

Portrait of a Thriving Youth



SEPTEMBER 2023



Please cite as:

Youth-Nex (2023). *Portrait of a Thriving Youth*. University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development. Charlottesville, VA.

For more information please visit
<http://education.virginia.edu/Youth-Nex>
or contact Youth-Nex@virginia.edu

Report © 2023 Rectors and Visitors of the University of Virginia.



SCHOOL of EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX

Table of Contents

Foreword	1
Portrait Overview	2
Domain Introduction	8
Domains of Adolescent Learning & Development	
▶ Health	10
▶ Cognition	13
▶ Identity	15
▶ Meaning & Purpose	17
▶ Emotion	19
▶ Social	21
Resources	23
Portrait Design Team Members	25
Appendix A: Skills & Competencies	27
Appendix B: Self Reflection Tool	30

Foreword

To say that we want to build a world where every young person can thrive is an easily agreed upon goal, especially for those in the education and youth-serving sectors. To define what it means to thrive, and to identify what people and environments need to be and do to make it possible for every young person to thrive is a little harder to come to a consensus on.

This is not for a lack of ideas or evidence. Over the years there have been many frameworks and much research aimed at ensuring healthy outcomes for youth. Yet too often this work has remained siloed within particular youth-serving sectors, be it education, out-of-school-time, juvenile justice, pediatrics, social services, counseling, etc. When we lack a common language across sectors, it is difficult to work together towards shared goals. This is where the Portrait of a Thriving Youth comes in.

The Portrait provides a north star for all the people, settings, and systems that work with and serve young people. It brings together the key ideas from across existing developmental frameworks and interdisciplinary literature, distilling them to their common concepts. In doing so, the Portrait elevates the major developmental tasks and needs of youth from the ages of 10-25, providing a shared language for sectors and systems to work together to ensure that young people have what they need to thrive. It differs from other portraits that you may be familiar with, such as the portraits of graduates common in school systems, because rather than focusing on a single point in time, it looks across the full period of adolescence.

The Portrait identifies what is critical not only to successfully exit adolescence to adulthood, but also to thrive during one's adolescent years. Importantly, it is not solely putting the onus on youth, but rather on those of us who work with and make decisions about youth to ensure that we are providing them with relationships and environments that meet and adapt to their evolving needs.

Whereas thriving might look and feel different in different communities and cultures, the basic dimensions of thriving are constant. Thus, the Portrait provides a common framework that can be used by both adults and youth themselves to advocate for what every young person has a right to access and experience. We hope that you will use the Portrait, across sectors and settings and with youth, to work together to build the world that every youth deserves.



**Stephanie Rowley,
Ph.D.**

Dean, University of
Virginia School of
Education and Human
Development

Affiliate, Youth-Nex: The
UVA Center to Promote
Effective Youth
Development

William R. Kenan Jr.
Professor of Education




Portrait Overview



SCHOOL *of* EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX


What Does It Mean To “Thrive”?

When we talk about a thriving youth, we mean a young person who is not only doing well across the various dimensions of development, but who also has the internal capacity and external resources they need to *continue* to do well. Thriving is holistic and dynamic. It includes the interconnected social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions that interact over time and is a marker of not only one’s present state, but also the trajectory one is on. Thriving is a state of being that is deeply dependent on context and exists at both the individual and the communal levels. Youth can thrive in one setting but feel a sense of failure in another setting. Thriving emphasizes strengths and assets, but structural inequities inhibit individuals’ opportunities to thrive. Even when life experiences are profoundly difficult, some youth thrive because they have support, positive relationships, and opportunities in place to help them manage adversity. Thriving is not always visible to the onlooker; it also has a subjective nature and depends on the youth’s own sense of joy, agency, and meaning in their lives.¹



“Thriving is holistic and dynamic. It includes the interconnected social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions that interact over time and is a marker of not only one’s present state, but also the trajectory one is on.”

Settings matter. Systems matter. Thriving is not the sole responsibility of each adolescent. Although we are naming this the *Portrait of a Thriving Youth*, thriving is highly dependent on the community conditions and supports around the individual. Thriving requires that one has access to the resources to support one’s physical, mental, emotional, and social health. While the Portrait focuses



“The responsibility for thriving is not on youth alone. It is the responsibility of all adults across all settings to ensure optimal thriving of all youth.”

on domains of thriving that are important for adolescents and consider how they appear within individual youth, we acknowledge that it is the responsibility of all adults across all settings to ensure optimal thriving of all youth. Resilience, while an important aspect of thriving, is determined by whether a youth has access to what they need to thrive.


Thriving may be defined differently within distinct cultural communities and we do not believe there is a single, universal definition of what thriving looks like for every young person and in every cultural community. We do believe that every young person has the capacity to thrive, if the environmental conditions and resources support them to reach their full potential. Further it is every young person’s right to have access to the environmental conditions and resources they need to thrive in whatever community they are part of. Namely, the integrated conditions of thriving that all youth need to be safe and supported; healthy and able to heal; rooted and connected; learning and growing; living with joy and purpose; and pursuing their passions and interests².

¹ Our definition of thriving is based on the definition provided in Osher, Pittman, Young, Smith, Moroney & Irby (2020). *Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning & Development: A More Powerful Conceptualization of the Contributors to Youth Success*. The Readiness Project.

² Krauss, S. M. (2023). *Whole Child, Whole Life: 10 Ways to Help Kids Live, Learn, and Thrive*. Corwin.

