

Task of Childhood

DID YOU KNOW THAT

The major task of childhood is to become “your own person” †

Children learn to make choices and commitments, follow through with them, and stand up independently in the world. They need to be respected for taking on these tasks. After all, we respect adults who can do these things. They are complicated and courageous actions. However, children swing back and forth between dependence and independence as they work on these tasks. It is easy for parents to get frustrated. It is also easy for a parent to assume that if the child would simply follow the plan that makes sense to a parent, things would be all right in the end.

† Source: Middle Childhood and Adolescent Development, Oregon State University Extension Service.

YOUR GUIDE TO

Understanding your child’s moral, emotional, and self-development

The main tasks of childhood require children to learn, and this kind of learning is not just a matter of getting the right answer. Most important is to understand the *meaning* of the right answer. This is truly difficult work and it absolutely requires support from parents, relatives, and neighbors.

To help children grow up, parents need to be aware how their child is changing, growing, and developing. It is easy for a middle-aged adult to forget this fact, especially when confronted with a difficult problem. However, parents who are working

on their own growth are in a good position to understand children and to respect what they are doing as they struggle to grow up and become good people in their own right.

On the following pages are characteristics of the “typical” child during each developmental stage from ages 8 to 18. Children’s progression through these stages is determined not only by biological growth and change, but also by temperament and personality, adult expectations, and social influences.



“Children will not remember you for the material things you provided but for the feeling that you cherished them.”

-Richard L. Evans



Late Childhood Development Ages 8-11

Cognitive Stage

Children in this developmental stage use logical thinking but with a very limited ability to extend logic to abstract concepts (e.g. the disdain for imaginative and illogical thinking of early childhood). At this point, they have accumulated a lot of general knowledge and have gradually developed the ability to apply learned concepts to new tasks. They also have a frequent interest in learning life skills from adults at home and elsewhere (e.g. cooking, fixing things, etc.).

Moral Development

Children age 8-11 are predominantly focused in the needs and wants of themselves, although they have developed a conscience and move from thinking in terms of “What’s in it for me?” fairness (e.g. “If you did this for me, I would do that for you.”).

They now want to gain social approval and live up to the expectations of people close to them. They

tend to have a “Golden Rule” morality where they can take the perspective of others and may place the needs of others over their own self-interest. However, their moral thinking abilities are not always reflected in their behavior.

Psychological and Emotional Traits

Children at this stage have a need to develop a sense of mastery and accomplishment with frequent interest in making plans and achieving goals. They learn from what parents and others do to make and fix things and have a tendency to be disorganized and forgetful.

Early onset of puberty is associated with lower self-control and emotional instability.

Self-Concept

Influenced by relationships with family members, teachers, and increasingly by their peers, often relatively, 8- to 11-year-olds have a low level of concern about their physical appearance (especially boys), although this is influenced by peers as well as the media.

Many boys experience pressure to conform to “masculine” stereotype. Girls’

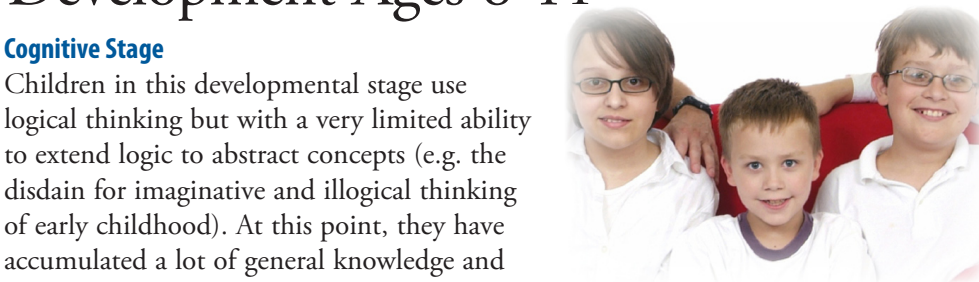
body image declines precipitously with puberty, especially with early onset puberty. Early onset puberty is also associated with lower self-control and emotional instability, especially for boys.

Relationship to Parents and Other Adults

Children in late childhood development tend to be closely attached to parental figures and parents increasingly need to involve these children in decision making while increasing responsibility with age. Most frequent conflicts occur over sibling quarrels and forgetfulness with respect to chores, schoolwork, and messiness, especially of their bedroom. Parental listening skills becomes increasingly important as the parent-child communication patterns can change with puberty. Many adolescents report that (a) they cannot talk with parents about issues related to sexuality, and (b) they do not get needed information in sex education courses at school.

