

Understanding Adolescence: Using a Developmental Lens

Tasks of Middle Adolescence (ages 15 – 17 years)



Adjust to new physical sense of self

Adolescents experience rapid and profound physical changes that are driven by hormones acting on different parts of their bodies.

In middle adolescence, they experience:

- Continuing physical and sexual changes.
- Concern with appearance and body.
- Feeling strange about self and body.
- Extremes in physical activity and lethargy.
- Increased appetite during growth spurts and decreased appetite between them.
- Increased need for sleep.

Adjust to a sexually maturing body and feelings

With the significant changes they experience in adolescence, youth must adapt sexually and establish a sense of sexual identity. This includes incorporating a personal sense of gender identity; establishing values about sexual behavior; and developing skills for romantic relationships.

In middle adolescence, they experience:

- Sexual drives.
- Interest in the possibility of dating and/or attracting a partner.
- Concerns about sexual attractiveness.
- Frequent changes in relationships.
- Feelings of love and passion.

Brain development

By age 6 (on average), a young person's brain is 95% of its adult size. However, the brain continues to physically develop in the teen years and even into the 20s. A second growth spurt of gray matter (peaking at age 11-12) is followed by a "pruning" process in which connections among neurons in the brain that are not used wither away and those that are used remain. The front part of the brain, responsible for functions such as complex reasoning, problem-solving, thinking ahead, prioritizing, long-term planning, self-evaluation and regulation of emotion, begins to develop in early adolescence with a final developmental push starting at age 16 or 17.

It is not that these tasks cannot be done before young adulthood, but rather that it takes more effort and requires practice.

Physical growth & puberty	Assigned male at birth (AMAB)	Assigned female at birth (AFAB)
Growth starts (average)	Age 14 (range 12-16)	Age 12 (range 10-14)
1-year average height increase during growth spurt	4.1"	3.5"
Starting age of puberty (average)	Age 11-12 (range 9-14), individuals continue to grow for about 6 years after the first visible signs of puberty.	Age 10-11 (range 8-13), individuals continue to grow for about 4 years after the first visible signs of puberty.
Length of puberty	3-4 years	4-5 years
Progression of changes	• Growth of testicles and penis • First ejaculation (average age 13-14; range 12-16) • Hair growth in pubic area and armpits • Muscle growth, deepening voice, acne, and facial hair develop • Continue to grow for about 6 years after the first visible sign of puberty, may not finish until age 21	• Breast development • Hair growth in pubic area and armpits • Acne • Menstruation starts (average age 12-13; range 10-16) • Attain adult height and reproductive maturity about 4 years after the first visible signs of puberty
Young people of all genders	• Enter puberty now at earlier ages than ever. • Experience a wide range of "normal." • Experience physical maturation and cognitive development in stages that don't always correlate to each other (e.g., youth that look physically older do not yet necessarily have higher levels of cognitive ability).	

Develop and apply abstract thinking skills

Adolescents experience significant changes in their ability to think. They are increasingly able to understand and grapple with abstract ideas, think about possibilities, think ahead, think about thinking, and “put themselves in another person’s shoes.” This is a gradual process that spans adolescence and young adulthood. They are growing in their ability to think about themselves, others, and the world around them. Early in the process, youth are limited in their ability to hold more than one point of view – understanding something from one perspective but not another.

In middle adolescence, however:

- Teens experience growth in abstract thought; developing new skills, such as thinking more about possibilities, thinking more about the process of thinking itself, thinking in multiple dimensions, and seeing things as relative rather than absolute.
- Cause-effect relationships are better understood.
- Young people practice new thinking skills through humor and by arguing with parents and others.
- They revert to concrete thought under stress.

Define a personal sense of identity

Adolescents move from identifying themselves as an extension of their parents (childhood) to recognizing their uniqueness and separateness from parents. They develop a sense of self as an individual and as a person connected to valuable people and groups. They refine their sense of identity, exploring issues such as: “Who am I? How do I fit in? Am I loveable and loving? How am I competent?”

This process often manifests as exploration of alternative styles of dress, jewelry, music, hair, and

mannerisms. Teens may struggle to identify a true self amid seeming contradictions in the way they feel and behave in different situations, and with different levels of thought and understanding.

Middle-stage adolescents:

- Attention to their own needs can present as being self-absorbed.
- Can alternate between unrealistically high expectations and a poor self-concept.
- Are focused on examining their inner experiences (journaling, etc.).
- Can fluctuate between perceiving self as being intensely inadequate and perceiving self as totally invulnerable to negative events.

Adopt a personal values system

Adolescents develop a more complex understanding of moral behavior and underlying principles of justice. They question and assess beliefs from childhood and restructure these beliefs into a personal ideology (e.g., more personally meaningful values, religious views, and belief systems to guide decisions and behavior).

In middle adolescence they:

- Develop ideals and select role models.
- Develop an interest in moral reasoning.
- Are increasingly able to take others’ perspectives into account.
- Begin to develop morals based on respect for the social order and agreements between people: “law and order” morality and desire for social approval.
- Question social conventions and re-examine personal values and moral/ethical principles, sometimes resulting in conflicts with parents.

Renegotiate relationship with parents/caregivers

Adolescents negotiate a change in relationships with parents that begins to balance autonomy (independence)

with connection. Overall, the adolescent’s task is one of separating in some ways, while maintaining and redefining connections in others. Through this process, they make room for a more adult relationship that meets cultural expectations and provides necessary support.

In middle adolescence, this differentiation presents as:

- Complaining that parents interfere with their independence.
- Conflicts with family (reflecting ambivalence about their own emerging independence).
- Periods of sadness as the psychological loss of parents take place.

Develop stable and productive peer relationships

Peer relationships change during adolescence, giving youth with more support and connections as they spend less time with adults and in supervised activities. These peer relationships often compete with parents and schools in terms of their influence on teen’s attitudes and behaviors. As networks with peers broaden, peer relationships become deeper and play an increasing role in shaping an individual teen’s self-concept and interaction.

Adolescents experience three transformations in peer relationships:

1. Reorientation of friendships from activity-based relationships of childhood to more stable, affectively-oriented friendships based on idea and value sharing.
2. Growth of romantic and sexually oriented relationships.
3. Emergence of peer “crowds.”

Throughout adolescence, friendships become more stable, intimate, and supportive; they provide a cornerstone for learning about adult relationships.

In middle adolescence, they:

- Prioritize their peer group. (These strong peer alliances can show up as fad behaviors.)
- Show increasing interest and involvement in romantic relationships and friendships.
- Increasingly label or group their peers (e.g., cliques).

Meet demands of increasing mature roles and responsibilities

Adolescents gradually take on the roles expected of them in adulthood. They learn the skills necessary for these roles and manage the demands of the labor market as well as meet family, community, and citizenship commitments.

In middle adolescence:

- Intellectual interests gain importance.
- Teens have greater capacity for setting goals.
- Having a part-time job is common.

