

## Section Two: Developmental Stages

**Section Two**, *Developmental Stages*, discusses the unique developmental needs of preteens and teens.

### Unique Needs of Teens

*In Unity we recognize every person as a child of God. We respect each person's dignity and value through our thoughts, words and actions. We celebrate the diversity of God's children by practicing tolerance of individuals or groups regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, sex, physical or mental disability, political or religious ideology.* —Unknown Author

In working with preteens and teens, we are blessed to see each individual grow and develop at their own unique pace, unfolding gradually with each life experience that arrives. As you share yourself and your wisdom, you have many opportunities to guide and illumine the youth you serve as they navigate the path to their best life. Your understanding of the various patterns of growth and development is crucial in making the most of these opportunities.

All humans grow in fairly predictable stages—physically, mentally, socially-emotionally, morally and spiritually. Yet each develops as a unique individual following his or her own inner timetable. External influences such as personal care, environment and culture can greatly impact the development within each stage. Many kinds of development are occurring at the same time, but the age groupings for the various stages are not identical. Development is ongoing, from the simple to the more complex, throughout a lifetime. In some kinds of development the sequence is unclear, but clearly recognizable levels have been identified.

In this section, several developmental theories are briefly summarized to assist you in understanding what is typical for each age. More information about teen development can be obtained by visiting [www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence2.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence2.html).

### Types of Development

#### Physical Development

Physical development can easily be seen. The size of the body and the acquisition of skills in using it are generally visible as the changes occur. Physical size and skills impact choices in youth ministry relating to furniture and supplies that can be used safely and easily by the age group using them. For the very young child, the lack of skills also impacts the adult/child ratio as they require more assistance in meeting their physical needs.

Physical development varies through each age in adolescence.

<b>Girls</b>	<b>Early</b>	<b>Late</b>	<b>Average Age</b>
Onset of puberty (begin breast development)	8 years	13 years	10.5 years
First menstruation	10 years	16 years	12.8 years
Peak rate of growth	9.5 years	15 years	12 years

<b>Boys</b>	<b>Early</b>	<b>Late</b>	<b>Average Age</b>
Onset of puberty (appearance of pubic hair)	9 years	14 years	11 years
Onset of reproductive potential (production of sperm)	11.5 years	15 years	13.4 years
Peak rate of growth	11.5 years	16 years	14 years

(data from *Encyclopedia of Adolescence*)

### **Early Adolescence (14-15)**

- Physical changes have slowed for girls; boys may still be changing rapidly
- Start to develop sex drive (particularly males)
- Active and energetic
- May experiment with alcohol and/or drugs

### **Late Adolescence (16-18)**

- Physique almost fully developed
- Most have reached adult height
- Boys have caught up with girls in their physical development
- Usually express strong interest in personal health
- May fall victim to eating disorders (both under- and overeating)
- Increasing numbers are sexually experienced and at a younger age

During these years of rapid rates of growth and change, teens are extremely sensitive to appearance. At no other time in life are feelings about the self and body so closely tied. These physical changes affect social relations and emotions. This is why being ahead or behind a classmate in physical growth can be so stressful to teens' emotions. They are concerned with their physical and hormonal changes, as well as fitting in with their peers. They now can imagine what other people may be thinking, so teens feel as if they are living in a display window and everyone is watching them.

## Physical Development Characteristics

### Rapid physical growth:

- Begin rapid increase in height, weight and size
- Increase muscle growth
- Motor skills well-developed

### Reproductive system develops:

- Capable of conceiving (and bearing) children
- Girls begin menstruation
- Boys experience genital growth and first ejaculation (nocturnal emission)
- May not recognize or understand changes in other sex or self

### Hormonal and other changes:

- Body hair and body odor
- Acne
- Fatigue easily, may need more sleep or better diet
- Extreme appetite variances
- Experience sexual urges
- Boys' voices change

### Differences between genders:

- Girls tend to reach physical and spiritual maturity earlier than boys.
- Boys are more active and have more endurance.

### Variance in onset and duration of puberty:

- Those who enter puberty at an early age tend to go through the changes quicker.

## Mental or Cognitive Development

Mental or cognitive development refers to the increasing ability of the mind to process and use information and language. Knowing more about how the brain works can help us create an environment where teens can experience optimal learning.

### Teen Brain Development

- The human brain is the behavioral command center.
- Research tells us that the teenage brain is different than the adult brain and is a work in process. Understanding this helps to guide our work with youth.
- Even though 95% of the brain's structure has been formed earlier in life, structural changes appear relatively late in child development.

- Abstract thinking develops.
- Begin to cultivate possibility thinking “what if” and “what might be.”