Peer Relationships

Friendships among 8- to 11-year-olds are often with their same-gender peers and are usually based on proximity, common interest/hobbies, or other perceived commonalities. Girls usually have fewer, but emotionally closer, friends than boys. Formation of exclusive “clubs” and shifting peer alliances is common at this age and media influences and popular culture increasingly affect the child’s peer activities and relationships.



Early Adolescents Ages 11-14

Cognitive Stage

Adolescents vary between some children who are still focused on logic and others who are able to combine logical and abstract thinking. Some early adolescents cannot think ahead to the consequences of their actions. They are developing new thinking skills, such as thinking more about possibilities,

thinking more abstractly, thinking more about the process of thinking itself, thinking in multiple dimensions, and seeing things as relative rather than absolute. They practice new thinking skills through humor and arguing with parents and others, and the use of humor focused on satire, sarcasm, and sex.



Self-Concept

An early adolescent's self-image can be challenged by body changes during puberty as well as social comparisons. This is also when they begin to develop the long-term process of establishing their own identity separate from family. Many girls experience pressure to conform to gender stereotypes and might

Relationship to Parents

Changes in parental expectations alter previous patterns of relationships, often resulting in greater conflict. Early adolescents also have a greater focus on peer friendships as they develop an identity outside of the role of a child in a family. They also often rebuff physical affection (but



Moral Development

Early adolescents have a continuing self-focus and often believe they are invulnerable to negative events. They also have an increasing ability to take the perspective of others into account with their own perspective. In addition, as they become concerned about gaining social approval, their morals begin to be based on respect for the social order and agreements between people or what is known as "law and order" morality. Youth also begin to question social conventions, re-examine their own values and moral/ethical principles, which sometimes results in conflicts with their parents.



Emotional Traits

Youth age 11-14 have an intense self-focus, an increased desire for privacy, and a sensitivity about their body. They also have frequent mood swings with changes in activities and contexts. Too much time spent alone can contribute to moodiness and heightened forgetfulness.

Peer Relationships

Early adolescent friendships increasingly involve sharing of values. Cliques of three to six friends (usually the same gender) provide a greater sense of security. Romantic crushes are common and dating begins.



show less interest in math and science. With puberty, normal increases in girls' body fat can negatively influence their body image and self-concept. Both boys and girls might be concerned with skin problems, height, weight, and overall appearance.

still need it). They have an increased interest in making their own decisions, which benefits from increased opportunities to do so. Youth object more often to parental limitations (but still needs some). Parental listening skills and nurturing continue to be important.



Late Adolescents Ages 14-18

Cognitive Stage

Late adolescents have a major broadening of thinking abilities: they can think abstractly and hypothetically; they can discern the underlying principles of various phenomena and apply them to new situations; and they can think about the future, considering many possibilities and logical outcomes of possible events. At this stage, they also have a greater perspective-taking ability that can result in increased empathy and concern for others and a new interest in societal issues.

Moral Development

As they get older, adolescents age 14-18 become less egocentric. They place an increased emphasis on abstract values and moral principles and some develop a “principled morality” with an increased ability to take another’s perspective where they can see the bigger societal picture and might value moral principles over laws. Late adolescents also have different rates of cognitive and emotional development (e.g. they often advocate for specific values and yet violate them at the same time).

Self-Concept

The process of identity formation is intense for late adolescents. They experiment with different roles, such as looks, sexuality, values, friendships, ethnicity, and especially occupations. Some girls might experience obsessive dieting or eating disorders, especially those who have higher body fat, are chronically depressed, or who have highly conflicted family relationships. Minority youths might explore several patterns of identity formation, such as a strong ethnic identity, bi-cultural identity, assimilation into the majority culture, and alienation from the majority culture.



Psychological and Emotional Traits

For some early adolescents, there is an increased ability to empathize with others along with a greater vulnerability to worrying, depression, and concern for others, (especially among girls). Many show an increase in responsible behaviors.

Peer Relationships

Peers help youth explore and develop their own identity and cross-gender friendships become more common. Anti-social peer groups can increase anti-social behaviors. Close friendships also help youth with the process of developing an individual identity separate from that of a child in a family.



Relationship to Parents and Other Adults

Conflicts with parents often decrease with age, especially as late adolescents have an improved ability to see parents as individuals and consider their perspectives. Most maintain good relationship with their parents. They also have a greater interest in taking on “adult-type” responsibilities (having their own checking account, doing their own laundry, buying their own clothes, cooking meals, making repairs, etc.). Late adolescents commonly make most of their own decisions, preparing for eventual family. Their needs balance between time spent with adults and with peers. They continue to benefit from some parental limits and monitoring, while often objecting to them. Common conflicts occur over money, curfews, chores, appearance, and activities with peers.

