



Ages and Stages of 4-H Youth Development

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As a leader you will be working with 4-H members of all ages. You have an important role in helping 4-H members grow and develop. Start where members are in their developmental stages and encourage them to grow physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally.

Early childhood

Characteristics	Implications for volunteers
Characteristics	
Learn best if physically active.	Provide experiences that encourage physical activity: running, playing games, painting, etc.
Have better control of large muscles than small muscles.	Use projects that can be completed successfully by beginners. Craft projects could end up messy.
Period of slow, steady growth.	Provide opportunities to practice skills.
Social	
Learning how to be friends. May have several "best friends."	Small group activities are effective for practicing social skills and allow for individual attention.
Beginning to experience empathy for others, but are still selfish.	Make-believe and role-play activities help children to understand how others might think or feel.
Boys and girls may enjoy playing together, but prefer same gender groups by the end of this developmental period.	Engage young children in mixed gender activities.
Intellectual	
Easily motivated and eager to try something new, but have short attention spans.	Plan a wide variety of activities that take a short time to complete.
More interested in doing activities rather than completing them.	Focus activities on the process rather than producing a product.
Thinking is concrete. Must have seen it, heard it, felt it, tasted it or smelled it in order to think about it.	Demonstrate activities. Use the senses to help youth experience things.
Naturally curious and want to make sense of their world.	Allow for exploration and spontaneity in activities. Be flexible.
Emotional	
Sensitive to criticism. Don't accept failure well.	Find ways to give positive encouragement and assistance. Plan activities that allow for success. Facilitate cooperation, not competition.
Becoming less dependent upon parents, but still seek adult approval and affection.	Offer support and plan small group activities, with an adult supervising every 3-4 youths.

Remember, 4-H club or project group members will develop at their own pace, but each age group may share some characteristics. These characteristics and their implications for you, as a volunteer, may be helpful to keep in mind as you plan a project group or club activity.

Middle childhood

Characteristics	Implications for volunteers
Characteristics	
Spirited, with boundless energy.	Provide active learning experiences.
Girls will be maturing faster than boys; some may be entering puberty.	Avoid competitions between girls and boys.
Large and small muscle development, strength, balance and coordination are increasing.	Plan activities that allow youth to move about and use their bodies.
Social	
Enjoy group activities and cooperation. Feel loyal to group or club.	Emphasize group learning experiences and form groups to plan activities together.
Prefer to be with members of the same sex.	Plan learning experiences to be done with members of the same sex.
Admire and imitate older boys and girls.	Encourage experiences with and mentoring by older youth.
Need guidance from adults to stay on task and to perform at their best.	Work closely with this age group and enlist older youth to help you with this task.
Intellectual	
Interests often change rapidly and do best when work presented in small pieces.	Allow for many brief learning experiences and give simple, short directions.
Vary greatly in academic abilities, interests and reasoning skills.	Offer activities appropriate for a wide range of abilities so that all children have a chance to succeed.
Easily motivated and eager to try new things.	Provide a variety of different activities.
Emotional	
Comparisons with other young people is difficult and erodes self-confidence. Prefer recognition and praise for doing good work.	Instead of comparing young people with each other, help them to identify their own successes by comparing present and past performances for the individual.

Young teens

Characteristics	Implications for volunteers
Characteristics	
Experience rapid changes in physical appearance, with growth spurt happening earlier for girls than for boys.	Be willing to talk about physical changes because new teens are often uncomfortable with and embarrassed by their changing bodies.
Have intense sexual feelings and a keen interest in their own bodies.	Provide honest information to the sexual questions they have. Prepare opportunities to help them discuss body development as a natural, normal process. Listen to their fears without judging or trivializing.
Interested in sports and active games.	Encourage active, fun learning experiences.
Social	
Concerned about social graces, grooming and being liked by peers.	Encourage learning experiences related to self-discovery, self-understanding and getting along with others. Be patient with grooming behaviors that may seem excessive.
Moving away from dependency on parents to dependency on opinions of peers.	Parents may need to help in understanding that this shift is a sign of growing maturity, not rejection of family.
Becoming interested in activities that involve boys and girls.	Provide opportunities for boys and girls to mix without feeling uncomfortable — it seems to work best if youth plan activities themselves.
Intellectual	
Tend to reject solutions from adults in favor of their own.	Involve young teens in setting rules and planning activities for your group or program.
Beginning to think more abstractly and hypothetically. Can think about their own thinking and are becoming skilled in the use of logic and cause-and-effect.	Ask questions that encourage predicting and problem solving. Help youth to find solutions on their own by providing supervision without interference.
Can take responsibility for planning and evaluation of their own work.	Allow young teens to plan activities and expect follow-through. Help them evaluate the outcome.
Emotional	
Can be painfully self-conscious and critical. Vulnerable to bouts of low self-esteem.	Plan many varied opportunities to achieve and have their competence recognized by others. Concentrate on developing individual skills.
Changes in hormones and thinking contribute to mood swings.	Remember that early adolescents are known for their drama and feelings that seem extreme to adults. Accept their feelings and be careful to not embarrass or criticize.
Desire independence, yet need their parents' help.	Encourage young teens to work with adults and older teens.

Teens

Characteristics	Implications for volunteers
Characteristics	
Most have overcome the awkwardness of puberty, but some boys are still growing at a fast pace. Many are concerned with body image.	Avoid comments that criticize or compare stature, size or shape.
Social	
Strong desire for status in their peer group.	Establish a climate that is conducive to peer support.
Interested in coeducational activities. Dating increases.	Allow teens to plan coeducational and group-oriented projects or activities.
Often want adult leadership roles	Provide opportunities for teens to plan their own programs.
Intellectual	
Reach high levels of abstract thinking and problem solving.	Put teens into real life problem-solving situations. Allow them to fully discover ideas, make decisions and evaluate outcomes.
Developing community consciousness and concern for the well-being of others.	Encourage civic projects that are a service to others.
Increasing self-knowledge; personal philosophy begins to emerge.	Allow time and plan activities for teens to explore and express their own philosophies.
Need life-planning guidance as they are beginning to think about leaving home for college, employment, etc.	College visits, field trips to businesses and conversations with college students or working adults can be helpful activities.
Emotional	
Feelings of inferiority and inadequacy are common.	Encourage teens by helping them to see their positive self-worth.
Gaining independence and developing firm individual identity.	Give teens responsibility and expect them to follow through. Provide opportunities that help teens explore their identity, values and beliefs.

Source: *Volunteers...the foundation of youth development*
Internet site:
<http://4h.missouri.edu/resources/>

This guide was developed by Mary Jo Williams, state 4-H youth development specialist, and Jamie Tomek, former extension associate.