

Characteristics of Young People

Young people are complex. At no other time in their lives will they face more physical, intellectual, and emotional changes than during adolescence. These changes may happen rapidly or slowly, early or late, all at once or over a period of years.

For those who work with these amazing young people, be aware. The individuals you are dealing with today are not the same as yesterday, not the same as they will be tomorrow, and certainly not the same as they will be next year. As a leader of these young people, how do you cope? The first step is to know and understand the kinds of changes that are taking place in young people and what the implications are for your work with them.

The following pages describe some of the changes young adolescents (ages 10—15 years) and older adolescents (ages 16—19 years) encounter in different areas of their lives. While there is no delineation between male and female development within each of the age levels, remember that there IS a great difference in the physical and intellectual areas, especially in young adolescents. Young women develop much faster than young men. Remember, too, that any description of change in young people speaks in generalities. You, as the leader of your group, know best the development patterns of each person. Gaining a working knowledge from these pages, however, will help as you plan programs and cope with changing attitudes and behaviors.

Note: While the focus of this handbook is on older adolescents, it is important to acknowledge that human development is uneven and relative. While in some areas a fourteen-year-old may share some of the characteristics of the older adolescent, it is also quite possible that a seventeen-year old may share some of the characteristics of a young adolescent. For this reason we are providing developmental information for both young and older adolescents.

Young Adolescents (approximately ages 10-15)

What is happening with young adolescents relating to others?

- Most spend more time in peer groups, both formal and informal, than they did as children.
- Some develop the capacity for leadership in peer groups, formal and informal.
- Belonging to a peer group and being accepted by it are very important to some.
- Some move from exclusively same-sex friendships to friendships with the opposite sex.
- Some are isolated, with little open communication with others.
- Some develop new relationships with adults through both fantasy and open communication.
- Most are regarded and treated inconsistently by adults, as children one moment and as older youth the next.
- Most vacillate between dependence on adults and independence from them.
- Many have adult models and heroes, often mass-media entertainment figures.
- Many adopt racial, ethnic, religious, and class stereotypes and prejudices.

Therefore, an effective program with young adolescents must

- Spend time and energy developing a sense of community.
- Provide opportunities for positive adult/youth interaction.
- Include adults who are consistent and fair in relating to young people.
- Break down divisive stereotypes, prejudices, and cliques.
- Provide opportunities for positive, nonthreatening peer interaction.

What is happening with young adolescents and the family?

- Young adolescents experience distance from and conflict with their parents more than they did as children.
- Some experience greater sibling conflict than in late childhood.
- Many are living in family patterns other than the nuclear family, especially in single-parent homes.
- Peer relationships and school activities begin to take more time and interest away from the family.

Therefore, an effective program with young adolescents must

- Provide opportunities for positive family interaction.
- Include parents in the program.
- Recognize that not all young adolescents are living in two-parent homes.
- Help young people and adults gain skills in positive conflict resolution.

What is happening with young adolescents and physical changes?

- Most experience a spurt of rapid growth in height.
- Most experience growth of hands, feet, shoulders, hips. Many others are physically awkward.
- Some young adolescents experience rapid growth in strength, coordination, and athletic ability.
- Most experience a change in physical appearance; attractiveness is a matter of great concern.
- Most experiment with different roles, varying widely in character, values, mood, and behavior.
- Most experience the onset of puberty.
- Most experience genital maturation, with first menstruation or first ejaculation.
- Most older young adolescents have full capacity for reproduction. Most develop secondary sexual characteristics (breasts, hair, voice change, etc.).
- Most develop sexual interests, fantasies; most try some type of experimentation.

Therefore, an effective program with young adolescents must

Help young adolescents understand that -the changes they are experiencing are a normal part of growing.

Focus on physical similarities rather than differences.

Enable young people to recognize their sexuality in a healthy, open environment.

Avoid activities that demand great coordination or agility.

Recognize that role experimentation, value changes, and mood swings are part of growth.

Accept individuals for who they are and who they are becoming.

What is happening with young adolescents in faith development?

- Most are beginning to question the literal faith of childhood while at the same time accepting a conventional faith.
- Some older young adolescents are moving into development of a personal faith based on reflective thinking.
- The religious knowledge of most is minimal and poorly organized.

Therefore, an effective program with young adolescents must

- Provide opportunities for them to question their understanding of faith.
- Challenge them to begin to articulate what they believe.
- Enable them to gain more biblical knowledge and organize it effectively.

What is happening with young adolescents in intellectual development and learning?

- A few are moving from almost wholly concrete ways of thinking into more general, abstract, and symbolic forms.
- The reading level of young adolescents varies greatly (some are reading only at fourth- or fifth-grade level).
- Many learn more readily through electronic media than through print.
- Most have short attention spans.

Therefore, an effective program with young adolescents must

- Recognize that not all of them are capable of or comfortable reading aloud.
- Depend heavily on visual aids and include virtually no lectures.
- Make allowances for frequent loss of attention.
- Include more concrete terms and images than abstract ones.

What is happening with young adolescents and self-concept/self-esteem?

- Most experience considerable anxiety with regard to personal identity and adequacy.
- For most, self-esteem is an issue of great importance and extreme fluctuation.
- The search for sexual identity can cause conflict and confusion in the sexual identification with one or both parents.
- For young people of color, race and ethnicity are greatly involved in the search for identity.

Therefore, an effective program with young adolescents must

- Provide a safe place where young adolescents are helped to cope with anxieties about sexual identity, personal inadequacy, and racial/ethnic identity.
- Affirm each individual as a child of God.
- Enable young people to develop a healthy self-concept.

What is happening with young adolescents' characteristic behaviors?

