Adolescent development

Adolescence is the time when young people explore, experiment and establish themselves. Supporting them can help to promote healthy development

Why is adolescence important?

Adolescence is a time of rapid biological, psychological, cognitive, emotional, and social change. While relationships with family and educators might change during this time, they are still fundamental to healthy adolescent development.

By providing a safe and supportive environment, schools can help young people develop resilience and support their mental health and wellbeing.

Key areas of development during adolescence

Physical development

The most obvious changes in adolescence are the physical developments in puberty driven by hormonal changes. Not all young people will experience puberty in the same way and variations in the timing of puberty can cause stress for some.

Brain development

Adolescent brains are a work in progress. In adolescence, the amygdala – the part of the brain associated with emotions, impulses, aggression and instinctive behaviour – is relatively well developed. However, the pre-frontal cortex – responsible for one's ability to plan and think about the consequences of actions, solve problems and control impulses – doesn't fully develop until a person is in their mid-20s.

As a result, young people often rely on the amygdala to make decisions and solve problems, particularly in emotionally charged situations. For this reason, adolescents may be more likely to:

- act on impulse
- try new adventurous activities
- explore new relationships
- not pick up on cues in social situations engage in dangerous or risky behaviour.

However, this doesn't mean young people can't make rational decisions or know the consequences of their actions.

Read more about brain development.

Social and emotional development

Adolescence is a time of exploration, experimentation and decision-making as young people establish a sense of identity and increased independence.

A big part of how identity develops is through experimentation, including trying out some things so that they can be either incorporated or rejected in future. Adolescents might explore new relationships, trial different ways of behaving and experiment with educational, recreational and vocational interests.

Young people might also experiment with behaviours, activities and beliefs during this period. These can sometimes be distinct from those of their family and other significant adults.

Some adolescents will "posture" (challenge authority) in an attempt to gain status with their peers. They may argue rather than agree to simple requests from educators and may find it hard to back down in front of peers.

Young people might also experiment with what "roles" they want to have in adulthood. They may change school subjects or proposed educational or vocational pathways often. This may be related to developments in their self-concept or identity, or new discoveries they've made about their values.

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Learn more about social and emotional learning (SEL) and teaching for resilience in the Learning Resilience domain.

The importance of relationships

Peer relationships

The establishment of good peer relationships is fundamental to adolescent wellbeing. Peer social support can help protect young people's mental health by providing a sense of belonging and connection. Peers can provide advice and understanding during times of change and can help young people feel valued. Research also suggests young people who feel valued and comfortable with their peer groups can have fewer behavioural problems.

You can help build positive relationships between peers by:

- modelling prosocial behaviour
- including wellbeing/social relationship/respectful relationship and anti-bullying programs
- establishing, updating and disseminating anti-bullying policies
- supporting young people who are experiencing challenges (for example, by referring them to wellbeing staff).

Family and community relationships

While relationships with peers assume greater importance during adolescence, young people's relationships with their families and communities are still critical. It's not necessarily true that adolescents want to "break free" of this.

Evidence shows that strong relationships with family and community help young people explore their identity safely and develop skills for adulthood. Similarly, high levels of family and community involvement in adolescent education and extracurricular activity can contribute to positive mental health outcomes.

Relationships with educators

By providing a safe and supportive environment at school, you can help young people to develop resilience. Resilient young people are better able to adapt to the transitions that occur during adolescence. Research also shows that educators who have positive relationships with young people more cooperative behaviours among the young people they work with.

When adolescents have a warm and trusting relationship with an educator, they are more likely to confide in them. They may also see an educator as a role model and are therefore more motivated to behave in a way that is consistent with an educator's expectations.

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Learn more about adolescent connectedness, and positive and respectful relationships, in the Connect module.

What can you do to support healthy adolescent development?

In your daily interactions with young people, you have many opportunities to promote healthy development. Here are some ideas.

Physical and mental health

Regular physical activity is a good way to support health and wellbeing. By encouraging young people to keep active you can help them stay physically fit and mentally healthy.

Research shows that keeping active can:

- lift mood through improved fitness and the release of natural chemicals in the brain
- improve sleeping patterns
- increase energy levels
- help manage negative thoughts or distract from daily worries
- lessen feelings of loneliness if exercising with others.

The current Australian standards recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, and preferably all, days of the week.

Media literacy

Teach media literacy skills by exploring techniques used by the media to manipulate images (for example, airbrushing) and ways to analyse and challenge media messages.

Communication

Young people may require more time to process information and it's a good idea to repeat instructions calmy and succinctly. It can be helpful to identify and suggest the way you would prefer adolescents to behave rather than tell them what not to do.

Experimentation and creativity

Respect experimentation. You may notice young people trying out different ways of behaving, such as how they dress or who they socialise with. Far from being minimised as a "phase", this should be understood as an important part of how they can develop a positive sense of identity.

How young people spend their time is crucial to how their brains develop. You can help adolescents to develop their higher-order planning, thinking and problem-solving skills through planned activities and everyday interactions.

Encourage students to find new creative ways (for example, sport, music or writing) to express their feelings and manage emotions. Help them hone problem-solving and decision-making skills by supporting them to develop a process of defining the problem, working through options and considering outcomes.

Relationships

Support young people to develop connections with a peer group. This is particularly important for students who feel isolated, new students or those who've had periods of absence. Paired and group work, when well-structured and thoughtful, can foster peer connections and skill development.

Recess, lunch break and other less-structured times in the school day provide opportunities for students to build skills through their social relationships.

Schools can offer a variety of positive social opportunities during break times, including peer support in the yard, interest clubs, library access and sporting opportunities are all valuable. Provide an inclusive environment for all students and families – one that's geared towards supporting individuals to develop their strengths, a positive sense of self and identity. It might be necessary to tailor specific strategies or programs for particular groups.

Social and emotional development

Be a positive role model by talking to students about how you process information and work with the emotions and challenges you face each day. Deliver social and emotional or resilience skills programs to students.

Looking forward

Help students to consider vocational roles. Transition planning is important, as are opportunities to experiment and try out different vocational interests. This is most often planned through work experience. Also, you could show an interest in the part-time work that many young people already do. For example, you could help them identify what parts of the job they like and what skills they are learning.

Often, these jobs are the places that initiate many of the organisational and leadership skills that adolescents need to develop.

Be You Resources

Learn more about the benefits for educators to maintain positive and respectful relationships with families, communities and kin, in Culturally respectful engagement for learning communities

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Learn more about social and emotional development in the Learning Resilience domain.

Bibliography

Visit Adolescent development for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

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We recognise their deep and ongoing connection to Country and pay our respect to Elders, past and present.