



## Youth Development Stages

When preparing students to learn and engage, there are several developmental factors to consider. Sessions should be appropriate to the ages and developmental stages of youth in the program. The cognitive abilities of youths vary considerably across age groups but there are also social, emotional and physical differences to consider. Definitions of the areas and typical characteristics and tasks for each developmental area, by age groups and developmental stages, are presented below.

### Developmental Area Definitions

- **Physical growth** includes development of gross motor skills (mastery of large muscle movement such as arms and legs) and fine motor skills (mastery of small muscles like hands and fingers) as well as the ability to coordinate these skills. Growth in this area affects connections with other people, objects and the environment.
- **Cognitive growth** describes the development of intellectual abilities such as memory, problem solving, language, reasoning and decision making. It also refers to how people think, perceive and construct thought processes.
- **Social growth** refers to the ability to interact with and develop relationships with others. It includes development of social and emotional skills as well as the realization of individuality — a person separate from others. Healthy social growth can impact other developmental domains such as cognitive and emotional growth.
- **Emotional growth** refers to the ability to self-soothe, cope with stress and anxiety, and display empathy to others. Growth in this area enables youths to experience, express, understand and regulate a wide range of emotions.



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### Early Childhood Stage (ages 5-8) Characteristics and Implications

	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Implications for Facilitators</i>
Physical Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youngsters experience slow, steady physical growth.</li> <li>These young people learn best if they are physically active.</li> <li>The youths are learning to use their bodies and master physical skills; skills are not yet polished.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan activities that incorporate both small (manipulatives) and large (beach balls) muscle skills.</li> <li>Build physical motion into activities (e.g., running, playing games).</li> <li>Be patient with messy projects.</li> </ul>
Cognitive Growth (Thinking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>These youths are often more interested in the process than the outcome.</li> <li>Young people can sort things and ideas into categories.</li> <li>These are concrete thinkers who see issues as black or white.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give clear instructions with a maximum of three to five steps.</li> <li>Plan activities that focus on doing something rather than finishing a product.</li> <li>Provide a variety of activities to appeal to all types of learners.</li> </ul>
Social Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>These youths tend to be more interested in themselves than in others.</li> <li>Young people start to play in mixed-sex groups and may have several “best friends.”</li> <li>Youths depend heavily on guidance from parents and other adults.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design role-playing activities that help youths see how others “act” and “feel.”</li> <li>Small-group activities are most effective.</li> <li>Be supportive of youths and develop awareness of parental values and beliefs.</li> </ul>
Emotional Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youths are motivated and excited to try new things.</li> <li>Youths are naturally curious and enjoy exploration.</li> <li>Young people are sensitive to criticism and do not “lose” well.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan short activities that build on previous activities.</li> <li>Allow opportunities for brainstorming and flexibility.</li> <li>Provide positive encouragement and create environments that support success.</li> </ul>



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### Middle Childhood Stage (ages 9-11) Characteristics and Implications

	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Implications for facilitators</i>
Physical Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people continue to experience slow and steady growth.</li> <li>• Puberty may be starting for some early-maturing girls.</li> <li>• Young people have high amounts of energy and are not comfortable sitting for long periods of time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan activities that allow for movement and using their bodies.</li> <li>• Limit lectures or presentations to keep youths engaged.</li> <li>• Provide a variety of activities to meet all needs.</li> </ul>
Cognitive Growth (Thinking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These young people begin to think logically but still have limited decision-making ability.</li> <li>• Youths need adult guidance to stay on task and think critically.</li> <li>• These youths are very curious, constantly asking “why?”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide adult guidance and simple and short instructions. If possible, there should be enough adults to work with each group of 5-7 youth</li> <li>• Plan opportunities for youth to research and find answers on their own, then report back to the group</li> </ul>
Social Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like group activities, group membership is important.</li> <li>• Youths are most comfortable with same-sex peers.</li> <li>• Youth show independence through disobedience and rebelliousness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize cooperative, group learning experiences.</li> <li>• Encourage learning experiences that occur within same-sex groups.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for youths to make decisions and exercise independence when possible.</li> </ul>
Emotional Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These young people admire and imitate older males and females as they learn more about themselves.</li> <li>• Youths do not like being compared to others.</li> <li>• Youths need recognition and praise for doing good work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage interactions with older youth who can act as positive role models.</li> <li>• Give positive feedback on efforts and successes.</li> <li>• Rather than comparing youth to one another, compare present to past experiences of individuals.</li> <li>• Provide corrections quietly in a caring and consistent manner.</li> </ul>



