

Characteristics of Middle School Students

Early adolescents are in a particularly difficult state of development. As stated in the website document, *Characteristics of Young Adolescents*, “Youth between the ages of 10 to 15 are characterized by their diversity as they move through the puberty growth cycle at varying times and rates. Yet as a group they reflect important developmental characteristics that have major implications for those agencies that seek to serve them.”¹

Middle school students are experiencing dramatic changes in physical development, although the rate at which this development occurs varies individually. Changes in height, and weight, and in body chemistry are taking place, along with rapid sexual development. This heightened physical growth, together with their tendency to be very active, causes frequent fatigue in early adolescence. Many of them find it difficult to cope with the many changes taking place in them and compare themselves unfavorably to their peers. At the same time, they are often concerned about their ability to learn and whether or not they can meet the expectations of parents and other adults.

Students of this age are sensitive and have a strong need for approval from others; thus, deflating comments or criticism sometimes have debilitating effects. Conversely, they are frequently thoughtless and calloused in their relationships with one another. They seek associations, relationships, and links with people, things, and new ideas. They are particularly concerned about peer approval and acceptance, and they need close friends their own age who can provide the comfort and understanding they find hard to get from adults.

Most early adolescents enjoy team sports, thrive on competition, work hard at perfecting athletic skills, and respect good sportsmanship. They seek values in simplified, concrete forms; are often hyperidealistic; and demand fair treatment. They are usually excitable, easily motivated, creative, inquisitive, and eager to explore; but if not active participants in learning situations, they may easily drift into daydreams.

¹ Characteristics of Young Adolescents. (WWW document).
URL:<http://www.etsd.org/ems/endorsement/characteristics.htm>

Intellectual Development:

- Display a wide range of individual intellectual development
- Are in a transition period from concrete thinking to abstract thinking
- Are intensely curious and have a wide range of intellectual pursuits, few of which are sustained
- Prefer active over passive learning experiences
- Prefer interaction with peers during learning activities
- Respond positively to opportunities to participate in real life situations
- Are often preoccupied with self
- Have a strong need for approval and may be easily discouraged
- Develop an increasingly better understanding of personal abilities
- Are inquisitive about adults, often challenging their authority, and always observing them
- May show disinterest in conventional academic subjects but are intellectually curious about the world and themselves
- Are developing a capacity to understand higher levels of humor

Moral Development:

- Are generally idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to become socially useful
- Are in transition from moral reasoning which focuses on "what's in it for me" to that which considers the feelings and rights of others
- Often show compassion for those who are downtrodden or suffering and have special concern for animals and the environmental problems that our world faces
- Are moving from acceptance of adult moral judgments to development of their own personal values; nevertheless, they tend to embrace values consonant with those of their parents
- Rely on parents and significant adults for advice when facing major decisions
- Increasingly assess moral matters in shades of grey as opposed to viewing them in black and white terms characteristic of younger children
- At times are quick to see flaws in others but slow to acknowledge their own faults
- Owing to their lack of experience are often impatient with the pace of change, underestimating the difficulties in making desired social changes
- Are capable of and value direct experience in participatory democracy
- Greatly need and are influenced by adult role models who will listen to them and affirm their moral consciousness and actions as being trustworthy role models
- Are increasingly aware of and concerned about inconsistencies between values exhibited by adults and the conditions they see in society

Physical Development:

- Experience rapid, irregular physical growth
- Undergo bodily changes that may cause awkward, uncoordinated movements
- Have varying maturity rates, with girls tending to mature one and one-half to two years earlier than boys
- May be at a disadvantage because of varied rates of maturity that may require the understanding of caring adults
- Experience restlessness and fatigue due to hormonal changes
- Need daily physical activity because of increased energy
- Develop sexual awareness that increases as secondary sex characteristics begin to appear
- Are concerned with bodily changes that accompany sexual maturation and changes resulting in an increase in nose size, protruding ears, long arms, and awkward posture
- Have preference for junk foods but need good nutrition
- Often lack physical fitness, with poor levels of endurance, strength, and flexibility
- Are physically vulnerable because they may adopt poor health habits or engage in risky experimentation with drugs and sex

Emotional/Psychological Development:

- Experience mood swings often with peaks of intensity and unpredictability
- Need to release energy, often resulting in sudden, apparently meaningless outbursts of activity
- Seek to become increasingly independent, searching for adult identity and acceptance
- Are increasingly concerned about peer acceptance
- Tend to be self-conscious, lacking in self-esteem, and highly sensitive to personal criticism
- Exhibit intense concern about physical growth and maturity as profound physical changes occur
- Increasingly behave in ways associated with their sex as sex role identification strengthens
- Are concerned with many major societal issues as personal value systems develop
- Believe that personal problems, feelings, and experiences are unique to themselves
- Are psychologically vulnerable, because at no other stage in development are they more likely to encounter so many differences between themselves and others.

Social Development:

- Have a strong need to belong to a group, with peer approval becoming more important as adult approval decreases in importance
- In their search for self, model behavior after older, esteemed students or non-parent adults
- May exhibit immature behavior because their social skills frequently lag behind their mental and physical maturity
- Experiment with new slang and behaviors as they search for a social position within their group, often discarding these "new identities" at a later date
- Must adjust to the social acceptance of early maturing girls and the athletic successes of early maturing boys, especially if they themselves are maturing at a slower rate
- Are dependent on parental beliefs and values but seek to make their own decisions
- Are often intimidated and frightened by their first middle level school experience because of the large numbers of students and teachers and the size of the building
- Desire recognition for their efforts and achievements
- Like fads, especially those shunned by adults
- Often overreact to ridicule, embarrassment, and rejection
- Are socially vulnerable because, as they develop their beliefs, attitudes, and values, the influence of media and negative experiences with adults and peers may compromise their ideals and values