

Understanding and Working With Youth

Deb Gebeke

Family Science Specialist

Understanding youth is the first important step toward successfully working with youth of all ages. Knowing what normal development is for each age enables adults to effectively interact with youth. As a parent, educator or youth worker, it is important to keep in mind the following points.

- Children grow at their *own unique rates*. However, there are many general characteristics of children at each age or stage of development. Understand these ages and stages of growth, and you'll be more effective with children.
- Physical growth and maturity are not the same thing. Some of the obnoxious/problem behavior that youth display is actually "normal" and evidence of healthy development.
- Children want to be accepted and respected for who and what they are, not what they do. Tell them you are proud of them for trying, for their interest and concern in the project. Avoid criticism for a job that doesn't meet your standards. Perfection is not the goal. Expect mistakes and let them know it's OK to make mistakes. Encourage them to try again.
- Your perceptions of the task and the child's perception may be very different. Discuss the meanings behind the differing perceptions.
- A sense of humor is a must! A lighthearted attitude (not telling jokes!) and avoidance of panic reactions to problems will preserve the child's dignity and allow learning to take place.
- Minor inappropriate behavior is best ignored. Keep children busy or they *will* act up! They need to feel involved and important. Meaningful involvement is one of the keys to working with youth.
- Your enthusiasm will be contagious if you are genuinely enjoying yourself with the children enjoying themselves as well.

The concept that children at various stages of development tend to concentrate on similar tasks was first presented by Havighurst, and subsequently many child developmentalists adapted the concept in a variety of ways. The following chart compiles some of their work, presenting information as it relates to specific age groups into four components of development (social, emotional, intellectual, physical).

The chart will help you better understand what to expect from the child you are working with, and understanding is the first step toward developing a successful relationship.

Examples of Differing Perceptions

Task	You think/feel	Child thinks/feels
Tree planting.	I can teach the proper method.	This is fun; all the kids are here.
Demonstration or class report.	The child will feel good about him/herself.	I am so afraid!
Athletic event.	Let's be the best team.	I may not score or win.



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North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND 58105

Elementary School Age

	Age 6 to 8	Age 9 to 11
Social	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• wants to please adults• is just beginning to place self within environment and desires a mastery within that environment• is self-centered• prefers same sex groups <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide generous amounts of praise support and encouragement• provide each child opportunities to achieve success	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• wants to take on new responsibilities and may need extra support to succeed• continues to be self-centered• will imitate grown-up behavior (positive and negative)• can understand the concept of taking responsibility within his environment• desires independence, yet needs guidance• has a strong need to belong to groups (more comfortable with same sex groups but is more aware of the opposite sex)• is gradually developing stronger loyalties with friends and experiencing a desire to “go with the crowd” <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• continue support and encouragement as the child ventures into new relationships• avoid feelings of rejection when the child is reaching away from family. Children grow and learn from this stage and need adult support.
Emotional	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• wants adult respect and attention• prefers immediate gratification• needs opportunities to show what she can do and be proud of accomplishments <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• avoid clashing of wills whenever possible	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• is more serious about herself• tends to be very sensitive to sarcasm, ridicule and failure• is very concerned about what is fair• depends on adult approval and recognition for direction• wants to feel needed and valued• displays a wide range of emotions and extreme mood swings at times <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• redirect inappropriate behavior• attempt to view these varied emotional changes as part of growing, not necessarily as a sign of a difficult child• frequently affirm the child's unique abilities, characteristics and value• avoid any use of sarcasm and ridicule

	Age 6 to 8	Age 9 to 11
Intellectual	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is very inquisitive • may often ask questions that do not seem important to adults, though they are very important to the child • thinks in terms of right or wrong, little room for the “gray area” in the middle • prefers short-term projects or goals, difficult to keep attention focused on long-term goals • has a short attention span (10 to 20 minutes) <p>Adults should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allow the child to be actively involved in making plans when possible • provide assistance in learning to solve problems instead of fixing problems for children 	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has a limited attention span (20 to 30 minutes) • has great ideas and intentions but difficulty following through • prefers well organized and planned tasks • enjoys being a part of the planning process <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be certain to include the child’s input in planning • encourage the child to try new activities and guide her through the new ventures • discuss outcomes of the child’s decisions (consequences) and assist in making new plans
Physical	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • varies in his levels of motor development skills • is very active, with high energy levels • prefers activities and hands on experiences instead of being lectured to <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide many varied opportunities for physical activity • provide opportunities to learn by doing, becoming physically involved in learning whenever possible 	<p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has better large muscle control and eye/hand coordination • is very active • may become uncomfortable with body image and puberty changes • is more self-conscious regarding physical abilities and attributes <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be sensitive to the child’s perception of body changes and openly discuss related issues • affirm positive aspects related to maturation and not promote negative stereotypes • accept the wide range of development possible at this age for all children

Junior High

High School

Age 12 to 14

Age 15 to 19

Social

The adolescent:

- is more interested in the opposite sex
- is sensitive to what others are thinking of him
- has a desire to conform to the group
- has difficulty relating the experiences consequences of others' actions to himself (it will never happen to me)

Adults should:

- provide varied learning experiences
- encourage cooperation and understanding among peers
- consistently discuss consequences of actions

The adolescent:

- continues to feel a need to conform but gradually begins to work toward individual goals rather than group desires
- develops an increased interest in community or civic activities
- wants to be respected and thought of on an adult level
- is beginning to balance desire to belong and individuality

Adults should:

- develop an atmosphere that promotes mutual respect
- avoid considering a teen as a child. Address the young person as a "teen" and consider her a "young adult."

