



BRIEF

Young Adolescent Development

The University of Virginia’s Youth-Nex Center and Curry School of Education and Human Development have launched the Remaking Middle School Initiative, an effort to elevate the middle grades and realize their promise for all students. To achieve these goals, the Initiative commissioned a set of four working papers that synthesize a robust body of research on early adolescence, informing supports and resources that can help the field make the most of this developmental phase. This brief highlights key ideas and findings from the first paper in the series, which details young adolescent development.

Young adolescents experience extraordinary cognitive, physical, emotional, and social changes from ages 10 to 15. The right middle grades experiences, coupled with equitable supports that help address changing social contexts, can support them through these changes and positively impact their development.

The incredible amount of change that happens between ages 10-15 - which some call a phase of igniting passions - provides a wealth of opportunity for shaping positive trajectories of development.

Providing the right supports and resources during this phase is especially important given that students’ educational trajectories become more path-dependent in middle school—and can affect a student’s long-term academic prospects.

Characteristics of Young Adolescent Development

Young adolescents experience a slew of developmental changes that affect nearly every aspect of their being, from their cognitive abilities and relational skills, to of course, their physical transformations. Adults who interact with youth in the middle grades, from teachers and after-school program staff to parents, must understand how these changes inform the educational needs of young adolescents in order to harness the potential of this developmental phase.

Equity in the Context of Early Adolescence

It is important to note that not all students have equitable access to the enriching educational environments that can make early adolescence an “age of opportunity.” This developmental phase is critical to the formation of institutional trust and a sense of fairness, especially for students who are more likely to experience bias and stereotype threats.

Physical Development

Puberty catalyzes a cascade of physical changes in early adolescence, which can occur at different times, paces, and different stages in their development. To help young adolescents navigate these changes in ways that lead to healthy outcomes, it is critical to shape expectations and messages they receive based on both their age and stage of physical development.

The young adolescent brain experiences a similar degree of transformation, second only to the first three years of a child's life.

Unused neural connections are discarded, connections between nerve cells proliferate, and communication between those cells accelerates in the center and outer portions of the brain. These transformations, which also occur at differing paces, not only leave young adolescents more attuned to social information and rewards, but also enable them to better regulate their cognitive, social, and emotional behavior.

While this is a time when physical activity and sleep are fundamental to health and well-being, especially as young adolescents undergo these significant changes, many adolescents engage in less physical activity and experience sleep loss. Young adolescents should engage in **45 minutes of “moderate to vigorous” physical activity a day and sleep 8.5 to 9.5 hours per night.**

Cognitive Development

Early adolescence brings with it increased cognitive flexibility. As young adolescents grow in their abilities to think, make decisions, reflect, and plan, they are increasingly able to pursue multiple cognitive processes at the same time.

This cognitive flexibility enables young adolescents to build deep learning, creativity, and critical thinking and problem-solving skills, all of which are critical to success in the 21st century.

Educators can nurture this development by providing frequent, scaffolded opportunities for young adolescents to make decisions based on goals rather than impulses—and build their executive function skills to, for example, manage multiple pieces of information at once.

Identity and Self-Development

Early adolescence represents a period when young adolescents seek to identify themselves in multiple ways, **establishing who they are; who they want to be; and where they fit in.** Schools are well-positioned to help youth form positive identities, providing experiences where they can envision future versions of themselves and shape their identities alongside peers from a variety of racial as well as ethnic backgrounds. By supporting the development of strong ethnic-racial identities, students experience increased psychological well-being, academic success, and prosocial behavior.

Social Development

Young adolescents also experience significant shifts in their relationships with family, peers, and non-parental adults, spending more time in peer groups. Educators can actually use these growing relationships as an opportunity to promote healthy social development. They can do so by promoting inclusive norms, fostering supportive interactions with students, and structuring opportunities for students to interact with diverse peers beyond their existing friend groups.

26% of U.S. middle and high school students nominated a teacher or guidance counselor as a significant, non-parental adult in their development.

Despite popular narratives that highlight adolescents' attention to peer approval, gaining autonomy does not come at the expense of detaching from their families and other adults. Indeed, a critical developmental goal for most young adolescents is to strike that balance between autonomy and connection with adults.

Meeting the Needs of Young Adolescents in Practice

Schools and middle grades educators can support the educational needs of young adolescents by:

- ▶ **Adopting developmentally-informed approaches that contribute to adolescents' feelings of social connectedness, of being valued, and of being respected.**
- ▶ **Providing formal opportunities for civic engagement and ensuring that young people can exercise a growing sense of purpose.**
- ▶ **Engaging with young people in a way that respects their increasing autonomy and preserves relationships with their families, while also providing scaffolded supports that respond to their changing needs over time.**

A full list of specific implications for practice are included in the corresponding [working paper](#).