



Understanding and Working with Youth



Meagan Scott Hoffman, Ph.D., Associate Professor/4-H Youth Development Specialist
Chloe Krinke, Ph.D., NDSU Center for 4-H Youth Development Graduate Assistant (2015–2019)

Certain characteristics are common to youth at each age level. While the rate of development may vary, the order of stages does not. Every young person is unique. However, there are various needs and milestones universal to all youth. Keep these in mind when working with youth to promote successful development.

Development is sequential, continuous and gradual. Each stage is distinct, characterized by abilities and attitudes that are different from the stages before and after. Youth develop at different rates, so age and grade level are not perfect predictors of maturity. What one youth is capable of doing may be too difficult for another of the exact same age.

4 Developmental Stages

- **Early Childhood:** Ages 5 to 8 (Grades K to 3)
- **Middle Childhood:** Ages 9 to 11 (Grades 4 to 6)
- **Early Adolescence:** Ages 12 to 14 (Grades 7 to 9)
- **Adolescence:** Ages 15 to 18 (Grades 10 to 12)

Age appropriateness refers to how effectively a program matches its learning objectives based on the predictable sequences of youth development. Each developmental stage has four areas of development impacting individual learning.

4 Areas of Development

- **Physical:** Growing and maturing of body and brain)
- **Social:** Interacting with others and responding in social settings
- **Emotional:** Understanding, recognizing and expressing emotions
- **Intellectual:** Thinking, learning and processing information

Growth in these four areas may proceed at different rates in an individual. For example, a youth who is advanced physically may be average in terms of intellectual ability and below average in terms of emotional and social growth. Youth may need different learning experiences in each of these areas to help them reach their full potential.

Remember: Youth develop at their own pace, and not all characteristics will be observed in every individual of the same age or developmental stage.

Guidelines for Events and Activities

- Include time for youth to learn by doing
- Offer a variety of learning experiences to include different learning styles: auditory, visual, verbal, physical and logical
- Build on past experiences and apply learning to new experiences
- Provide opportunities that motivate and challenge youth in each area of development

Importance

Selecting applicable and suitable activities is critical for successful learning. Engaged learning leads to higher levels of motivation, creativity and confidence. Age appropriate experiences promote fun and engaging learning opportunities for youth. Understanding ages and stages of development helps cultivate a thriving youth development program.



Tip: Providing a choice of activities or offering multiple levels of difficulty within one activity is ideal.



NDSU

EXTENSION

Physical Development

GOAL

Learn to master physical skills

CHARACTERISTICS

Control large muscles better than small muscles

APPLICATION

Incorporate running, moving and playing games that encourage continued development of large muscles.

Learn best if physically active

Include active learning experiences (painting, pasting, brushing and assembling) to develop small motor skills.



Social Development

GOAL

Learn how to be friends

CHARACTERISTICS

May have multiple "best friends"

APPLICATION

Form groups of three to four to allow for individual attention. Have an older youth with each group.

Boys and girls may enjoy playing together

Encourage mixed-gender activities.

Fighting occurs but does not last long

Use role-playing or make-believe activities to promote empathy.



Emotional Development

GOAL

Learn to manage own emotions

CHARACTERISTICS

Wrapped up in self and seek approval from adults

APPLICATION

Provide positive encouragement and assistance.

Easily motivated and eager to try something new

Plan concrete activities where everyone can experience success.

Sensitive to criticism, does not like to fail, and goes out of their way to avoid punishment

Foster cooperation and teamwork rather than competition.



Intellectual Development

GOAL

Learn to manage attention and follow directions

CHARACTERISTICS

Short attention span

APPLICATION

Plan activities that take a short time to complete. Be very specific and clear with instructions.

Naturally curious and want to make sense of their world

Allow for exploration and asking lots of questions.

More interested in doing activities than "doing well"

Focus on the process, not the final product. Maybe only work on a project rather than complete it.



Physical Development

GOAL	CHARACTERISTICS	APPLICATION
Master small muscle (fine motor) coordination	Very active	Emphasize hands-on experiences.
	Moving all the time	Include real-life objects when teaching.
	Sitting still is difficult	Provide opportunities for physical activities such as hammering and playing instruments.



Social Development

GOAL	CHARACTERISTICS	APPLICATION
Learn empathy	Enjoy group activities but may not understand others' views	Incorporate group learning experiences and encourage the sharing of many viewpoints
	Most comfortable in same-gender groups	Assign youth to same-gender groups when possible.
	Look up to older youth and imitate their behavior	Encourage mentoring with older youth.
	Like symbols, ceremonies and songs	Hold initiation and installation ceremonies.



Emotional Development

GOAL	CHARACTERISTICS	APPLICATION
Achieve a "personal best"	Need recognition and praise for doing good work and do not like comparisons with others	Emphasize individual strengths and progress. Compare present to past performance of the individual.
	Show independence by disobedience and back talk	Give choices and provide individual attention.
	Enhanced feelings of self-competence	Allow youth to make decisions about what they make, do and use.



Intellectual Development

GOAL	CHARACTERISTICS	APPLICATION
Learn to stay on task	Interests often change rapidly, jumping from one thing to another	Use simple, short directions to facilitate brief learning experiences.
	Need guidance from adults	Provide assistance and close supervision
	Extremely curious and ask "why?" frequently	Do not answer all their questions in order to promote self-discovery.
	Learn by finding answers on their own	Encourage a few youth to find and report answers to the group.