What Is This Portrait Of A Thriving Youth?

The Portrait aims to build a collective and broadly understood vision of what a thriving youth might be and do, as individuals and as part of their communities. It depicts what optimal youth development looks like during the period of adolescence when the supports, structures and systems are in place to promote thriving. As such it provides practitioners, policymakers, and researchers with an anchor point to ground their work and the decisions they make. It also provides young people and their adult caregivers a common language to advocate for the systems and settings that support thriving.



"The trajectory of adolescent development is as unique as each of us and highly impacted by the systems and settings in which we learn and grow."

We know that the trajectory of adolescent development is as unique as each of us, and highly impacted by the systems and settings in which we learn and grow. This portrait is not a how-to guide to creating those systems and settings. Many sectors, such as youth development and education, have their own implementation frameworks and toolkits and it is not our intent to compete with or complicate the good work happening in communities across the country to promote healthy adolescent learning and development. Therefore:

The Portrait is a high-level call to action to provide decision-makers with common, cross-sector language to guide their decisions about resources, funding, and policies that can promote or inhibit thriving. It can help individuals, organizations, and systems understand the science behind their work.

How We Developed The Portrait

Our process for developing the portrait was akin to the *Portrait of a Graduate* exercise that states and school districts across the country are creating to help develop a joint vision of the experiences, assets, skills, and knowledge that they aspire for their students to have upon high school graduation. As such, the design process for this consensus document brought together a set of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, convened by a team at Youth-Nex, the University of Virginia (UVA) Center to Promote Effective Youth Development at the UVA School of Education and Human Development.

Acknowledging 40 years of science on adolescent development, we relied on several existing frameworks to guide the portrait development, namely:

- ▶ Alliance for Excellent Education: Science of Learning: [What Educators Need to Know About Adolescent Development](#)
- ▶ American Academy of Pediatrics: [Reaching Teens, 2nd Edition](#)
- ▶ Center for the Developing Adolescent: [The Core Science of Adolescent Development](#)
- ▶ National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine: [The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth](#)
- ▶ National Institutes for Health: [Adolescent Development and the Biology of Puberty](#)
- ▶ Science of Learning and Development Alliance: [How the Science of Learning and Development Can Transform Education](#)

- ▶ University of Chicago Consortium for School Research: [Foundations for Young adult success](#)
- ▶ UNICEF Office of Research, [The Adolescent Brain: A Second Window of Opportunity](#)

“Development during adolescence is fluid and based, in part, on socially constructed transition points (e.g., from elementary to secondary school and from high school into young adulthood), as well as variations in biological maturation; namely, the onset of puberty, which varies by individual.”

Through an iterative and collaborative process the Youth-Nex team, in collaboration with the design team developed consensus around the six domains of adolescent development that reflect contemporary developmental science and current and future societal needs.

An early version of the Portrait was vetted with key stakeholder groups including the Youth-Nex Youth Advisory Council and the Commonwealth Alliance for Thriving Youth (in Virginia). (See a later section for a list of Design Team members and supporting staff).

Defining “Adolescence”

The portrait is grounded in the science of adolescence and encompasses the four research-based stages of adolescent learning and development, based on the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine 2019 definitions of the stages of adolescent development:

- ▶ Early adolescence (ages 10 to 12)
- ▶ Middle adolescence (ages 13 to 15)
- ▶ Late adolescence (ages 16 to 18)
- ▶ Young adulthood (ages 19 to 25)

While these stages have ages associated with them, development during adolescence is fluid and based, in part, on socially constructed transition points (e.g., from elementary to secondary school and from high school into young adulthood), as well as variations in biological maturation; namely, the onset of puberty, which varies by individual. The portrait depicts the full period of adolescence – from early to middle to late adolescence, and into young adulthood – surfacing developmental needs, assets, and milestones a young person might experience throughout this time. Specifically, this document offers a portrait that illustrates the key domains of adolescent development across the 10–25-year-old age span. It is our intent that the Portrait can serve as a guide to people, programs, systems, and settings, so that each community where adolescents live can create optimal and equitable conditions for thriving, based on what the science tells us is important.

The remainder of this introductory section to the Portrait provides a synthesis of the research on adolescent brain and body development. It underscores the individuality of our growth trajectories, shaped by the cultural, societal, and community norms that impact the programs, settings, and systems available to promote thriving youth.

The Rapidly Changing Adolescent Brain

Research about adolescent learning and development draws from a variety of disciplines, including but not limited to neuroscience, cognitive sciences, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and medicine. By drawing from these multiple disciplines, the science of adolescent learning synthesizes

what researchers know about adolescence and challenges traditional thinking about what it means to teach and learn during this developmental period.

As asserted in The Promise of Adolescence "*Although adolescence is often thought of as a time of turmoil and risk for young people, it is more accurately viewed as a developmental period rich with opportunity to learn and grow.*" Throughout adolescence, connections between regions of the brain become stronger and more efficient, while unused connections are pruned away. Adolescents' brains, therefore, can adapt to challenges and opportunities, becoming more specialized in response to demands placed on them by their environments.

Adolescent brain development is a second window of opportunity, where the onset of puberty heralds a period of rapid physical growth as well as changes to the brain's neural circuitry, particularly impacting the neural circuits that are involved in processing emotions, risks, rewards, and personal interactions.