The area of the brain just behind the forehead, called the prefrontal cortex, acts as the CEO of the brain. It controls:

- Impulse
- Planning
- Judgment
- Working memory
- Organization
- Regulating emotional reactions
- Understanding others

This is the last part of the brain to develop, perhaps as late as the mid 20s. Because of this late development, it is challenging for adolescents to:

- Organize tasks
- Keep track of multiple thoughts
- Recall past experiences instantly in order to assist in decision making

The late development of the cortex may help to explain certain teenage behavior when it comes to poor decision-making, recklessness and emotional outbursts.

As the prefrontal cortex matures teens can reason better, develop more control over impulses and make better judgments. Therefore, it is difficult to expect teens to have adult levels of organization skills or decision making before their brains are finished being built. It is especially important to understand this so we can help guide the teens with assistance in organization, planning and prioritizing.

In a baby, the brain over-produces brain cells (neurons) and connections between brain cells (synapses) and then starts pruning back the synapses around the age of three. By age 11 for girls and 12 for boys, the neurons in the front of the brain have formed thousands of new connections. Over the next few years most of these links will be pruned. Similar to clearing away unused icons on computer desktops, the brain starts pruning unused synapses to make remaining ones more stable, strong and efficient.

This is exciting news because teens may actually have control over the brain’s wiring. Teens who “exercise” their brains by learning to order their thoughts, understand abstract concepts and control impulses are laying the neural foundations that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

## Emotional Intelligence

*We are being judged by a new yardstick: not just how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other.*

—Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, 1998

Emotional intelligence is the ability to cope with both the inner and outer world. Just as a person's intellectual intelligence develops over time, a person's emotional intelligence develops also. Yet, one's intellectual intelligence is not necessarily an indication of one's emotional intelligence. The coping skills of a person at an early age are quite different from the coping skills of an adult. If a youth's emotional life is arrested or not encouraged, this can affect all areas of his or her life. Thus, as adults, some people may be unable to manage minor setbacks and may have exaggerated or inappropriate responses to life's situations. Emotional intelligence is now being recognized more and more as essential for high performance at work, at school, and at home and in balancing your commitments with what is important in your life.

No matter what happens in a person's life, an individual with a well-developed emotional intelligence has strong coping skills. These abilities include:

- **Self-awareness**—the ability to recognize one's emotions, one's strengths and limits and having a strong sense of one's self-worth and capabilities
- **Self-management**—the ability to adapt to changing situations, to exercise emotional self-control in group situations, to show initiative, to strive to do their best, to be trustworthy in values, emotions and behavior and to be optimistic
- **Social awareness**—the ability to show empathy, to have organizational awareness of political relationships and to recognize and meet other's needs
- **Relationship management**—the ability to provide inspirational leadership, help others improve performance, initiate or manage change, work toward resolving disagreements, influence others, and work effectively in collaboration and teamwork

As adults working with youth, we have wonderful opportunities to model emotional abilities to the preteens and teens we interact with in Youth and Family Ministry. Many of the lessons we facilitate invite them to increase their self-awareness, their social awareness as well as self-management abilities. In Unity lessons, we honor a person's thoughts, feelings and intuition thus connecting the head and heart. As we do so, we provide each person an opportunity to acquire skills in using their emotional intelligence. Our role may simply be helping the youth to realize that their expressions of empathy, self-worth and trustworthiness are expressions of the Christ within.

## Social Development

Social development is frequently linked with emotional development. Social development is learning the rules and expectations for interacting with other people. Emotional development is the increasing ability to respond with feelings toward someone or something. These areas are

considered together because interaction with people results in a feeling response. As youth leaders, be aware that this is an area in which you have more opportunity and ability to influence our young people. Your every action and emotional state is observed, even more so than your words.

### **Relationally:**

- Adolescence is the time teens are pushing away from their families, wanting independence.
- Peer friendships outside of the family increase in importance. Same-sex friendships are extremely important, sharing emotions, support, advice and intimacy.
- Girls are more likely to express friendships by talking and sharing their feelings—seeking trust, emotional support, mutuality, confidentiality and loyalty.
- Boys are likely to develop emotional support through sharing activities like sports. They are looking for someone with whom they can do things, showing less interest in personality as long as activities are compatible.
- In early adolescence friendships are almost exclusively same-sex. Even in late adolescence boys rate same-sex friendships as more valuable than those with girls.
- The role played by peers in adolescence is critical. Relationships with peers during these years imitate later adult relationships. Teens who do not learn how to get along with others by the time they reach adulthood are likely to face obstacles in years ahead.
- Since teens spend twice as much time with peers than with parents, the lack of supervision in peer groups is significant. Teens come into youth groups looking for the “social” aspect, which is very important for their development.
- Having appropriate relationships with adults is also very important for their development.
- It is important that we have supervision for our chapter meetings, rallies and retreats so the teens have the opportunity to develop significant relationships in a safe environment.

