

Who Are the KIDS in the Middle?

KIDS ARE THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING WE DO



A Resource for Middle Level Educators

Characteristics of Young Adolescents

Youth between the ages of 10 and 15 are characterized by their diversity as they move through the pubertal growth cycle at varying times and rates. Yet, as a group, they reflect important developmental characteristics that have major implications for parents, educators, and others who care for them and seek to promote their healthy growth and positive development.

In the area of ***Physical Development***, young adolescents:

- Experience rapid, irregular physical growth.
- Undergo bodily changes that may cause awkward, uncoordinated movements.
- Have varying maturity rates, with girls tending to begin puberty one and one-half to two years earlier than boys, and young adolescents in some cultural groups, such as African Americans, tending to begin puberty earlier than those in other groups.
- Experience restlessness and fatigue due to hormonal changes.
- Need daily physical activity because of increased energy, and if not actively engaged in regular physical activity, often lack fitness, with poor levels of endurance, strength, and flexibility.
- Need to release energy, often engaging in sudden, apparently meaningless outbursts of activity.
- Have preference for junk food, but need good nutrition.
- May be prone to risky dieting practices, especially among European-American youth, in order to lose or gain weight.
- Continue to develop sexual awareness that increases with the onset of menstruation, the growth spurt, and the appearance of secondary sex characteristics.
- Are concerned with bodily changes that accompany sexual maturation and with changes such as increased nose size, protruding ears, long arms, and awkward posture, concerns magnified by comparison with peers.
- Have an increased need for comprehensive, medically accurate education about sexuality and health issues that responds to these increased concerns.
- Are physically vulnerable because they may adopt poor health habits or engage in experimentation with alcohol and other drugs and with high-risk sexual behaviors.

In the area of ***Cognitive-Intellectual Development***, young adolescents:

- Display a wide range of individual intellectual development.
- Increasingly are able to think abstractly; both concrete and abstract thinking styles may be evident in the same young adolescent, depending on the issue or situation.
- Commonly face decisions that require more sophisticated cognitive and social-emotional skills.
- Are intensely curious and have a wide range of intellectual pursuits, although few are - or need to be - sustained.
- Prefer active over passive learning experiences; depending on their cultural backgrounds, some young adolescents, such as Native American youth, may be quite engaged in learning through observation but not show this engagement through active participation.
- Prefer interaction with peers during learning activities.
- May show disinterest in conventional academic subjects but are intellectually curious about the world and themselves.
- Respond positively to opportunities to connect what they are learning to participation in real life situations, such as community service projects.
- Develop an increasingly more accurate understanding of their current personal abilities, but may prematurely close doors to future exploration in particular interest areas due to feeling inadequate in comparison to peers.
- Are inquisitive about adults and are keen observers of them; depending on their cultural upbringing, some young adolescents also may often challenge adults' authority.
- Are developing a capacity to understand higher levels of humor, some of which may be misunderstood by adults to be overly sarcastic or even aggressive.

exploration

In the area of *Moral Development*, young adolescents:

- Are in transition from moral reasoning that focuses on “what’s in it for me” to that which considers the feelings and rights of others; self-centered moral reasoning may be in evidence at the same time as other-or principle-oriented reasoning, depending on the situation the young adolescent is in; in addition, cultural differences in the socialization of moral development, especially among young adolescents whose families are recent immigrants, may contribute to special moral conflicts or dilemmas for those young people attempting to navigate multiple cultures.
- Increasingly are capable of assessing moral matters in shades of grey as opposed to viewing them in the black and white terms more characteristic of younger children; however, this increased potential for more complex moral reasoning may often not be evident in practice.
- Are generally idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make a meaningful contribution to a cause or issue larger than themselves.
- Often show compassion for those who are downtrodden or suffering and have special concern for animals and the environmental problems that our world faces.
- Are capable of, and value, direct experience in participatory democracy.
- Owing to their lack of experience, are often impatient with the pace of change, underestimating the difficulties in making desired social changes.
- Are likely to believe in, and espouse, values such as honesty, responsibility, and cultural acceptance, while at the same time learning that they and the people they admire also can be morally inconsistent, and can lie or cheat, avoid responsibility, and be intolerant.
- At times are quick to see flaws in others but slow to acknowledge their own faults.
- Are often interested in exploring spiritual matters, even as they may become distant from formal religious organizations; for many youth, however, especially African Americans, connection to religious organizations may continue to be a vital part of early adolescence.
- Are moving from acceptance of adult moral judgments to development of their own personal values; nevertheless, they tend to embrace major values consonant with those of their parents and other valued adults.
- Rely on parents and significant adults for advice, especially when facing major decisions.
- Greatly need, and are influenced by, trustworthy adult role models who will listen to them and affirm their moral consciousness and actions.
- Are increasingly aware of, concerned about, and vocal about inconsistencies between values exhibited by adults and the conditions they see in society.

