



# Human development

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Why this chapter? If you are an adult youth worker, then you probably think this chapter is redundant, because you have already had your experience as a young person. We believe your experience in this case is not enough. This does not qualify you as a properly prepared youth worker, because your experience was very subjective and also mostly subconscious. Nevertheless your experience as a young person is important as a reference for yourself. And it also will help you to put yourself in the shoes of another young person, especially if you have given time, space and attention to reflect on your own experiences. But as a professional youth worker, subjective experience cannot be sufficient, we need to increase our comprehension through studying and training best practices. It is important for us to briefly check the characteristics of human development and to keep in mind who young people are, when dealing with their wellbeing.

## ***Middle childhood***

Middle childhood is not a target group youth work targets on a regular basis. But it is good to know what is happening in the lives of children right before they enter into our domain – youth work. Middle childhood is a period of life that marks the time between the beginning of school and entering adolescence (between 7 and 11 years of age).

### **Physical development**

This period is known for slow, but steady growth. Due to muscle gain, they can be active for a longer time. They develop motor skills. Their brain has reached its full capacity, which results in better planning and also in controlling emotional outbursts.

### **Cognitive development**

They develop inductive reasoning, which is a reflection of their own experience. They often assume that what happens to them is true for all. They understand logic, but in terms of their own experiences, not yet the hypothetical logic. Their vocabulary grows immensely as well as understanding grammar. They start solving moral issues from the perception of *how this is perceived by others*.

### **Psychological development**

They start building their self-concept more realistically, though the influence is slowly shifting from family to peer and media. These three influencers are the ground for the feeling of a child's worth.





### **General characteristics of this period**

Children are very busy in this period playing, planning, and being constantly active. Friendship starts being more important than family. Friends and peers are those with whom they compare their worth, their competencies and their looks. Friendship also offers numerous possibilities for learning social skills like communication and negotiation. By copying their peers, they learn how to achieve some tasks, how to dress, how to act, what to listen etc. This is a period, where self-esteem mostly comes from their peers, not from their parents anymore.

### ***Adolescence***

This is a period in life from 12 to 18 years of age and it is a construct of the modern time.

#### **Physical development**

This period is known for rapid growth, hormonal changes, and sexual maturity which is visible in sex characteristic of the body. Sexual maturity for females starts around age 10 or 11 and ends by ages 15 to 17. For male, the process starts at 11 or 12 and finishes by 16 or 17 years of age. During this time, both female and male, develop secondary sex characteristics, which are physical signs of sexual maturation. Females develop breasts, their hips start widening. They experience the beginning of menstrual periods. Female bodies experience increases in body fat. Male starts growing facial hair and their voice gets deeper. They also experience their first ejaculation. Male bodies grow more muscle. Both sexes start growing pubic and underarm hair. Hormones do not affect just the reproductive system; they also trigger different behaviour. They experience mood swings, emotions, and impulses. All this happens due to a massive amount of sex hormones (oestrogen, progesterone, and testosterone).

#### **Cognitive development**

Cognitive improvements in adolescence are rapid and huge. They develop deductive reasoning, which is based on facts and with a wider perspective. Their cognitive abilities are mostly improved in the following areas: attention, memory, processing speed, organisation, and metacognition. "Metacognition is relevant in social cognition, increasing introspection, self-consciousness and intellectualization. It also encourages adolescents to question rules, assertions, and such. Wisdom, or the capacity for insight and judgement, is developing through experience, and increases steadily through age 25, however, young adolescents have an increased tendency to engage in risky behaviour." (Walter, Bobbola, 2017). They start understanding that morality often isn't black or white, but it could also have levels of right and wrong.

#### **Psychological development**

Psychological development is seen as development of personal and social identity. Young people test limits, break rules, rebel against authority, explore, and experience, and this is how





they form their own identity and become more autonomous. This is a period of questioning their own existence and becoming more self-aware. They start thinking more abstractly and play with the multiple possibilities. On one hand, they experience more emotions (possible to develop more stress), but on the other hand, they are able to think more mature in problem solving. This is interchangeable all the time. Peer groups are becoming more and more important as they break from parents, but the role of the parents is never completely unimportant. While peers help them develop their identity, they are also a huge source of peer pressure and consequently stress.