## Youth Development Stages

### Early Adolescence Stage (Ages 12-14) Characteristics and Implications

	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Implications for facilitators</i>
Physical Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some youths may experience growth spurts that occur across a wide range of areas (e.g., hands and feet may grow faster than arms and legs).</li> <li>Girls mature before boys.</li> <li>Young teenagers may be self-conscious about body image due to rapid physical changes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan activities in which size is not a factor in success, things like hiking, canoeing and biking.</li> <li>Avoid calling attention to physical characteristics, even if the comments are positive.</li> <li>Be patient with excessive grooming behavior.</li> </ul>
Cognitive Growth (Thinking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youths start to move from concrete thinking to understanding abstract concepts and ideas.</li> <li>Youths can set short-term goals, brainstorm options and think hypothetically.</li> <li>Youths can imagine consequences that may result from actions.</li> <li>Youths tend to reject adults' ready-made solutions in favor of their own.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate complex games that require deep thinking and problem-solving.</li> <li>Ask questions that prompt students to predict outcomes and think critically.</li> <li>Offer opportunities for youths to test ideas and question ways of doing things.</li> </ul>
Social Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youths prefer to spend time with peers rather than parents.</li> <li>Youths are increasingly more influenced by peers, role models and public figures.</li> <li>Teens begin to feel more comfortable with members of the opposite sex.</li> <li>Teens start to question authority.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involve teens in planning activities.</li> <li>Offer safe, comfortable ways for them to interact with opposite-sex peers.</li> <li>Provide clear expectations and explain the reasons for them.</li> <li>Involve youths in setting and enforcing rules.</li> </ul>
Emotional Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youths want to be part of something important.</li> <li>Youths experience challenges to their self-concepts.</li> <li>Youths compare themselves with others.</li> <li>Young people's emotions can swing back and forth rapidly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be open and willing to talk and listen.</li> <li>Avoid singling out, criticizing or embarrassing youths.</li> <li>Avoid comparing youth to one another.</li> <li>Find ways for individuals to contribute to the group.</li> </ul>



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### Middle Adolescence Stage (Ages 15-18) Characteristics and Implications

	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Implications for facilitators</i>
Physical Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Girls' growth is complete while boys are still growing.</li> <li>Youths are very concerned with physical appearance.</li> <li>Youths begin to accept physical changes and recognize physical abilities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid offering critiques or comments about physical stature.</li> <li>Vary activities so that size does not influence success.</li> <li>Provide activities around body image, grooming, fitness and related areas.</li> </ul>
Cognitive Growth (Thinking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teenagers begin to think of the future and make realistic plans.</li> <li>Youths reach high levels of abstract thinking and problem solving.</li> <li>Young people feel a strong need to set their own goals and may ignore goals set by others.</li> <li>Teens can initiate and carry out tasks without supervision.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage teens to accept responsibility and expect them to follow through.</li> <li>Plan coeducational and group-oriented projects.</li> <li>Emphasize personal development whenever possible.</li> <li>Provide real-life, problem-solving opportunities.</li> </ul>
Social Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teens have high social needs and desires.</li> <li>Teens want to belong to the group but also want to be recognized as unique individuals.</li> <li>Youths develop a growing concern for the well-being of others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasize personal development whenever possible.</li> <li>Make sure youth are encouraged by peers.</li> <li>Encourage interest in and discussion of community and world problems.</li> <li>Support involvement in civic projects that serve others.</li> </ul>
Emotional Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teens want and need a strong voice in planning their own programs.</li> <li>Teens need freedom from parental control when making decisions.</li> <li>Teens want adult leadership roles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide suggestions and alternatives rather than providing solutions.</li> <li>Help youths see the active role they play in their decisions and future.</li> <li>Provide opportunities for youths to practice leadership with younger audiences.</li> </ul>

Adapted from <https://4-hmilitarypartnerships.org/resources/educator-resources/preparing-the-youth-development-professional>.

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