In the area of *Psychological Development*, young adolescents:

- Are often preoccupied with self.
- Who have been socialized in European-American culture seek to become increasingly independent, searching for adult identity and acceptance, but they continue to need support and boundary-setting from adults; young adolescents from other cultural backgrounds, such as Hispanic or Asian American youth, may be as focused or more focused on their social obligations and roles in the family and other groups than they are on independence.
- May experience a significant increase in their awareness of, and the importance they give to, their ethnic identity.
- Experience levels of self-esteem that may fluctuate up and down, but in general are adequate and increase over time; in contrast, levels of belief in self-competence in academic subjects, sports, and creative activities - often decline significantly from the levels of middle childhood.
- Believe that personal problems, feelings, and experiences are unique to themselves.
- Tend to be self-conscious and highly sensitive to personal criticism.
- Desire recognition for their positive efforts and achievements. Exhibit intense concern about physical growth and maturity as profound physical changes occur.
- Increasingly behave in ways associated with their sex as traditional sex role identification strengthens for most young adolescents; some young adolescents may question their sexual identities.
- Are curious about sex, and have sexual feelings, and need to know that these are normal.
- Are psychologically vulnerable, because at no other stage in development are they more likely to encounter and be aware of so many differences between themselves and others.

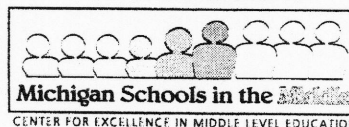
- Are also psychologically resilient; across diversities in race/ethnicity, residence, or socioeconomic status, young adolescents tend to be optimistic and have a generally positive view of their personal futures.

In the area of ***Social-Emotional Development***, young adolescents:

- Have a strong need for approval and may be easily discouraged.
- Are increasingly concerned about peer acceptance.
- Often overreact to ridicule, embarrassment, and rejection.
- Are dependent on the beliefs and values of parents and other valued adults, but seek to make more of their own decisions.
- Like fads, especially those shunned by adults.
- Have a strong need to belong to a group, with approval of peers becoming as important as adult approval, and on some matters even more important.
- Also need moderate amounts of time alone, in order to regroup and reflect on daily experiences.
- In their search for group membership, may experience significant embarrassment, ridicule, or rejection from those in other cliques from which they are excluded.
- Can gravitate toward affiliation with disruptive peers or membership in gangs in order to feel part of a group and to protect their physical safety.
- Experiment with new slang and behaviors as they search for a social position within their group, often discarding these “new identities” at a later date.
- Experience mood swings, often with peaks of intensity and unpredictability.
- May exhibit immature behavior because their social skills and ability to regulate emotions frequently lag behind their cognitive and physical maturity; among some young adolescents, however, particularly those whose cultural backgrounds value such capacities, their social and emotional skills may be more advanced than their cognitive and physical maturity suggest.
- Must adjust to the social acceptance of early maturing girls and boys, especially if they themselves are maturing at a slower rate.
- If physically maturing earlier than peers, must deal with increased pressure around others’ expectations of them, especially about engaging in high-risk behaviors.
- Often begin to experience feelings of sexual/romantic attraction to others, with some having significant sexual/romantic relationships, and a sizeable minority experiencing sexual behaviors.
- Often experience sexual harassment, bullying, and physical confrontations more than they did in elementary school or will in high school.
- Are often intimidated and frightened by their first middle level school experience because of the large numbers of students and teachers, the size of the building, and what may be for many their first day-to-day experiences with significant proportions of students who are culturally different from them
- Are socially vulnerable, because as they develop their beliefs, attitudes, and values, the emphasis media place on such things as money, fame, power, and beauty (and the majority culture perspectives which most often define those issues) may negatively influence their ideals and values, or encourage them to compromise their beliefs.

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents
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