### **Social Development Characteristics**

#### **Self-Conscious:**

- preoccupation with self
- compare self to others
- worry about how they look
- hide from attention
- feel everyone is looking at them
- try on different personalities
- want privacy
- have uncomfortable awareness of differences in race, culture, class, finances, religion, etc.

**Seeks Acceptance:**

- strongly influenced by peers
- want to feel safe and loved
- worry about how others view them
- not willing to appear different
- may act out for peer approval
- like that you recognize something about them (but not them, really)
- quick to criticize others, especially outside clique

**Feels Separate:**

- believe they are the only ones feeling this way
- feel guilt or shame for thoughts, actions or experimentation
- don't know whom to turn to

**Changing Emotions:**

- vulnerable to moodiness or intense emotions
- many fears or worries
- might exaggerate feelings
- act out dramatically
- withdrawal
- may appear contradictory
- actions not matching words and feelings
- behavior disorders may appear
- depression
- aggression

**Not a “child”:**

- strive for independence
- want responsibility
- critical of adults, notice inconsistency
- wonder why adults are so self-absorbed
- confide in friends and the dog only
- begin to resist displays of affection
- don't appreciate parents speaking for them
- wonder when they will be listened to
- still want to be able to play
- going to church is no longer “cool”
- sometimes want an adult to talk to, but don't know who that should be or how to build that relationship

## Moral Development

Moral development is an increase in understanding of what people believe is right and wrong. Knowing what each age is capable of is essential in appropriate expectations for them morally.

Youth ages 8-16:

- Action motivated by need to avoid rejection or disapproval
- Live up to what is expected
- Conformity is prized
- Being good/having good motives

Youth 16+:

- Group authority
- Concern for maintaining social order
- Moral judgment maintained by need to not be criticized by a true authority

## Spiritual Development

Spiritual development relates to how one grows in understanding of spiritual concepts. This is the primary area of development we have the privilege of sharing with our young people, and the fundamental purpose of a youth ministry program. Spiritual development is an intrinsic part of being human; a dynamic process that varies by individual and cannot be separated from other aspects of our being. It involves both an inward journey (experiencing awe, wonder and mystery) and an outward journey, expressed in daily activities, relationships and actions.

Expressing spirituality is a multi-sensory experience involving intuitive and bodily forms of knowing about God.

### What Influences Teen's Spiritual Development?

What are parents, adult leaders and teachers modeling with regard to spirituality? Are they walking their talk, demonstrating a sense of empathy, responsibility and/or love for others, for humanity and for the world? A variety of influences, practices and experiences help to shape a young person's spiritual development, including:

- family
- friends
- spiritual mentors
- youth groups
- overcoming challenges
- practices showing love, compassion or humility
- helping others
- being alone—outside in nature
- listening to music

- reading books
- praying and meditating
- having private time to think and explore inner thoughts and feelings

Our youth programs are important to help ground our teens in principles, practice and commitment.

### **How Do We Nurture Young People on Their Spiritual Journey?**

- Take them seriously. Listen to them. Affirm, love and encourage them in their own journey. Let them know they are valued in who they are, and what they think and say.
- Build relationships with young people. Show up each Sunday on a regular, consistent basis. As a minister, set aside some time to spend with the teens. Have pizza and conversation, come to an event. Let them know that the ministry is also their home for them to use. Do the teens in your ministry know anything about the minister, the board, the Youth and Family Ministry Director? Do they feel part of the congregation?
- Create spiritually enriching “spaces” that give young people opportunities to reflect, be safe and experience silence. Be present and patient with them.
- Ask good, open-ended questions, not just ones with yes or no answers. Give them the opportunity to express the “how” and “why” and verbalize their thoughts.
- Use stories, art, films and other media to stimulate thinking and reflection. We don’t want to recreate “school” in their Sunday experience. Be creative in the presentations.
- Let them interpret their own experiences rather than telling them what they should think or feel. Answer their questions honestly. Don’t rush to correct them; if a mistake is made—it’s okay.
- Recognize and use their gifts. Encourage them to show care and compassion to each other and in the world. Give opportunities to serve others. Expect a lot of them. Let them teach us. Working with teens is a tremendous opportunity to deepen your own spiritual path.
- Especially important, have fun!

