



Ages and Stages of 4-H Youth Development

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Winnebago County 4-H Youth Development

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

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

Early Childhood (Grades Pre-K - 2)

Characteristics		Social		Intellectual		Emotional	
Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers
Learn best if physically active.	Provide experiences that encourage physical activity; running, playing games, painting, etc.	Learning how to be friends. May have several "best friends."	Small group activities are effective for practicing social skills and allow for individual attention.	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.	Sensitive to criticism. Don't accept failure well.	Find ways to give positive encouragement and assistance. Plan activities in which success can be experienced. Facilitate cooperation, not competition.
Have better control of large muscles than small muscles.	Use projects that can be completed successfully by beginners. Craft projects could end up messy	Beginning to experience empathy for others, but are still selfish.	Make-believe and role-play activities help children to understand how other might think or feel.	More interested in doing activities rather than completing them.	Focus activities on the process rather than producing a product.	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.
Period of slow, steady growth.	Provide opportunities to practice skills.	Boys and girls may enjoy playing together, but prefer same gender groups by the end of this development period.	Engage young children in mixed-gender activities.	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 youths experience things.		
				Naturally curious and want to make sense of their world.	Allow for exploration and spontaneity in activities. Be flexible		

Middle Childhood (Grades 3 - 5)

Characteristics		Social		Intellectual		Emotional	
Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers
Spirited, with boundless energy.	Provide active learning experiences.	Enjoy group activities and cooperation. Feel loyal to group or club.	Emphasize group learning experiences and form groups to plan activities together.	Interests often change rapidly and do best when work presented in small pieces.	Allow for many brief learning experiences and give simple, short directions.	Comparisons with other youth is difficult and erodes self-confidence. Prefer recognition and praise for doing good work.	Instead of comparing youth with each other, help youth identify their own successes by comparing present and past performances for the individual.
Girls will be maturing faster than boys; some may be entering puberty.	Avoid competitions between boys and girls	Prefer to be with members of the same sex.	Plan learning experiences to be done with members of the same sex.	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.		
Large and small muscle development, strength, balance, and coordination are increasing	Plan activities that allow youth to move about and use their bodies.	Admire and imitate older boys and girls.	Encourage experiences with and mentoring by older youth.	Easily motivated and eager to try new things.	Provide a variety of different activities.		
		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.				

Young Teens (Grades 6 - 8)

Characteristics		Social		Intellectual		Emotional	
Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers
Experience rapid changes in physical appearance, with growth spurt happening earlier for girls than boys.	Be willing to talk about physical changes because new teens are often uncomfortable with and embarrassed by their changing bodies	Concerned about social graces, grooming, and being liked by their peers.	Encourage learning experiences related to self-discovery, self-understanding, and getting along with others. Be patient with grooming behaviors that may seem excessive.	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.	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.
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 youth discuss body development as a natural, normal process. Listen to their fears without judging or trivializing.	Moving away from dependency on parents to dependency on opinions of peers.	Parents may need help in understanding that this shift is a sign of growing maturity, not rejection of family.	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.	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 not to embarrass or criticize.
Interested in sports and active games.	Encourage active, fun learning experiences.	Becoming interested in activities that involve boys and girls.	Provide opportunities for boys and girls to mix without feeling uncomfortable - seems to work best if youth plan activities themselves.	Can take responsibility for planning and evaluation of their own work.	Allow young teens to plan activities and expect follow through. Help them to evaluate the outcome.	Desire independence, yet need their parents help.	Encourage youth to work with adults and older teens.

Teens (Grade 9 and over)

Characteristics		Social		Intellectual		Emotional	
Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers	Attributes	Implications for volunteers
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.	Strong desire for status in their peer group.	Establish a climate that is conducive to peer support.	Reach high levels of abstract thinking and problem solving.	Put youth into real life problem-solving situations. Allow them to fully discover ideas, make decisions, and evaluate outcomes.	Feeling of inferiority and inadequacy are common.	Encourage youth by helping them to see their positive self-worth.
		Interested in coeducational activities. Dating increases.	Allow teens to plan coeducational and group oriented projects or activities.	Developing community consciousness and concern for the well-being of others.	Encourage civic projects that are a service to others.	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.
		Often want adult leadership roles.	Provide opportunities for teens to plan their own program.	Increasing self-knowledge; personal philosophy begins to emerge.	Allow time and plan activities for youth to explore and express their own philosophies.		
		Want to belong to a group, but also want to be recognized as unique individuals.	Place emphasis on personal development whenever possible.	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.		