

# Understanding and Working WITH YOUTH

**Sharon Query**  
4-H Youth Development Specialist

**Camie Stokesbary**  
Human Development and  
Family Science Graduate Student

## Children Show Common Development Characteristics

Certain characteristics are common to children at each age level. Although children differ in the rate at which they develop, the order of the stages does not vary. While remembering that every child is unique and special is extremely important, some needs and interests are universal to all children to ensure successful development.

We all need to:

- Experience a positive self-concept
- Experience success in what we attempt to do

- Become increasingly independent
- Develop and accept our own sex identity
- Give and receive attention
- Experience adventure
- Be accepted by people of different ages and peers, as well as those in authority

These needs continue from infancy through old age. Other needs vary for different children and different ages.

*Age appropriateness* refers to how well a youth development program matches its educational offerings with the universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children. Children's development proceeds in stages. Each stage is distinct, characterized by abilities, attitudes and priorities that are qualitatively different from those of preceding and subsequent stages.

From kindergarten through high school, youth pass through four developmental stages.

Specialists often identify these stages as:

- Early childhood: ages 5 to 8
- Middle childhood: ages 9 to 11
- Early adolescence: ages 12 to 14
- Middle adolescence: ages 15 to 18

**Please remember:** Children develop at their own pace, and all characteristics will not be observed in all children at the same age or at the same stage of development.

For each child, consider uniqueness, needs and interests.

To do this, keep in mind the following two basic development principles:

1. Age is not a perfect predictor of maturity. Most children go through predictable order, but ages at which they do this will vary enormously. An activity that is well within the capability of one child may be much too difficult for another child exactly the same age. Providing a choice of activities or providing multiple levels of difficulty within one activity is the ideal.
2. Growth may proceed at different rates in various developmental areas within an individual child. A child who is advanced physically may be average in terms of mental ability and below average in terms of emotional and social growth. A child may need different experiences in each of these areas to reach his or her full potential.



**NDSU**  
**Extension Service**

North Dakota State University  
Fargo, North Dakota 58108

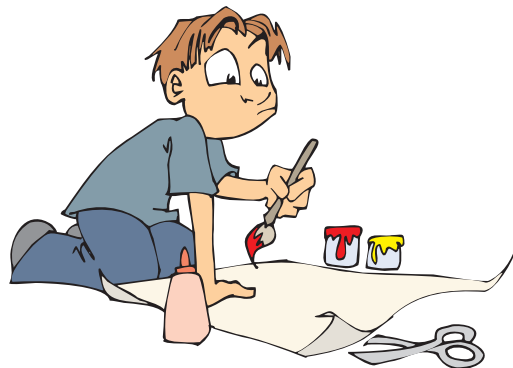
February 2010



# Ages 5 to 8, Early Childhood

## Understanding and Working With Youth: What are they like?

Characteristic of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Growing slowly; just learning to master physical skills. Can control large muscles better than small muscles. Learn best if physically active.	Use active learning experiences. Provide activities that encourage physical activity: running, moving, playing games, cutting with scissors, painting, pasting, brushing and assembling.
Are learning how to use their bodies by mastering physical skills.	Use small and large muscle activities.
Are more interested in process than product. Interested in doing activities other than creating a specific product or “doing well” in the activity.	Only working on a project rather than completing it is OK.
Are wrapped up in self.	Make-believe activities allow youth to imagine clearly what other people think and feel.
Are learning how to be friends. May have several “best friends.”	Provide a balance of activities that can be done alone or in small groups and allow for individual attention. Smaller groups of three to four children work best. Have an older youth with each group.
Boys and girls may enjoy playing together.	Involve both sexes in activities.
Are self-centered. Seek approval from adults and go out of their way to avoid punishment. Are sensitive to criticism; don’t like to fail.	Provide positive encouragement and assistance. Plan many concrete learning activities in which success can be experienced. Set up situations that foster cooperation and teamwork rather than competition.
Are easily motivated and eager to try something new.	Plan a wide variety of activities. Plan activities that take a short time to complete, with each experience building on previous activities. Provide a variety of short and specific learning activities involving concrete concepts.
Deal with here and now. Interest span short.	Free time should be planned and encouraged. Move from one activity to another. Alternate high and moderate activity with low. Be very specific and clear with instructions.
Are naturally curious and want to make sense of their world.	Allow for exploration and spontaneity in activities.
Are concrete thinkers. Base thinking in reality. Can’t multitask well. Are more interested in doing things than getting a good result at the end.	Use the senses to help children experience things. Plan lots of activities that take a short time to finish. Focus on the process and not the final product. Allow for exploration. May not be able to apply concepts learned in one setting to other applications without staff assistance.
Have strong desire for affection and attention of adults. Are moving from dependence on parents to dependence on another adult.	Plan for small-group activities with an adult for each three to four youths.
Seek adult approval because not confident enough yet to set their own standards.	Offer support to the young people.
Highly dependent on adults or older children to help them explore computers and the Internet.	Help them use computers, follow commands, use the mouse and play computer games.