The Rapidly Changing Adolescent Body

Adolescent physical development is often thought of synonymously with puberty, which triggers complex and powerful changes to the body that need to be understood and managed. Puberty is a process of physical changes through which our bodies mature and become capable of reproduction. It is accompanied by profound psychological changes as well. Puberty is shaped by both biological (maturation of primary and secondary sex characteristics, acquisition of reproductive maturity) and social processes (physical changes affect how we perceive ourselves and how we are treated by others which has been shown to have social consequences). During adolescence, we experience highly visible physical changes such as acne, body odor, and growth of axillary hair, in addition to the invisible neurological changes.

The sequence of pubertal changes is relatively predictable, but their timing is unique to each of us. Females normally experience the onset of puberty between the ages of 8 and 14, while the onset of puberty for males is a little later, normally between the ages of 9 and 15. Pubertal maturation is controlled largely by complex interactions among the brain, the pituitary gland, and the gonads, which in turn interact with the social and cultural environments in which we develop. A substantial body of evidence suggests that variations in the age of onset of puberty may have developmental and behavioral consequences during adolescence. For example, early puberty in girls has been associated with being teased or bullied by older children and higher rates of depression and anxiety. Additionally, the adultification of youth of color leads to inaccurate interpretation of their behaviors.

How Positive Adolescent Development Shapes Thriving


At the beginning of puberty, neurons (brain cells) are gaining and losing up to 25 percent of their connections each week in response to changing environmental demands. By the time we reach adulthood (and some neural stability) that number drops to 10 percent. This rapidly changing adolescent brain is primed to help us adapt to the vastly changing social, intellectual, and cognitive landscape. Our brains are especially sensitive to the social environment during this period of development. This makes the adolescent years an especially abundant time for experiential learning with regard to developing relationships and learning to process and manage emotions, which in turn helps adolescents develop their interests, passions, and goals. As our cognitive, emotional, and social development continue to mature, our understanding of morality—what we perceive to be right and wrong—expands and our behaviors become more closely aligned with our values and beliefs. Adolescent brains are neither immature nor incomplete. Instead, they are structured for the intense learning they need to propel them out of childhood and into the world of adulthood.



"As our cognitive, emotional, and social development continue to mature, our understanding of morality--what we perceive to be right and wrong--expands and our behaviors become more closely aligned with our values and beliefs."

Requisite to transition to adulthood is the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and social competencies to successfully take on adult roles and relationships. Much of this learning occurs through real-life experiences and involves paying close attention to the people and setting around us. It also requires that we are willing to explore, try new things, and learn from mistakes, often through trial and error.

During adolescence, our brains are more responsive to dopamine (a neurotransmitter that creates good feelings, or feelings of reward) and we are more likely than as children or adults to be drawn to novel and intense experiences—leading to both positive and risky behaviors. Hormonal changes



"The rapidly changing adolescent brain is primed to help us adapt to the vastly changing social, intellectual, and cognitive landscape."

contribute to the appeal of these new experiences, particularly those that promise to increase social status. The same brain regions that are activated by rebellious, risk-taking behavior are those regions activated by prosocial behavior, such as kindness and doing for others. Risk-taking can be positive or negative depending on the context and the content of the behaviors.

During adolescence our desire for new experiences enables us to become more independent from our parents, enhancing learning and curiosity, and helping us develop our unique identity and agency. To harness this drive in positive directions, adolescents need safe and satisfying opportunities for positive exploration, underscoring the need for safe and supportive environments that enable youth thriving.





Domain Introduction



SCHOOL *of* EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX

Six Domains Of Adolescent Learning & Development

The Portrait illustrates the six key interconnected domains of adolescent learning and development:

- ▶ Health
- ▶ Cognition
- ▶ Identity
- ▶ Meaning & Purpose
- ▶ Emotion
- ▶ Social

While the developing child works on these domains starting in early childhood and an individual continues to do so into adulthood, the neurobiological and social shifts associated with adolescence render the ages from approximately 10 to 25 as a critical window during which the healthy development of these domains is essential to support thriving. Further, because of the openness to change during this period, these years also provide ideal opportunities for intervening to shift potentially negative developmental trajectories.

The development of adolescent characteristics and behaviors is not linear or sequential, looks different for each adolescent, and is inextricably linked to the environments in which we grow. However, there are certain milestones and capacities that are essential for young people to attain to thrive. While not exhaustive, key milestones and competencies are listed in textboxes for each domain. Each domain definition starts with a statement of what a young person might say about their experiences during adolescence as they work through the developmental tasks associated with the key aspects of adolescent thriving. Appendix A offers a list of the skills and competencies commonly associated with each of the six domains.

Domains of
Adolescent
Learning
& Development

Health



Health: Physical & Mental

Physical and mental health are inextricably linked throughout our lives, and especially during adolescence, when we are trying to figure out who we are and how we fit into the world around us. Changing hormone levels affect both physical development and emotions during adolescence, creating a link between physical and emotional development that youth and adults need to be aware of. However, the body and brain may not be developing at the same rate, which can also lead to adolescents looking physically older than their emotional age, or vice versa. Because of the unique but intertwined natures of physical and mental health, and the need for mental health to be prioritized alongside physical health we have bundled them within a single domain, emphasizing the holistic nature of physical and mental health.