- Many may be exuberant, spirited, reckless, and energetic, especially in groups.
- Most have a short attention span and respond to frequent changes of pace.
- Most are willing to experiment with new approaches.
- Many appear spontaneous, unpredictable, flighty.
- Many take a deep interest in popular music.
- Many spend long hours watching television.
- Many begin using alcohol and tobacco and other forms of addictive drugs.

Therefore, an effective program with young adolescents must

- Include frequent and often extreme changes in pace.
- Set and communicate clear and firm behavioral limits and expectations.
- Include patient and flexible leaders.
- Educate them about drug and alcohol abuse and provide training in refusal skills.
- Model and teach critical viewing and listening skills, helping youth to view television and listen to music discriminately.

Older Adolescents (approximately ages 16-19)

What is happening with older adolescents relating to others?

- Most continue to pursue acceptance by peers; many find acceptance by a select peer group most important.
- Peer groups consume a majority of waking hours for many.
- Leadership qualities begin to mature as opportunities for development are provided.
- Most late teens relate to both same-sex and opposite-sex friendships, with opposite sex relationships concentrating on one-to-one relationships.
- Some continue to avoid communication with others.
- Relationships with adults vary from conflict to friendship. Authority becomes personified in adults (many times in parents) and, for many, becomes a threat to personal freedom.
- Independence grows in importance; adults and adolescents begin to formulate person-to-person relationships to replace child-adult relationships.
- Adult models and heroes remain important; many become more involved in a more realistic profile of their heroes, especially as they project their own independent lifestyle.
- Many continue to accept established stereotypes; many reject stereotypes in an attempt to gain independence and to establish new lifestyles.

Therefore, an effective program with older adolescents must

- Spend time and energy developing a sense of community.
- Provide opportunities for positive adult-youth interaction.
- Include adults who are willing to work with young people as partners.
- Enable adolescents to assume leadership roles.
- Work to question stereotypes and lifestyle issues.
- Help adolescents develop healthy one-to-one same-sex and opposite-sex relationships.

What is happening with older adolescents and relationships

- Conflict with parents can become more intense as each young person continues to establish his or her own identity.
- In the last years of high school, parent-youth relationships may mellow.
- Some young people begin to form their own families through engagement, marriage, and the birth of children,
- Peer relationships and school activities become more and more important for many, leaving less time for family. School athletics take on great significance for some.

Therefore, an effective program with older adolescents must

- Provide opportunities for positive family interaction.
- Include parents in the program.

- Enable young people to view their future as family members and possible parents realistically.
- Begin to teach parenting skills
- Help young people and parents as the parent-child relationship changes dramatically.

What is happening with older adolescents and physical changes?

- Some mature later than others and experience rapid growth during the late teens.
- Growth begins to level off, and many begin to accept their own bodies.
- Strength and coordination become more manageable and reliable.
- Physical appearance continues to be a matter of concern.
- Adolescents continue to experience later stages of puberty; some catch up with others during this period of growth.
- Sexual interests continue to grow, with fantasies and experimentation becoming more frequent.

Therefore, an effective program with older adolescents must

- Help them develop a healthy attitude toward their body.
- Enable them to cope with their sexuality responsibly.
- Continue to educate them about the changes they are experiencing.

What is happening with older adolescents and faith development?

- Some are just now beginning to raise questions about religion.
- Many adolescents are attempting to put the pieces together for themselves.
- Some adolescents have begun to relate religious information and to deal with concerns caused by conflicts and lifestyles.

Therefore, an effective program with older adolescents must

- Continue to raise questions about their faith.
- Challenge them to articulate what they believe.
- Provide opportunities to apply faith to real* world issues and situations.

What is happening with older adolescents and intellectual development and learning?

- Late teens are more able to think abstractly and globally.
- Reading levels still vary greatly; many cannot write coherently.
- Electronic media continue to be important for educating.
- More are able to concentrate for slightly longer periods of time.

Therefore, an effective program with older adolescents must

- Challenge them to think in abstractions.
- Broaden their perspectives to include the whole church, community, and world.
- Depend heavily on visual aids and the electronic media to convey messages.
- Provide opportunities for intense discussions and concentration.

What is happening with older adolescents and self-concept/self-esteem?

- Anxiety continues for many, but others begin to accept and concretize their personal identity and to accept their adequacy.
- Most adolescents will have established a role model that may or may not be continued in the future.
- The search for sexual identity continues.

- Many young people of color become personally concerned with racial/ethnic empowerment and cultural awareness.

Therefore, an effective program with older adolescents must

- Continue to provide a safe place where they may cope with anxieties about sexual identity, personal inadequacy, and racial/ethnic identity.
- Affirm each individual as a child of God.
- Enable adolescents to develop a healthy self-concept.
- Provide positive adult role models.

What is happening with older adolescents' characteristic behaviors?

- Most are settled, some to the degree of experiencing boredom in groups.
- Most are able to concentrate for longer periods of time and enjoy discussions that allow them to express their own ideas.
- Most are willing to experiment, but many express reserve.
- Many continue to appear spontaneous, unpredictable, and flighty.
- Many are willing to take on responsibility and are capable of managing difficult tasks.
- Music interests continue; some participate in their own groups.
- Some continue to be avid television watchers, but many are too busy with other activities.
- Drug use becomes more widespread.
- Alcohol and tobacco use continues, and some become champions against their use.

Therefore, an effective program with older adolescents must

- Include new and interesting approaches and teaching methods.
- Depend heavily on group discussions.
- Provide opportunities to assume responsibilities within the group.
- Help to relieve rather than create more stress in young people's lives by providing a strong community that is comfortable and yet challenging.
- Include referral and counseling services for drug and alcohol abusers.