# Ages 9 to 11, Middle Childhood

## Understanding and Working With Youth: What are they like?



Characteristic of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Moving all the time; can't sit still. Beginning of middle childhood is marked by a growth spurt, with females maturing before males. Both small and large muscles are well-developed.	Emphasize active learning experiences.
Like group activity. Group and club membership is important. Don't always understand other's viewpoints, but like to try to make others happy. Strive to please adults with successful project completion instead of gaining satisfaction from completing the project itself.	Emphasize group learning experiences. Provide opportunities for youth to engage in activities that encourage the sharing of many viewpoints.
Like to be with members of own sex.	Encourage learning experiences to be done with members of the same sex.
Have interests that often change rapidly, jumping from one thing to another.	Encourage many brief learning experiences.
Usually do best when work is presented in small pieces.	Provide simple and short directions.
Need guidance from adults to stay at a task to achieve their best performance.	Work closely with this age group.
Admire and imitate older boys and girls.	Encourage apprenticing with older youth.
Are easily motivated and eager to try something new.	Provide a wide variety of learning experiences.
Do not like to keep records and do not see the value in them.	Provide assistance and close supervision in completing records.
Like symbols, ceremonies and songs.	Hold initiation and installation ceremonies for new members and officers.
Are extremely curious; 9- to 11-year-olds constantly ask "why?"	Do not answer all their questions. They will learn by finding some answers on their own. Encourage a few to find answers and report to the group.
Enjoy cooperation.	Plan activities so that youth work together sometimes.
Show independence by disobedience, back talk and rebelliousness.	When you notice these characteristics, allow youth to show independence. Ask them in which activities they would like to participate, and give individual attention.
Need recognition and praise for doing good work.	Present recognition in front of peers and parents.
Have feelings of competence that enhance self-concept.	Provide activities that will let youth succeed. Recognize them for their accomplishments.
Don't like comparisons with others.	Instead of comparing youth to each other, compare present to past performance of the individual.
Can direct a single familiar activity.	Provide adult support.
Have limited decision-making ability.	Provide adult guidance. Teach them the steps of the decision-making process.
Curious and interested in discovering new information.	Encourage kid-friendly Web sites, and encourage youth to come to you if they encounter anything online that makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened.

# Ages 12 to 14, Early Adolescence

## Understanding and Working With Youth: What are they like?

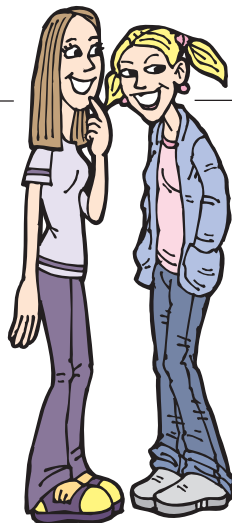
Characteristic of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Are concerned about physical development, being liked by friends, social graces and good grooming (even though they don't like to admit it).	Encourage learning experiences related to understanding oneself and getting along with others. Be willing to talk about physical changes.
Change at different rates according to highly individual "clocks." Can be painfully self-conscious and critical. Are vulnerable to bouts of low self-esteem.	They need many varied opportunities to achieve and to have their competence recognized by others.
Are self-conscious, with many needing help to overcome inferiority complexes.	Concentrate on developing individual skills.
Have intense feelings related to sex. Keen interest in their own bodies, especially sex and sex processes.	Prepare opportunities to help youth discuss body development as a natural and normal process. Provide the opportunity for discussion of human sexuality to ease anxiety associated with a developing body.
Experience emotions that are on a rollercoaster ride. Change in hormones and changes in thinking contribute to the mood swings.	Accept the feelings they have. Remember that early adolescents are known for their drama, and their feelings may seem extreme at times.
Desire a sense of independence, yet they want and need their parents' help.	Encourage youth to work with adults and older teens to complete learning experiences and apprenticing.
Like fan clubs. Many have older or adult idols.	Encourage youth to work with or apprentice to older teens and adults.
Still depend on parental guidelines.	Involve youth in deciding on own group rules. Give them parameters to follow.
Are beginning to question authority and values of parents.	Be willing to spend time to discuss values and morals.
Peer pressure mounts, first from same sex, then from opposite sex.	Use peer pressure as a positive influence. Use the group to influence nonparticipation. Have the group give encouragement to individuals.
Are interested in activities involving boys and girls.	Encourage learning experiences involving boys and girls.
Are interested in sports and active games.	Encourage active, fun-learning experiences.
Are ready for in-depth, longer learning experiences.	Encourage deeper exploration of leadership roles; encourage more detailed recordkeeping of leadership experiences.
Can take responsibility in planning and evaluating their own work.	Allow members to plan activities. Expect follow-through. Help them evaluate the outcome. Let members have responsibility for group activity.
Can plan their own social and recreational activities.	Form planning committees to plan parties and other social activities. Give experience in working in groups.
May avoid difficult tasks.	Help youth choose tasks at which they can succeed. Encourage them to participate in all tasks. Assist youth in eliminating their fears. Help them succeed in solving and participating in difficult tasks.
Want to get outside of their own community to explore.	Provide learning experiences outside the community.
Are getting over the age of fantasy. Beginning to think of what they will do when they grow up, but are often unclear of needs and values.	Relate life skills to career choices.
Gain skills in social relations with peers and adults.	Provide opportunities for interaction with peers and adults. Provide activities that would foster social interaction.
Feel in control about technology.	Discuss with youth about their online friends and activities just as you would about their other activities.
Lack the critical thinking skills to judge the accuracy of online information.	Teach youth to never give out personal information on the computer. Talk to them about responsible online behavior and ethical behavior.