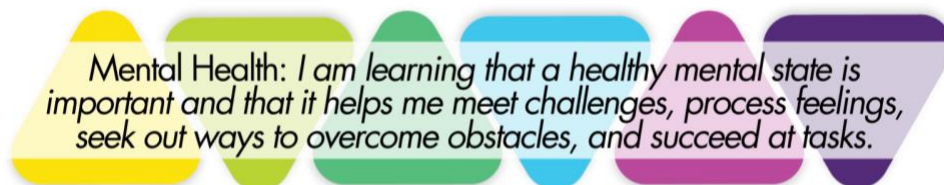


Adolescence is a period of development where we can establish healthy behaviors that will carry into adulthood. During adolescence, hormonal changes lead to sometimes rapid growth and development in our bodies, including increasing height and the development of secondary sex characteristics (i.e., breasts, body hair, changing voice). These changes occur at different times for each of us, which can particularly feel confusing for youth who are developing physically earlier or later than their peers. Because physical development occurs at various points across an adolescent's life, it can leave one feeling out of step with peers when development of certain physical traits happens earlier or later than others.

During adolescence, as young people are more attuned to belonging, social rewards, and societal norms for what constitutes “acceptable appearance,” youth may become more focused on their physical appearance. This is an opportunity to help adolescents learn and experience healthy eating habits and physical exercise with family and peers. While the context of their lives might result in unhealthy habits, their knowledge of and access to healthy foods, sports, and activities can help buttress the risk of obesity as well as eating disorders and other body dysmorphia. Physical appearance in the US comes with “acceptable physical features and looks” based on messages, explicit and implicit, from television, social media, even friends and family. These messages may affect youth differently depending on their own level of knowledge, confidence, and self-assurance. For example, the cultural dominance of whiteness shows preference to certain features over others (straight hair, slim body type, thin lips) which might place extreme burden on youth of color to take matters into their own hands to achieve these features so they feel part of the mainstream and have a sense of belonging.

One aspect of physical well-being is getting adequate sleep which is critical during adolescence. Young people need more sleep and often have different circadian rhythms than at other points during development. A conscious effort to create an atmosphere that demonstrates benefits of healthy eating and exercise along with practices of positive self- image is necessary to support the physical health of youth.

Physical development between the ages of 10-25 is impacted by a number of external factors such as stress and exposure to endocrine disruptors found in our environment, as well as access to physical and reproductive health supports. Further, each individual varies in their pubertal timing and tempo and is impacted by family history, nutrition, sleep, and exercise.



Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Mental health affects how we think, feel, act, make choices, and relate to others. Mental health is more than the absence of a mental illness. It involves having high ideals for one's identity and cognition, and resiliency. Self-care, coping strategies, and understanding one's triggers of stress and anxiety are skills that adolescents develop to support their overall health and quality of life. Further, adolescent mental health includes taking time to reflect on and process feelings and seek to understand what we need to feel mentally healthy.

Brain plasticity, pruning, and greater specialization underlie both positive mental health as well as mental health risks. Mental health problems often go hand-in-hand with other health and behavioral risks like increased risk drug use, violence, and higher risk of unsafe and unhealthy sex that can lead to HIV, STDs, and unintended pregnancy. At the same time, the plasticity of the brain also means that adolescents are especially responsive to supports in their environments that may both mitigate risk factors and promote positive development.

Negative emotions, such as embarrassment, anxiety, or confusion, and bodily self-consciousness, can accompany the onset of puberty. It is important that adolescents have access to support systems and safe spaces during this time where their questions can be addressed.

Due to their unique social, behavioral, and neurobiological characteristics, adolescents are susceptible to mental and behavioral health disorders and require tailored treatments. Mitigating behavioral and mental health issues in adolescents includes understanding risk factors, trauma and stress on brain development and learning, protective factors, and genetic underpinnings of anxiety. There is also evidence that meaningful activities that provide: a sense of social connection, a sense of belonging, unconditional support; and feelings of value can provide psychological and social resources that lead to better well-being over time.

Contemporary stressors, ranging from Covid-19 to racial injustice to gun violence to climate change, have led to increasing rates of mental health challenges for adolescents. This is making supportive relationships and settings even more important as young people learn to cope with external stressors and develop strategies for both self and communal care.

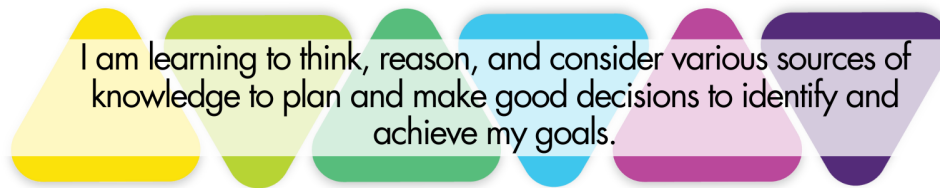


Domains of
Adolescent
Learning
& Development

Cognition



Cognition



Adolescence is when we shift from the concrete thinking of childhood to the abstract thinking of adulthood. When we enter adolescence, we are typically able to read and synthesize information and to understand the concept of numbers, tell time, understand fractions, and count backward. Early adolescence can serve as a period of opportunity to strengthen attentional capabilities and perspective-taking abilities. Biological changes in brain structure, including stronger connections among brain regions and increased experience, knowledge, and changing social demands help produce rapid cognitive growth. These cognitive changes are intertwined with physical changes happening in the adolescent brain. Gray matter, which is made up of neural cell bodies, dendrites, and synapses, decreases across adolescence. White matter, which is made up of myelin (e.g., the fatty sheath around axons neurons use to communicate), increases throughout adolescence. Moreover, changes in the limbic system region lead to increased sensitivity to rewards and novel experiences as we move through later adolescence.