Teens are even more aware of the many perspectives to consider. God may be a confidante, a guide, a counselor. They are also conscious of whether a person who says they are spiritual actually lives what they say they believe. Teens are looking for clarity to questions they cannot make sense of.

## Faith Development

Stages of Faith—James Fowler	Faith Development—Yob
<p><b>Mythic-Literal Faith</b>, elementary school years through early adolescence The child’s developing ability to think logically helps them sort out the real from make-believe, to see the perspectives of others and to capture life and meaning in narrative and stories.</p>	<p><b>The Young Adolescent, 13-18</b> Form a number of important relationships outside of family Close relationships are very important—they are mirrors reflecting who they are. In period of conformity to conventions within their groups: ie. dress, behavior, activities, hobbies, music.</p>
<p><b>Synthetic-Conventional Faith</b>, middle adolescence Teens begin abstract thinking and can reflect on past experiences looking for meaning. Begin to have concern about one’s future and about personal relationships. They also look for a personal relation to God and look to be loved in deep and comprehensive ways.</p>	
<p><b>Individuative-Reflective Faith</b>, young adulthood A time to question, examine and reclaim values and beliefs formed thus far making commitments. A time to take charge of one’s life.</p>	
<p><b>Conjunctive Faith</b>, mid-life or beyond Stage embraces and integrates polarities and opposites of one’s life, one sees both sides of an issue simultaneously and sees things related to each other.</p>	
<p><b>Universalizing Faith</b>, some adults reach this Individuals are grounded in oneness with God, are devoted to overcoming division, oppression, and violence, live for love and justice in the world.</p>	

Sources: <http://www.sonlifeafrica.com/model/faith2.htm> and James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 102-15.

*Keys to Teaching Children about God*, Iris M. Yob, Barrington’s Educational Series, 1996.

It is important to be cognizant of the physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual stages of development for our teens. However, behind these stages is another very important point to consider—*nature*, our genetic makeup and *nurture*, early childhood environment. Both play a part in developing into who we are. Nature endows inborn abilities and traits, while nurture molds these genetic tendencies as we learn and mature. The influence of a teen's future is a combination of genetic inheritance which provides potential, and training which determines the extent to which potential is reached.

## Developmental Stages Chart

Physical Development	Cognitive Development Piaget	Moral Development Kohlberg	Social Development Erikson
		<p><b>Level II Conventional</b>  <b>Stage 3: Mutual Interpersonal expectations, Conformity, 8-16</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action motivated by need to avoid rejection or disapproval</li> <li>• Live up to what is expected of you</li> <li>• Conformity is prized</li> <li>• Being good-having good motives</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Later Childhood, 9-12</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceleration of physical growth</li> <li>• Glands begun secretion of sex hormones</li> <li>• Girls generally more mature than boys</li> </ul>	<p><b>Formal Operations, 11 –Adult</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can think on abstract level</li> <li>• Can consider hypothetical situations</li> <li>• Can solve problems</li> <li>• Become interested in past and future</li> <li>• Can intensely explore subjects</li> </ul>	<p><b>Stage 4: Social Science and Conscience Orientation, 16+</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group authority</li> <li>• Concern for maintaining social order</li> <li>• Moral judgment maintained by need to not be criticized by a true authority</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Adolescence, 12-20</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach sexual maturity</li> <li>• Stage of maximum vitality</li> </ul>		<p><b>Level III, Postconventional</b>  <b>Stage 5: Social Contract, some adults reach this</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values and rules are up to your group.</li> <li>• Laws followed for the greatest good of society</li> <li>• Able to understand and appreciate perspective of other people</li> </ul>	<p><b>Identity vs. Role Confusion, 12-18</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looking for an identity that integrates into a sense of self</li> <li>• Failure to do so leads to inadequacy, isolation, indecisiveness, role confusion</li> <li>• Seeks similarities</li> </ul>

<p><b>Intimacy vs. Isolation, Early Adulthood</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop meaningful relationships with others</li> <li>• Otherwise loneliness and isolation results</li> </ul>	<p><b>Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles</b>, reached by only a few adults</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Judgment based on individual principles</li> <li>• Principles are universal-human equality, respect</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Generativity vs. Stagnation, Middle Adulthood</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commit to productive work and raising/teaching next generation</li> <li>• Or become stagnant and self-centered</li> </ul>			
<p><b>Integrity vs. Despair, Mature Adult</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sense out of lives and see choices they made were reasonable</li> <li>• Despair at wrong turns and goals never reached</li> </ul>			

When we give special attention to understanding teen characteristics and stages of development, we can more effectively support their spiritual development. Teens are humans, ever growing and changing. Author Og Mandino writes, “We aren’t human beings, we are humans becoming.”