# Ages 15 to 18, Middle Adolescence

## Understanding and Working With Youth: What are they like?

Characteristic of Age Group	Implications and Applications
Have high social needs and desires.	Put more emphasis on personal development (mental and social) wherever possible.
Want and need a strong voice in planning own programs.	Provide suggestions and several alternatives rather than detailed instructions.
Need freedom from parental control to make decisions.	Make youth aware that in these situations, they are making decisions for themselves or a group like themselves.
Want adult leadership roles.	Emphasize guidance and counseling from adult leaders rather than directions. Recommend liberal use of discussion method.
Quite interested in coeducational activities.	Plan coeducational and group-oriented projects or activities.
Strong desire for status in peer group.	Make sure youth are encouraged by peers. Help establish a climate that is conducive to encouragement.
Are restricting areas of interest; patterns of interest becoming more definite.	Projects can have considerably more depth. May need to suggest related areas to give youth a broader outlook.
Reach high levels of abstract thinking and problem solving. Can choose purposes, make plans, carry them out and evaluate the results.	Put youth into real-life problem-solving situations. Allow them to fully discover ideas, make decisions and evaluate the outcomes.
Have widespread feelings of inferiority and inadequacy.	Counter the feelings of inferiority and inadequacy by encouraging youth and helping them see their positive worth.
Are beginning to know self as individual. Personal philosophy begins to emerge.	Allow time for youth to explore and express their own philosophies. Use activities that have them search for experiences that will allow them to identify their philosophies.
Are developing community consciousness.	Recommend civic projects that are a service to others.
Are developing a growing concern for the well-being and progress of other individuals and groups.	Encourage interest in and discussion of community and world problems in which they express concern.
Need life planning guidance.	Include activities and information regarding life planning.
Are beginning to think of leaving home for college, employment, marriage, etc.	Put emphasis on consumer and financial management.
Many will leave the community for employment, and many who go to college will not return to their present communities after graduation.	Need to introduce youth to other settings through tours and trips to state and interstate conferences.
Are interested in travel and adventure.	For incentives, provide trips rather than medals and ribbons.
Girls are especially interested in building relationships with online acquaintances.	Encourage the use of monitored chat rooms and social networking sites.



# Applying Information on Understanding and Working With Youth

## Activity One

Next month you are responsible for planning a club event that will have members from each age group participating. Think through and plan how you can design the event so all members can be engaged.

Event \_\_\_\_\_

5- to 8-year-olds \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

9- to 11-year-olds \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

12- to 14-year-olds \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

15- to 18-year-olds \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

## Activity Two

What program, project or activity in your program might need to be modified based on understanding how youth grow and develop?

Activity \_\_\_\_\_

Modifications \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

---

---

Adapted from *How Kids Develop*, Iowa State University,  
written by Sharon Query, 1995, and revised by Judy Levings, 2006.

Reviewed by: Maxine Nordick, Vanessa Hoines, and Carrie Knutson





*Children develop at their own pace  
and all characteristics will not be  
observed in all children at the same age  
or at the same stage of development*

**For more information on this and other topics, see: [www.ag.ndsu.edu](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu)**

This publication may be copied for noncommercial, educational purposes in its entirety with no changes.

Requests to use any portion of the document (including text, graphics or photos) should be sent to [NDSU.permission@ndsu.edu](mailto:NDSU.permission@ndsu.edu).

Include exactly what is requested for use and how it will be used.

North Dakota State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, disability, age, status as a U.S. veteran, sexual orientation, marital status, or public assistance status. Direct inquiries to the Vice President for Equity, Diversity and Global Outreach, 205 Old Main, (701) 231-7708.

County Commissions, NDSU and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating.

This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, (701) 231-7881.