At puberty, changes in cognition build on earlier development to produce more sophisticated executive functions (mental processes such as focusing, self-monitoring, and planning), and advanced cognitive skills (higher order reasoning and critical thinking) that enable the control and coordination of thoughts and behavior. This is generally associated with the increasing development of the prefrontal cortex area of the brain. The thoughts, ideas, and concepts developed during this period greatly influence one's future life.

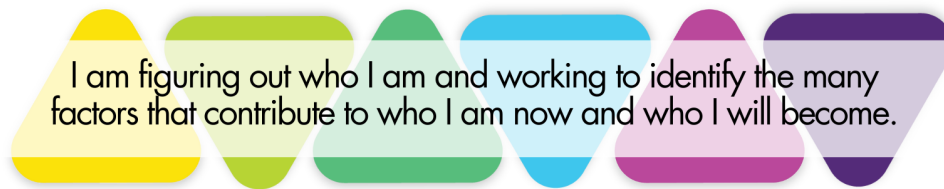
During adolescence, we acquire the skills, knowledge, and abilities to achieve our goals and objectives. While the tasks associated with cognitive development – setting goals, critical thinking, reflection, and abstract reasoning, to name a few – are essential for academic development, advanced cognition contributes to our overall health and well-being. Further, the ability to develop these skills is dependent on the ability to independently manage stress, adapt in the presence of challenge and adversity, and have the self-understanding and regulation to make healthy choices.

Domains of
Adolescent
Learning
& Development

Identity



Identity



The development of identity in adolescence encompasses both who we are now and who we may be in the future. Across people, cultures, and places, during adolescence we repeatedly ask ourselves and others: *who am I, how do I see myself, how do others see me, what makes me unique, where do I fit in?* During this period, young people are exploring possible identities—gender, sexual, cultural, spiritual, racial, ethnic, sociopolitical—through social activities, dress and physical appearance, peer group status, cultural trends, and other means. Their emerging reflection of values, beliefs, and aspirations are shaped and reshaped over time by multiple factors – family, peers, culture, media – with the young person as an active agent in developing their own identity.

The development of an integrated identity – a sense of internal consistency about who one is across time and across multiple social contexts (e.g., race/ethnicity, profession, culture, gender, religion) is important. It serves as an internal framework for making choices and provides a stable base from which we can act in the world. As such, it is a foundation for mental health and well-being. Having an integrated identity can also serve as a motivator for working towards goals and taking on different social roles. Identity includes both personal and social components, allowing one to have a core sense of “this is who I am as an individual,” “this is who I am as part of a social group,” “this is where I belong,” and “these are my values, beliefs, and ethics.” These exercises in identity development contribute significantly to the development of a sense of meaning and purpose.

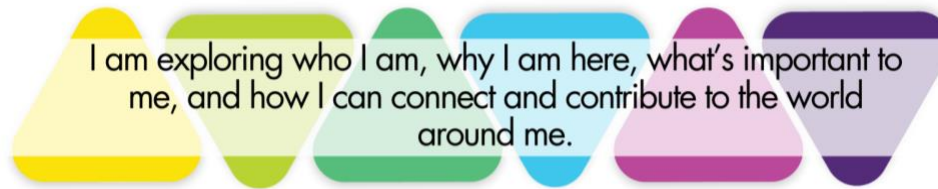
Changes in the limbic system increase adolescents’ sensitivity to peers, and they become more concerned with the evaluations of others. Adolescents may feel stress over their conflicting real and ideal selves but become better able to manage these feelings as their cognitive and self-reflection skills develop. Personality is often not considered stable until age 18 and can be affected by life experiences that influence our reactions and behaviors.

Domains of
Adolescent
Learning
& Development

Meaning & Purpose



Meaning & Purpose



During adolescence, as we are exploring our identities, we are also seeking a sense of meaning and purpose to our lives. Big questions such as “why are we here?” may surface, as young people become more attuned to risks and rewards and aware of the systems, structures, and social contexts in which they find themselves as well as the perspectives of others around them. Adolescents can be particularly attuned to issues of fairness and justice and sensitive to hypocrisy as they seek to align their values with a sense of purpose. Purpose and meaning can include key aspects of one’s individual identity as well as goals beyond the self. Similar to having an integrated identity, a sense of meaning and purpose can serve as a motivator during adolescence, providing young people with goal-directed actions and behaviors, promoting adolescent health and well-being.

Meaning and purpose are closely related but also distinct constructs. Meaning refers to more internally focused goals, aims, and commitments constructed by knowledge, understanding, and experiences. Purpose involves asking questions like, “what does it mean to do the right thing?” and “what can I do to change this unjust situation?” Developing a sense of meaning and purpose can be a key driver for maintaining a sense of forward movement in one’s life and a reason for positive actions and worth of existence.

Adolescents have been referred to as motivated agents, meaning they are guided by their values and hopes. As a youth’s conscience develops, feelings of guilt can be used as motivators for moral behavior. By middle adolescence, young teens have usually developed a stronger sense of right and wrong. In middle to late adolescence, youth typically become more invested in philosophy, politics, and social issues. They may also begin to think long-term, set goals, learn more defined work habits, and become more concerned about their future plans. Youth may begin to question the fairness of social institutions as they develop a greater ability to reflect on themselves and the world.

