



# 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. Young people's relationships with educators and families may also change during this time.

However, these relationships are still fundamental to healthy adolescent development. By providing a safe and supportive environment, schools can help young people to develop resilience and to grow up well.

## Key developmental stages during adolescence

### Physical development

The most obvious changes in adolescence are the physical developments in puberty driven by hormonal changes. Puberty occurs at different times for different young people, 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 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 are more likely to:

- act on impulse
- try new adventurous activities
- explore new relationships
- misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions
- engage in dangerous or risky behaviour.

### Don't underestimate adolescents

Ultimately these brain differences don't mean young people can't make rational decisions or tell the difference between right and wrong. Nor does it mean they shouldn't be held responsible for their actions. Generally, the outcomes are better when educators approach young people in an emotionally neutral and respectful manner.

Read 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 different educational, recreational and vocational interests.

Identity development typically sees the adolescent experimenting with behaviours, activities and beliefs that are different from those of their family and other significant adults.

### **In adolescence, many young people look to their peer group to set expectations about behaviour.**

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

Young people also need opportunities to try out what 'roles' they want to have in adulthood. You may notice they change subjects or proposed educational or vocational pathways frequently. This may be related to developments in young people's self-concept or identity, or new things that they've noticed about their values.

### **Be You Professional Learning**

Check out content on 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 protects their mental health, buffering young people from feelings of anxiety and alienation. Peers can provide advice and understanding during times of change and help young people feel valued. Research also suggests young people who feel valued and comfortable with their peer groups have fewer behavioural problems.

You can build positive relationships between peers by:

- modelling prosocial behaviour
- including wellbeing/social relationship/respectful relationship and anti-bullying programs
- having anti-bullying policies
- supporting young people who struggle (for example, by referring them to wellbeing staff).

### **Family relationships are still critical**

While relationships with peers assume greater importance during adolescence, young people's relationships with their families are still critical. It's not necessarily true that adolescents want to 'break free' of their families. This belief can lead to families withdrawing from school life.

Evidence shows that strong relationships with family allow young people to explore their identity safely and develop skills for adulthood. Similarly, high levels of family involvement in adolescent education and extracurricular activity is predictive of good outcomes.

### **Strong relationships with educators also promote positive development and wellbeing.**

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

Adolescents are more likely to talk with educators they have a warm and trusting relationship with. They may also see you as a role model and so are more motivated to behave in a way that is consistent with your expectations as an educator.

### **Be You Professional Learning**

Check out content on 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 help prevent or manage mild [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). By supporting young people keeping active you can help them stay physically fit and mentally healthy.

Research shows that keeping active can:

- help lift mood through improved fitness and the release of natural chemicals in the brain
- help improve sleeping patterns
- increase energy levels
- help block negative thoughts or distract people from daily worries
- help people feel less alone if they exercise with others.

The current recommendation is at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, and preferably all, days of the week. Support young people to have a positive body image by providing accurate information and education about physical changes, and how different transitions occur for different people at different times.

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

### Communication

Young people often require more time to process information and need instructions repeated calmly and succinctly. 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', these experiments should be understood as an important part of how they 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 deal 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.

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

### **Be You Professional Learning**

Learn about observing young people's behavioural and mood changes in the learning environment, and how to support young people and their families, by helping them access information and internal and external supports, in the [Early Support](#) domain.

## **References**

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