



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.



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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.

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.



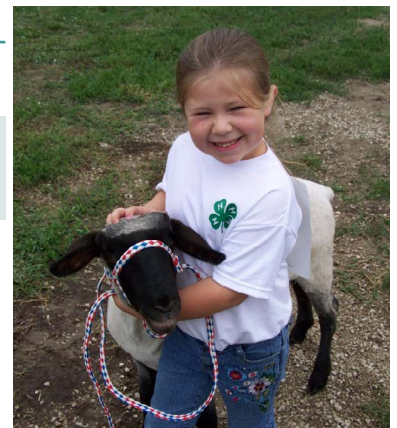
Social Development

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 eventually separate	Encourage mixed-gender activities.
	Fighting occurs but does not last long	Use role-playing or make-believe activities to promote empathy.



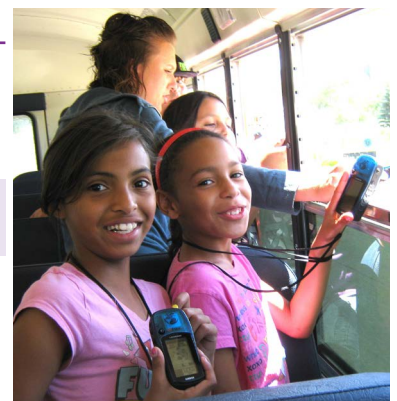
Emotional Development

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, do not like to fail, and go 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.
	Multitasking is challenging	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 apprenticing 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.



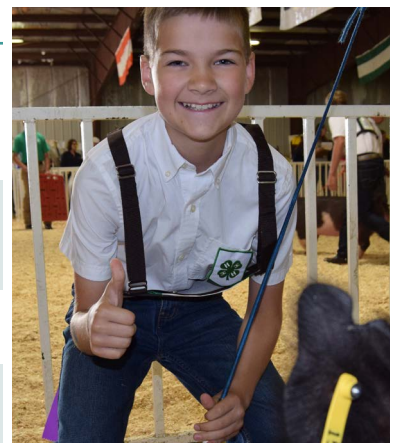
Social Development

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.
	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.



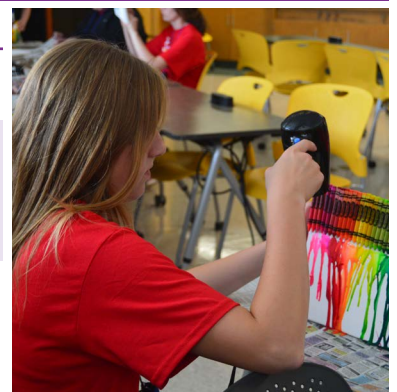
Emotional Development

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 apprentice with adults and older teens.
	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 members 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 work opportunities and colleges.
	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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