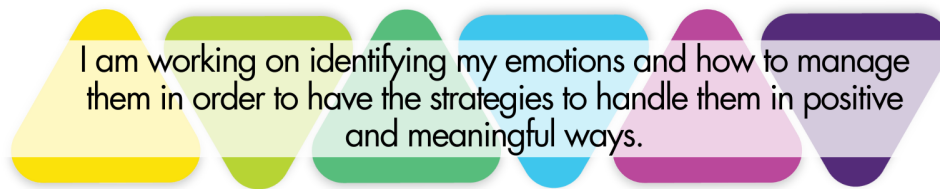
In middle to late adolescence, youth typically become more invested in philosophy, politics, and social issues. They may also begin to think long-term, set goals, learn more defined work habits, and become more concerned about their future plans. During adolescence, we are gaining the cognitive skills needed to reflect on complex questions about our goals in life and our role in the world. This can lead us to grapple with moral issues such as the legitimacy and fairness of experiences and social institutions.

Domains of
Adolescent
Learning
& Development

Emotion



Emotion



In adolescence, we experience more extreme highs and lows. This is because the part of the brain that initiates and processes emotions develops rapidly during adolescence, resulting in a heightened sensitivity to emotional content and subtle interpersonal cues. Between the ages of 10 and 25 years old, there is a significant range in how young people experience and can respond to their emotions, both individually and by age group. In part, this is due to the environments in which they are developing, the people they learn from, and the opportunities they have to learn about their emotions through various life experiences.

Through interactions with family, peers, and other adults, young people may be exposed to both joyful and stressful situations that give them new ways of experiencing and managing emotions, which help them to mature. It is critical that young people develop skills to both experience their emotions safely and regulate their emotions in ways that allow for healthy engagement in social settings and in relationships.

Emotional health involves understanding both one's self and seeking to understand others, especially those in close relationships. It also involves understanding the diverse ways people show their emotions and how one's individual interactions with others can affect their emotional experience and reaction. Key tasks of emotional regulation are: persistence, adaptability, compassion, courage, optimism, empathy, and resilience. Adolescence is a time when young people develop beliefs and attitudes about themselves, the external world, and the interaction between the two. These beliefs and attitudes are the lenses through which adolescents process their experiences and demonstrates emotional responses.

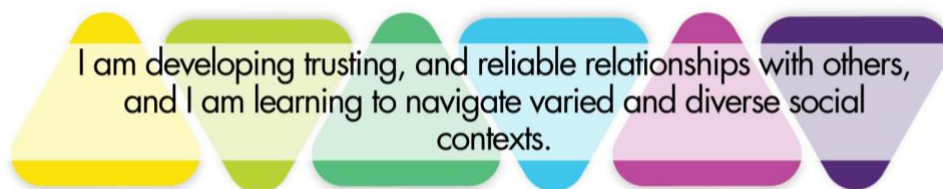
Emotional states change throughout adolescence, and young teens may experience moodiness, sadness, or depression. Changes in schoolwork and social demands during early adolescence may also lead to increased levels of stress. Although certain emotions, such as pride or shame, may be increasing during this time, adolescents are also developing their emotional regulation skills and knowledge. For instance, their ability to recognize emotional expressions improves over time. Ten-year-olds have been found to know, on average, a greater number of words for happy feelings than sad or scary feelings. However, a 14-year-old knows, on average, more words for sad feelings than happy or scary feelings.

Domains of
Adolescent
Learning
& Development

Social



Social



The need for relationships is a human constant across the lifespan, but adolescence is a critical time for developing the social brain – the complex network of areas that enable us to recognize our interaction with others, and understand and assess others’ feelings, dispositions, and actions, and help us develop a sense of belonging. The rapid growth of the social brain means that figuring out the types of relationships that are important to oneself is a central task of adolescence. Relationships with peers, older youth, and adults serve multiple purposes during adolescence, including but not limited to sources of social support.

Adolescence is also an important time for developing relationship skills and learning how to navigate independence and interdependence as well as conflict and conflict resolution in relationships, particularly with peers. Peer relationships during adolescence often overlap with identity exploration, as we explore social groups and where we fit. Peer groups during adolescence can be powerful pulls and youth often group themselves in social settings by their interests and identities. Romantic relationships and sexuality also come to the forefront during adolescence, as youth explore and learn to navigate this new dimension of safe and appropriate peer relationships.

Although bullying usually begins in middle childhood, its incidence declines with age across adolescence. Changes in the limbic system of the brain that accompany the onset of puberty lead to youth being more sensitive to their peers. In middle to late adolescence, youth desire more independence, and peer influence continues to become increasingly important. They might put more focus on romantic and sexual relationships during this time. Teenagers (ages 15-17) typically develop the ability to form intimate relationships. They may be spending less time with their parents and more with their peers, as well as directing more prosocial behavior to their peers than with others. It is also during middle adolescence that the onset of engagement in antisocial and criminal behaviors occurs. Such offenses peak near the end of adolescence, and antisocial behavior then decreases in adulthood.

Although relationships with peers become increasingly important during adolescence, relationships with adults are also critical. Relationships with adults can provide both bridging and bonding capital – links to networks beyond one’s own as well as close emotional connections and ties to one’s own social groups. Relationships with supportive adults in particular are considered a key developmental asset. Trusting relationships create a nourishing environment for adolescents to explore the world around them and engage in healthy risk-taking, knowing they have the support of caring individuals to help them make good choices.

Importantly, social development, particularly for today’s adolescents, also means learning to navigate the complex landscape of social media.



UNIVERSITY
of VIRGINIA

SCHOOL *of* EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX



Resources

These resources provide implementation guidance on how to create the optimal conditions for adolescent development, as depicted in the Portrait. While not comprehensive, this list can help you think about what you can do in your program, setting, or system to support thriving.

