical for successful learning. Engaged learning leads to higher levels of motivation, creativity and confidence. Age appropriate experiences promote fun and engaging learning opportunities for youth. Understanding ages and stages of development helps cultivate a thriving youth development program.

Tip: Providing a choice of activities or offering multiple levels of difficulty within one activity is ideal.



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Physical Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|--|---|---|
| Learn to master physical skills | Control large muscles better than small muscles | Incorporate running, moving and playing games that encourage continued development of large muscles. |
| | Learn best if physically active | Include active learning experiences (painting, pasting, brushing and assembling) to develop small motor skills. |



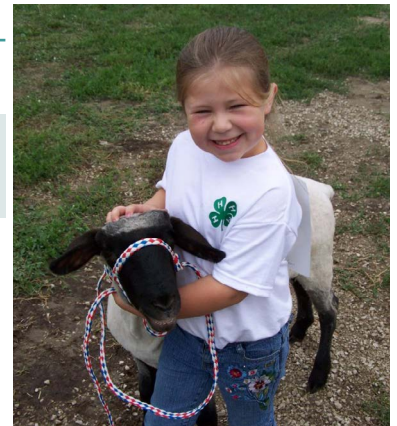
Social Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Learn how to be friends | May have multiple “best friends” | Form groups of three to four to allow for individual attention. Have an older youth with each group. |
| | Boys and girls may enjoy playing together | Encourage mixed-gender activities. |
| | Fighting occurs but does not last long | Use role-playing or make-believe activities to promote empathy. |



Emotional Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Learn to manage own emotions | Wrapped up in self and seek approval from adults | Provide positive encouragement and assistance. |
| | Easily motivated and eager to try something new | Plan concrete activities where everyone can experience success. |
| | Sensitive to criticism, does not like to fail, and goes out of their way to avoid punishment | Foster cooperation and teamwork rather than competition. |



Intellectual Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|--|---|--|
| Learn to manage attention and follow directions | Short attention span | Plan activities that take a short time to complete. Be very specific and clear with instructions. |
| | Naturally curious and want to make sense of their world | Allow for exploration and asking lots of questions. |
| | More interested in doing activities than “doing well” | Focus on the process, not the final product. Maybe only work on a project rather than complete it. |



Physical Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|--|----------------------------|--|
| Master small muscle (fine motor) coordination | Very active | Emphasize hands-on experiences. |
| | Moving all the time | Include real-life objects when teaching. |
| | Sitting still is difficult | Provide opportunities for physical activities such as hammering and playing instruments. |



Social Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Learn empathy | Enjoy group activities but may not understand others' views | Incorporate group learning experiences and encourage the sharing of many viewpoints. |
| | Most comfortable in same-gender groups | Assign youth to same-gender groups when possible. |
| | Look up to older youth and imitate their behavior | Encourage mentoring with older youth. |
| | Like symbols, ceremonies and songs | Hold initiation and installation ceremonies. |



Emotional Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Achieve a "personal best" | Need recognition and praise for doing good work and do not like comparisons with others | Emphasize individual strengths and progress. Compare present to past performance of the individual. |
| | Show independence by disobedience and back talk | Give choices and provide individual attention. |
| | Enhanced feelings of self-competence | Allow youth to make decisions about what they make, do and use. |



Intellectual Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Learn to stay on task | Interests often change rapidly, jumping from one thing to another | Use simple, short directions to facilitate brief learning experiences. |
| | Need guidance from adults | Provide assistance and close supervision. |
| | Extremely curious and ask "why?" frequently | Do not answer all their questions in order to promote self-discovery. |
| | Learn by finding answers on their own | Encourage a few youth to find and report answers to the group. |

Physical Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Achieve a healthy body image | May experience growth spurt during puberty | Offer projects that require more coordination. |
| | Concerned and critical about their body image and personal hygiene habits | Avoid activities that lead to youth comparing their physical characteristics to others. |