Early Adolescence: Ages 12 to 14

Grades 7 to 9

Physical Development

GOAL

Achieve a healthy body image

CHARACTERISTICS

May experience growth spurt during puberty

Concerned and critical about their body image and personal hygiene habits

APPLICATION

Offer projects that require more coordination.

Avoid activities that lead to youth comparing their physical characteristics to others.



Social Development

GOAL

Balance positive and negative peer pressure

CHARACTERISTICS

Prefer activities with boys and girls

More interested in what their peers say than advice from adults; worried about being liked by friends

Opinionated, but still depend on parental guidelines

Feel in control about technology

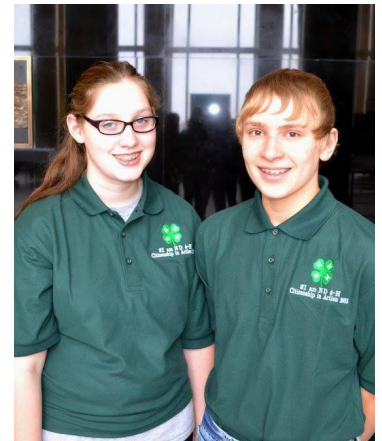
APPLICATION

Encourage co-educational learning.

Provide activities that foster social interaction with peers and adults. Encourage youth-adult partnerships.

Involve youth in deciding group rules but give them parameters to follow

Discuss their online friends and social media use.



Emotional Development

GOAL

Learn to overcome feelings of inferiority

CHARACTERISTICS

Self-critical; compare themselves to others with bouts of low self-esteem

Experience "rollercoaster ride" of emotions and mood swings

Desire independence but want and need parental guidance

Self-conscious

APPLICATION

Provide varied opportunities to achieve and have their competence recognized by others.

Recognize and accept their feelings, even if their feelings may seem extreme at times.

Encourage youth to find a mentor.

Concentrate on developing individual skills.



Intellectual Development

GOAL

Ability for complex thought

CHARACTERISTICS

Unsure of their needs and values for future career

Can take responsibility in planning and evaluating their own work

Can plan their own recreational activities; want to explore outside their community

Highly creative

APPLICATION

Relate life skills to career choices.

Allow youth to plan group activities. Expect follow-through but help them assess the outcome.

Form planning committees to organize social activities. Provide learning outside the community.

Give youth raw materials and let them create.



Physical Development

GOAL

Learn to self-regulate

CHARACTERISTICS

Approaching maturity; easily misguided by social media and the emphasis placed on appearance

APPLICATION

Avoid comments comparing body shapes/sizes. Be willing to answer questions about physical changes.

Pleasure seeking is appealing, and controlling impulses is difficult due to rapid brain development

Include opportunities to engage body and mind (mindfulness, yoga, meditation, journaling).



Social Development

GOAL

Balance individuality and social group roles

CHARACTERISTICS

Desire status among peer groups

APPLICATION

Establish a culture in which youth support and encourage their peers.

Interested in co-educational socializing and acceptance

Provide group-oriented projects, activities and games.

Developing community consciousness

Incorporate service learning projects.



Emotional Development

GOAL

Develop own set of values and beliefs

CHARACTERISTICS

Widespread feelings of inadequacy

APPLICATION

Help them see their positive worth.

Strive to earn responsibility and respect from others

Provide suggestions and alternatives rather than detailed instructions.

Beginning to know self as an individual

Allow time for youth to explore and express their own views.

Beginning to know self as an individual

Allow time for youth to explore and express their own views.



Intellectual Development

GOAL

Engage in abstract and future thinking

CHARACTERISTICS

Interested in adventure and traveling as incentives

APPLICATION

Provide trips rather than medals or ribbons.

Narrowing areas of interest for career exploration

Explore opportunities for after high school.

Enjoy setting goals based on their needs or interests

Put youth into real-life, problem-solving situations. Allow them to fully discover ideas, make decisions and evaluate outcomes.



Activity

Imagine next month you are responsible for planning a club event with members from each age group participating. Think through and plan how you can design the experience so all members are engaged.

Event:



Ages 5 to 8

Grades K to 3

Ages 9 to 11

Grades 4 to 6

Ages 12 to 14

Grades 7 to 9

Ages 15 to 18

Grades 10 to 12

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Child development: Positive parenting tips. [cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/Index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/Index.html)
- Martz, J., Mincemoyer, C., & McNeely, N.N. (2016). Essential elements of 4-H youth development programs: Curriculum and training guide. National 4-H Council.
- Allen, B. (2018). How kids develop: Ages and stages of youth development. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Extension Store. store.extension.iastate.edu/product/15415

Reviewed by:

Maxine Nordick, Caroline Homan, Cindy Klapperich, and Amelia Doll – NDSU Extension Agents

Dr. Rebecca Woods – NDSU Associate Professor of Developmental Science

The NDSU Extension does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names. NDSU encourages you to use and share this content, but please do so under the conditions of our Creative Commons license. You may copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this work as long as you give full attribution, don't use the work for commercial purposes and share your resulting work similarly. For more information, visit www.ag.ndsu.edu/agcomm/creative-commons.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ag.ndsu.edu

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, color, gender expression/identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, public assistance status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, spousal relationship to current employee, or veteran status, as applicable. Direct inquiries to Vice Provost for Title IX/ADA Coordinator, Old Main 201, NDSU Main Campus, 701-231-7708, ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu. This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881.