Center for the Developing Adolescent: Resource Library

- ▶ The Center for the Developing Adolescent provides resource guides, videos, fact sheets, and infographics on how to help adolescents navigate areas of development relating to race, equity, health, well-being, learning, and technology.

Design Principles for Community-Based Settings: Putting the Science of Learning and Development into Action

- ▶ This playbook describes the five non-negotiables of equitable whole child design that when implemented can lead to the transformation of community-based settings. It illustrates how practitioners can implement structures and practices that support learning and development.

Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development into Action

- ▶ This playbook describes the five non-negotiables of equitable whole child design that when implemented can lead to the transformation of k-12 settings. It illustrates how educators can implement structures and practices that support learning and development.

Ready by Design: The Science (and Art) of Youth Readiness

- ▶ This resource synthesizes cross-system, cross-sector research in the science of readiness, offering guidance and tools to help all systems and sectors support youth readiness.

Search Institute Developmental Relationships Framework


- ▶ The framework from by The Search Institute consists of five key elements and twenty specific actions individuals can follow to foster healthy developmental relationships.

The Promise of Adolescence Interactive Website

- ▶ This interactive website unpacks The Promise of Adolescence report, offering infographics and user-friendly excerpts from the report.

Investing in the Well-Being and Well-Becoming of America's Young People: Recommendations for Philanthropy, Policy, and Practice

- ▶ Created by the Youth Transition Funders Group, this resource offers a unifying framework for all youth-serving systems and settings to work toward the well-being and well-becoming of our nation's most vulnerable young people.



Portrait Design Team Members



SCHOOL *of* EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX



Design Team Members

The following individuals, listed in alphabetical order, contributed to the development of the Portrait:

Design Team Members

- ▶ **Dr. Nancy L. Deutsch**, *Director, Youth-Nex; Professor and Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, University of Virginia*
- ▶ **Dr. Shereen El Mallah**, *Research Assistant Professor, Youth-Nex and CASTL*
- ▶ **Dr. Adriana Galván**, *Dean of Undergraduate Education, Co-Executive Director of the Center for the Developing Adolescent, UCLA*
- ▶ **Dr. Katie Johnson-Goodstar**, *Associate Professor, University of Minnesota (Twin Cities)*
- ▶ **Robert Jagers**, *Vice President of Research, CASEL*
- ▶ **Chidi Jenkins**, *Senior Advisor, Youth-Nex*
- ▶ **Dr. Christopher Jones**, *Executive Director, Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*
- ▶ **Stephanie Krauss**, *Founder and Principal Consultant, First Quarter Strategies*
- ▶ **Priscilla M. D. Little**, *Senior Advisor, Youth-Nex, Co-Chair for the Portrait Design Team, Lead Writer*
- ▶ **Dr. Marisa Gerstein Pineau**, *Director of Research Application, FrameWorks Institute*
- ▶ **Dr. Winsome Waite**, *Senior Program Director, The Opportunity Institute, Co-Chair for the Portrait Design Team*
- ▶ **Dr. Joanna Williams**, *Associate Professor, Rutgers University; Co-Director, National Scientific Council on Adolescence*

Supporting Staff

- ▶ **Leslie Booren**, *Associate Director for Communications & Operations, Youth-Nex*
- ▶ **Brooke Carneal**, *Graduate Intern, Youth-Nex*
- ▶ **Abby Gillespie**, *Director of Strategy & Engagement, Youth-Nex*
- ▶ **Emma Otremba**, *Graduate Intern, Youth-Nex*
- ▶ **Mairead Young**, *Graduate Intern, Youth-Nex*

A special thank you to the Commonwealth Alliance for Thriving Youth (in Virginia) and the Youth-Nex Youth Advisory Council for their thoughtful input on this project.

The Portrait of a Thriving Youth was illustrated by Maia Smith.



Appendix A




Skills & Competencies



SCHOOL *of* EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX

Examples Of Domain-Specific Knowledge, Skills & Competencies

Adolescent thriving within each domain requires access to opportunities to develop the kinds of knowledge, skills, and competencies listed on this chart. No one program, setting, or system can (or should) be responsible for all these aspects of thriving but in each adolescent's ecosystem, opportunities to cultivate this set of knowledge, skills, and competencies should be available.

Domain	Examples of Developing Knowledge, Skills, & Competencies	
 Health: Mental	<i>Establishing healthy physical behaviors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Learn what the body needs and how it will change throughout puberty ▶ Move and exercise in healthy ways ▶ Practice healthy diet and eating habits ▶ Ensure one gets enough sleep and rest ▶ Understand and establish self-care and personal hygiene practices ▶ Learn how to manage one's own health conditions and monitor health risks
 Health: Physical	<i>Developing psychological & social well-being</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Positive sense of self-worth ▶ Develop and maintain healthy relationships and support ▶ Ability to recognize and manage stress and anxiety ▶ Strategies for coping with stress, challenges, and setbacks
 Cognition	<i>Acquiring the skills, knowledge, & abilities to achieve goals & objectives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Learn how to learn ▶ Foster curiosity and critical thinking ▶ Apply learning/transfer to new settings ▶ Ability to make healthy and safe decisions ▶ Build capacity for self-reflection ▶ Increase executive functioning skills

