Engaging and Responding to Young Adolescents:
Connecting Research and Practice

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Who are Young Adolescents?

10- to 15-year-olds who experience rapid and significant developmental changes
Developmental Characteristics

*Interrelated and overlapping domains:*

- Physical
- Intellectual
- Moral
- Spiritual
- Psychological
- Social-Emotional
Physical Development

- Experience accelerated and uneven physical growth
- Changes in basal metabolism may cause periods of restlessness and fatigue
- May be physically vulnerable due to improper nutrition, poor physical fitness, and health habits
- Develop primary and secondary sex characteristics (puberty)
Physical Development

- Includes significant changes within the brain:
  - Synaptic pruning
  - Development of prefrontal cortex, which handles executive functions such as planning, reasoning, sustaining attention and impulse control
Suggestions for Practice:

- Recognize how physical development relates to young adolescents’ social-emotional and psychological development

- Provide opportunities that encourage exercise and healthy lifestyle

- Provide access to water and nutritious food during the school day
Suggestions for Practice:

- Provide appropriate instruction about consequences of high risk behaviors
- Provide opportunities for periods of movement and rest
- Avoid competition between early and late maturing students
Intellectual Development

- Display a wide range of development including metacognition and independent thought
- Are eager to learn about topic that they finding interesting and relevant
- Progress from concrete logical operations to abstract thought processes
Intellectual Development

- Begin to develop and test hypotheses, analyze and synthesize data, grapple with complex concepts
- Take an ideological stance, argue a position, and challenge adult directives
- Prefer real life and authentic learning experiences
Suggestions for Practice:

- Consider students’ varying intellectual development and individual differences
- Provide appropriate level of cognitive challenge: concrete to abstract
- Offer opportunities for exploration
- Prompt students to reflect and self-assess
Suggestions for Practice:

- Arrange for active learning experiences
- Recognize students’ changing interests
- Provide learning experiences that are authentic and meaningful to students
- Serve as a role model; remember the students are watching
Moral Development

O Tend to be idealistic and possess a strong sense of fairness
O Usually embrace values of parents or key adults
O Move from egocentricity to being able to consider the feelings and rights of others
Moral Development

- View of moral dilemmas may differ by gender: a justice lens vs. an interpersonal care lens
- May pose broad, unanswerable questions about life; refuse to accept trivial responses from adults
- Begin to consider complex moral issues, while less prepared to cope with them...so may struggle to make sound choices
Suggestions for Practice:

- Capitalize on the relationship between cognitive and moral/ethical reasoning
- Engage youth in experiences that prompt consideration of moral and ethical dilemmas
- Offer youth opportunities to participate in democratic practices
Spiritual Development

A developmental process for making meaning of one’s life (Lingley, 2013)

- Young adolescents often want to explore spiritual matters, develop connections between self and others, and gain a sense of themselves and the world.

Suggestions for Practice:

- Rarely referenced in education
- Inclusion depends on commitments to educating the whole child
- Consider mindfulness curriculum or programs for young adolescents, which may help them navigate stress more effectively
Psychological Development

- Is about independence and identity formation
- Depends on exploration and commitment to an identity
- Seek individuality and uniqueness
- May experience an increased awareness of ethnic identity
Psychological Development

- Strive to maintain peer approval
- Are vulnerable due to awareness of differences between self and others
- Often self-conscious and highly sensitive to criticism
- Tend to believe that their personal problems, feelings, and experiences are unique
Suggestions for Practice:

- Assure youth that shifting allegiances are normal
- Acknowledge the importance of friendships
- Provide experiences that build positive self-esteem
- Avoid harsh criticism and humiliation
Suggestions for Practice:

- Support opportunities for identity formation through:
  - formal and non-formal educative experiences
  - organizational structures that promote affiliation with peers
  - exploration of interests
Social-Emotional Development

- Have a strong need to belong to a group and peer approval
- May experiment with new behaviors while seeking social position and personal identity
- May experience feelings of sexual attraction
Social-Emotional Development

- May be rebellious toward parents and adults, yet tend to depend on them.
- May challenge authority and test limits of acceptable behavior.
- Often experience conflicting loyalties to peer group and family.
Suggestions for Practice:

- Recognize the importance of friendships
- Acknowledge that adults compete for attention with peer groups
- Interact with young adolescents in positive and constructive ways
- Offer experiences that promote freedom and independence within a safe space
Suggestions for Practice:

- Teach young adolescents to handle social situations
- Plan activities for youth to argue and debate appropriately
- Provide opportunities for collaborative interactions among youth
Ideas for Engaging and Responding to Young Adolescents
Questions & Resources
Association for Middle Level Education

Website:  www.amle.org

- Offers free resources
  - Advocacy tools
  - Research summaries (e.g., Developmental Characteristics of Young Adolescents)
- Publishes books for purchase
Print Resources


Association for Middle Level Education. (2012). This we believe in action: Implementing successful middle level schools (2nd ed.). Westerville, OH: Author.


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Thank You!

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