Emotional

The adolescent:

- tends to reject domination as she seeks more independence
- resents criticism and put-downs even though she uses them herself
- is easily embarrassed and needs to be put at ease in new situations
- is seeking out adult role models

Adults should:

- provide informal, one-to-one conversation opportunities on a regular basis
- avoid judging the child as "bad" when he behaves immaturely. He is not an adult and needs to be viewed as a teen trying to become an adult.

The adolescent:

- wants more independence and opportunity to make his own choices
- is more interested in assisting others which boosts his own self-esteem
- will strongly resist a controlling adult

Adults should:

- encourage the development of honesty, fairness and responsibility for actions
- avoid judging the child as "bad" when she behaves immaturely. She is not an adult and needs to be viewed as a teen trying to become an adult.

	Age 12 to 14	Age 15 to 19
Intellectual	<p>The adolescent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has a longer attention span (30 to 40 minutes) • is more willing to try new things • is better at planning than executing • believes he has the “right” answer • is beginning to think in the abstract <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consistently give their reasons for the limits set • allow more control in decision making for teens within limits • give choices and discuss decision making regularly 	<p>The adolescent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is closer to adults in attention span (40 to 50 minutes) • is becoming a better judge of her own abilities and skills • develops a better understanding of his world and uses this information in problem solving • may struggle with tasks she cannot find interesting • tends to be idealistic and to believe he is invincible • capacity to think abstractly is developing <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give teens choices within broader limits whenever possible • engage teens in abstract thinking with questions such as, “What if you..”
Physical	<p>The adolescent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is struggling to accept body changes • is preoccupied with physical appearance <p>Adults should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be patient and supportive • gently point out illogical thoughts or misperceptions and avoid sarcasm 	<p>The adolescent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is beginning to accept his unique characteristics • has a continued emphasis on appearance • will continue to experience various rates of growth <p>Adults should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be accepting of each child’s growth rate and uniqueness • be patient and supportive • gently point out illogical thoughts or misperceptions and avoid sarcasm

Supporting Youth

Being positive is a key to working with youth. If you believe the youth can succeed, they will be more likely to succeed. One way to begin supporting youth is to use praise and encouragement.

Praise

Some of the following comments are positive ways to praise. Use these comments with each member of a group or family. Do your best to reach each child so no one feels left out.

- You really outdid yourself today.
- Congratulations!
- That's right. Good for you.
- Terrific!
- I bet your mom (dad) would be proud to see the job you did on this.
- I really appreciate your efforts. You tried your best!
- I'm very proud of the way you worked (or are working) today.
- I appreciate your help.
- Very good. Will you show the group?
- Thank you for (sitting down, being quiet, getting right to work, etc.)
- You've got it now.
- Nice going.
- You're on the right track now.
- I like the way you're working.
- Keep up the good work.
- Everyone's working so hard.

Encouragement

Praise alone is not enough for children. Praise tends to focus on the person, not the specific behavior. Consider following the praise with specific messages and encouragement. Children of all ages need to know what they are being praised for. You may return from an outing and say, "I was really proud of you today." The child may sense your positive reaction but may not know if it was for the way she sat in the car, refrained from fighting, carried your groceries in, made her bed or washed the car! The same is true when you react negatively. The statement, "I am really upset with your behavior," is just not specific enough, whether the child is 6 or 18.

Some examples of support and encouragement might be:

- This is super! You made your bed and picked up your room without being told! Thanks!
- What a great day! I really enjoy taking you and your friend to the pool when you cooperate and share, like you did with the pool toys today.
- You're really growing up! When you use the car and fill the tank before coming home, I am grateful. I appreciate your mature thinking so I can get to work Monday without an extra stop.

This takes a bit more time and effort, but it's well worth it in the long run. Your relationship with children will be more positive and respectful. When you respect children of *all* ages and their feelings, they will respect you and yours. This approach will encourage children to respond and behave more appropriately because they want to behave for their own benefit, not just because an adult said so. The child will begin to understand that certain actions will lead to a positive outcome for all parties.

Support

Social support has been defined as information leading one to believe he is:

1. valued and esteemed;
2. cared for;
3. a member of a network of communication and mutual obligation.

There are several types of support. To give emotional support means to provide empathy, caring, love, trust, esteem and concern and to listen. To contribute instrumental support is to provide aid in kind, money, labor or time or to give any direct help. Giving informational support means providing advice, suggestions, directives and information for use in coping with personal and environmental problems. Giving appraisal means to provide affirmation, feedback and self-evaluation. This is also a means of support.

Each time you come into contact with a child or adolescent, you can find ways to support his growth. Listening is critical. Most people view support from the emotional standpoint. When you give a child your extra time willingly, or purchase an item for him that otherwise he could not afford, you are providing instrumental support. When you take time to help a child solve problems, you are providing informational support. If you are able to assess a situation a child has found himself in, and if you offer gentle and honest feedback, this is an appraisal. Try some of the following appraisals or affirmations:

- You can trust your intuition (gut feeling) to help you decide what to do.
- I love you even when we differ!
- I'm glad you're starting to think for yourself.
- All of your feelings are OK to express to me.
- You are learning to use old skills in new ways.

You can find many ways to support youth. All children and adolescents need support. But remember, a positive and genuine approach is a must. Children will see past a false picture of support.

Summary

Understanding and supporting youth is the basis for a positive and successful relationship with youth of all ages. Adults who take time to study developmentally appropriate behavior and use developmentally appropriate techniques will find that their job of relating to youth is less stressful.

Our investments in genuine caring and meaningful relationships will have a tremendous payoff — even if we are not around in later years to witness it.

The following quote from an unknown author may serve as a guide for all adults interacting with youth.

A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of clothes I wore.

But the world may be much different because I was important in the life of a child.

Author Unknown



HE-484

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