Identity

Exploring identities and figuring out who they are now & who they want to be

- ▶ Explore and reflect on one's sense of self as an individual
- ▶ Explore and reflect on how collective identities fit into one's sense of self
- ▶ Establish a sense of self-worth and positive self-image

Meaning & Purpose

Exploring how to meaningfully connect & contribute to the world around them

- ▶ Seek diversity of perspectives
- ▶ Increase civic consciousness and a broad world view
- ▶ Explore personal interests
- ▶ Tap into personal agency and autonomy
- ▶ Develop character traits and tap into a moral compass
- ▶ Explore one's own values and beliefs

Emotion

Identifying emotions & how to manage them in positive ways

- ▶ Understand and practice empathy
- ▶ Ability to self-regulate
- ▶ Know when to practice humility
- ▶ Learn to be pragmatic and adapt when needed
- ▶ Ability to express emotions that are relevant to the setting/experience

Social

Developing trusting & reliable relationships & navigating diverse social contexts

- ▶ Knowledge of social norms and the skills to address them
- ▶ Respect and appreciation for self and others
- ▶ Versatile communication skills
- ▶ Knowledge of, engagement with, and safe navigation of social media technologies
- ▶ Develop conflict resolution skills
- ▶ Demonstrate respect and appreciation for self and others
- ▶ See others' points of view



Appendix B

Self Reflection Tool



SCHOOL of EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX



Portrait Of A Thriving Youth Self-Assessment

This self-assessment can help you reflect on how well your program, setting, or system is supporting thriving with regard to the six domains of adolescent learning and development described in a Portrait of a Thriving Youth.

Instructions: (1) For each of the domains of thriving listed in the chart, consider whether it is a priority for your work and if so, how well you are supporting it on a scale of 1 to 5. (2) Then, consider the reflection questions at the end of this worksheet.

- 1 = This domain of development is not a priority for my work
- 2 = This domain of development is a low priority for my work
- 3 = This domain of development is a priority, but we are not supporting it adequately
- 4 = This domain of development is a priority, and we have many supports in place
- 5 = This domain of development is a priority, and we have a robust set of supports in place

Domains of Adolescent Development

Health: Mental

*Establishing
healthy physical
behaviors*

- ▶ Exercising and developing healthy eating habits
- ▶ Getting adequate sleep and rest
- ▶ Understanding and establishing self-care and personal hygiene practices

1: Not a priority **2:** Low priority **3:** Priority but we are not doing it well **4:** Priority with many of the supports in place **5:** Priority with a robust set of support in place

Health: Physical

*Developing
psychological &
social well-being*

- ▶ Developing the ability to recognize and manage stress and anxiety
- ▶ Cultivating strategies for coping with stress, challenges, and setbacks
- ▶ Having a positive sense of self-worth

1: Not a priority **2:** Low priority **3:** Priority but we are not doing it well **4:** Priority with many of the supports in place **5:** Priority with a robust set of support in place



Acquiring the skills, knowledge, & abilities to achieve goals & objectives

- ▶ Fostering curiosity and critical thinking
- ▶ Building capacity for self-reflection
- ▶ Applying learning to new settings

1: Not a priority 2: Low priority 3: Priority but we are not doing it well 4: Priority with many of the supports in place 5: Priority with a robust set of support in place



Exploring identities and figuring out who they are now & who they want to be

- ▶ Exploring and reflecting on one's self as an individual
- ▶ Exploring and reflecting on how collective identities fit into one's sense of self
- ▶ Establishing a sense of self-worth and positive self-image

1: Not a priority 2: Low priority 3: Priority but we are not doing it well 4: Priority with many of the supports in place 5: Priority with a robust set of support in place



Exploring how to meaningfully connect & contribute to the world around them

- ▶ Seeking diversity of perspectives
- ▶ Exploring personal interests
- ▶ Developing character and tapping into a moral compass

1: Not a priority 2: Low priority 3: Priority but we are not doing it well 4: Priority with many of the supports in place 5: Priority with a robust set of support in place



Emotion

Identifying emotions & how to manage them in positive ways

- ▶ Being able to self-regulate
- ▶ Expressing emotions that are relevant to a setting or experience
- ▶ Understanding and practicing empathy

1: Not a priority 2: Low priority 3: Priority but we are not doing it well 4: Priority with many of the supports in place 5: Priority with a robust set of support in place



Social

Developing trusting & reliable relationships & navigating diverse social contexts

- ▶ Knowing social norms and having the skills to address them
- ▶ Knowing how to engage with and manage the safe navigation of social media
- ▶ Demonstrating respect and appreciation for self and others

1: Not a priority 2: Low priority 3: Priority but we are not doing it well 4: Priority with many of the supports in place 5: Priority with a robust set of support in place

Reflection Questions

1. For the domains that you indicated are a priority with a robust set of supports in place (rating = 5), what are those key supports that you could potentially tap into to improve in other domains? Consider: resources, professional development/training, staffing, organizational policies, partnerships, advocacy, political will.
2. For the domains that you indicated are a priority but without a robust set of supports (rating = 3 or 4), what are the barriers you are facing to improving support in those areas? Consider: resources, professional development/training, staffing, organizational policies, partnerships, advocacy, political will.
3. For the domains that you indicated were not a priority or a low priority, do you think you should make them a priority for your work? What would it take to do that? Consider: resources, professional development/training, staffing, organizational policies, partnerships, advocacy, political will.
4. For those areas that you indicated are not a priority, are there other programs in your community that address those areas? If so, could you build partnerships with such organizations to refer youth who might benefit from such a focus?