Social Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|--|---|--|
| Balance positive and negative peer pressure | Prefer activities with boys and girls | Encourage co-educational learning. |
| | More interested in what their peers say than advice from adults; worried about being liked by friends | Provide activities that foster social interaction with peers and adults. Encourage youth-adult partnerships. |
| | Opinionated, but still depend on parental guidelines | Involve youth in deciding group rules but give them parameters to follow. |
| | Feel in control about technology | Discuss their online friends and social media use. |



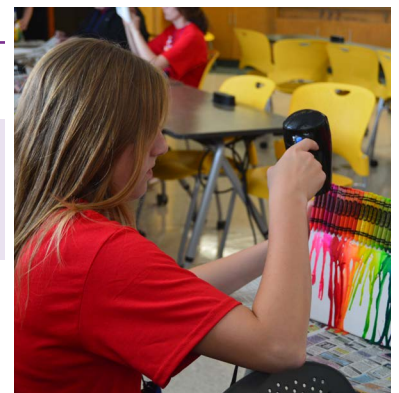
Emotional Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|--|---|---|
| Learn to overcome feelings of inferiority | Self-critical; compare themselves to others with bouts of low self-esteem | Provide varied opportunities to achieve and have their competence recognized by others. |
| | Experience “rollercoaster ride” of emotions and mood swings | Recognize and accept their feelings, even if their feelings may seem extreme at times. |
| | Desire independence but want and need parental guidance | Encourage youth to find a mentor. |
| | Self-conscious | Concentrate on developing individual skills. |



Intellectual Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Ability for complex thought | Unsure of their needs and values for future career | Relate life skills to career choices. |
| | Can take responsibility in planning and evaluating their own work | Allow youth to plan group activities. Expect follow-through but help them assess the outcome. |
| | Can plan their own recreational activities; want to explore outside their community | Form planning committees to organize social activities. Provide learning outside the community. |
| | Highly creative | Give youth raw materials and let them create. |



Physical Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Learn to self-regulate | Approaching maturity; easily misguided by social media and the emphasis placed on appearance | Avoid comments comparing body shapes/sizes. Be willing to answer questions about physical changes. |
| | Pleasure seeking is appealing, and controlling impulses is difficult due to rapid brain development | Include opportunities to engage body and mind (mindfulness, yoga, meditation, journaling). |



Social Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|---|---|---|
| Balance individuality and social group roles | Desire status among peer groups | Establish a culture in which youth support and encourage their peers. |
| | Interested in co-educational socializing and acceptance | Provide group-oriented projects, activities and games. |
| | Developing community consciousness | Incorporate service learning projects. |



Emotional Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|--|---|---|
| Develop own set of values and beliefs | Widespread feelings of inadequacy | Help them see their positive worth. |
| | Strive to earn responsibility and respect from others | Help them explore their identity and develop individual skills. |
| | Want and need a strong voice in planning their own programs | Provide suggestions and alternatives rather than detailed instructions. |
| | Beginning to know self as an individual | Allow time for youth to explore and express their own views. |



Intellectual Development

| Goal | Characteristics | Application |
|---|---|---|
| Engage in abstract and future thinking | Interested in adventure and traveling as incentives | Provide trips rather than medals or ribbons. |
| | Narrowing areas of interest for career exploration | Explore opportunities for after high school. |
| | Enjoy setting goals based on their needs or interests | Put youth into real-life, problem-solving situations. Allow them to fully discover ideas, make decisions and evaluate outcomes. |



Activity

Imagine next month you are responsible for planning a club event with members from each age group participating. Think through and plan how you can design the experience so all members are engaged.



Event: _____

Ages 5 to 8 (Grades K to 3)

Ages 9 to 11 (Grades 4 to 6)

Ages 12 to 14 (Grades 7 to 9)

Ages 15 to 18 (Grades 10 to 12)

References

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