### **General characteristics of this period**

In this period of identity forming young people are influenced by parents, peers, and wider society. This often results in many conflicts, because the influencing groups often do not see eye to eye. They continue developing social skills because the frequency of interactions increases. They form their own belief system, they feel the need for sexual expression, and often conflict with the social responsibilities. All these aspects develop through culture and through communication with the external world, which can either be positive or negative.

### ***Early Adulthood***

This is a period in life from the age of 18 into the 20ies.

#### **Physical development**

From the perspective of physical development, this is the human peak. All physical systems are operating at their finest. This is also the best time to reproduce, however postponing childbearing is quite common in Western societies.

#### **Cognitive development**

Young people continue with cognitive development. They are able to think abstractly. But they don't only think what is possible, but also what is likely as they have gained many experiences on their own by now. They also understand the complexity of moral dilemmas, for instance that they are layers of right and wrong and nuances of truth.

#### **Psychological development**

Being a young adult is all about becoming independent and autonomous. All their thoughts are future-oriented because they need to finish school, find a job, get their own place etc. that is why they often feel like their lives are on hold. Needs to be intimate is often met through friends, not through partners yet. Friendships are still the most important relationships in early 20ies. That however, transitions in later years.

### **General characteristics of this period**





Young people often feel a lot of stress transitioning to adulthood and they become less physically active. These two are interactive and can be changed by adopting a better and healthier lifestyle. They are facing their first proper decision making (to leave home, career decision, defining goals) and also first consequences of such decisions. They are also becoming active in the community by volunteering, activism etc.

### ***Young people and nature***

One of the most interesting statements found in the literature about nature and young people is that young people tend to lose connection with nature as they grow older. The article *Barriers to nature engagement in young people* (This article is an extract from 'Into the Wild' restoring young minds in the Surrey Hills, a report by Genevieve Lebus)

States that the nature connection index is significantly decreasing with age. In the following chart (Reprinted from A measure of nature connectedness for children and adults: validation, performance, and insights (p. 7) by Richardson et al., 2019: Sustainability.), we can see the mean across the lifespan of 3919 people. The same study cites the following as reasons for disconnection from nature:

- **Inaccessibility to nature.** If it is not of an appropriate nature, then the likelihood of associating with nature is significantly lower.
- **Youth** in the present times is primarily a **technology-oriented generation**. Their interests are more focused on the internet, social media, computer games and the like.
- **Parents.** If young people spent time in nature with their parents as children, then young people are also significantly more likely to spend time in nature (albeit a reduced amount of time).
- **Fear of the unknown.** Young people feel less and less safe in nature.
- Young people from families with **lower socio-economic status** have **even less access to nature**. The study explains this by saying that there are usually fewer local green spaces in deprived urban areas.

A study *A Measure of Nature Connectedness for Children and Adults: Validation, Performance, and Insights*, claims "Adolescence sees the move from primary to secondary school and is a time of many developmental changes, including the emotional regulation required for successful social relationships and the development of self-identity."

This explains another two reasons for detachment of young people from nature, which were listed in the report *Nature: How connecting with nature benefits our mental health*:

- **No time.** Young people tend to be very busy studying or even working at that time, which results in less time spent in nature.
- **Lack of people.** Young people often have trouble finding people to spend time in nature with.





However, even if young people do not spend a sufficient amount of time in nature, young people still appreciate nature. This was also very evident in the case of the Friday for Future movement, which began with the gesture of a single girl and conquered the whole world.

### ***Conclusion***

Being young is not an easy thing. As you were able to see, young people face several physical, psychological and social changes which influence their lives. This influences their wellbeing. Nature, that was once their safe haven, falls out of focus. Their interests shift and their behaviour changes drastically. This is a moment for us to stop with the judgement and to support youth. As everything else in nature, this is a transitional period to adulthood and it has its purpose. In the chapter about the *Principles and daily routine in youth work*, you can read how to do just that.

### **Bibliography**

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