

Characteristics of the Adolescent

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<https://marenschmidt.com/2016/09/characteristics-of-the-adolescent/>



For centuries the Judeo-Christian tradition has held a coming of age ritual for thirteen-year-olds. The Jewish Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and the Christian confirmation announce an adolescent's provisional membership in his or her religious adult communities.

With changing legislation over the past 50 years young people's official entry into the adult world occurs eight years later, on one's 21st birthday. Perhaps the generation who grew up in the Depression and World War II did not want to force responsibilities prematurely on their children, as had been the case during those challenging times.

Young people around age 12, despite legalities, begin the journey into adulthood and enter a phase of development with distinct needs to enhance the following characteristics over the next six years or so:

The adolescent begins to focus on belonging to a self-organized group of peers, classmates, teammates and friends, becoming the "we" generation.

Watching a group of several hundred junior high school students move from a gymnasium across to the main building, I was amazed at the similarities in hairstyles and clothing. Young teens change rapidly to adapt to this need to belong to their time and place, to become contemporaries. This is one reason we can look at old high school pictures and pinpoint the year based on the fashions at the time.

This age is a time for adventure, personal challenge and self-discovery.

We observe the young teenager of 12-15 years setting goals, sometimes quite lofty, and working to achieve these goals. The young teenager seeks adventure, perhaps desiring to travel to new places and to meet new people. At this time, the teen works to figure out who he or she is in the larger context of his or her community and the world.

The young teen needs to argue, disagree and oppose others, especially parents, teachers and other authority figures.

These teens push the envelope, testing what is acceptable in our culture and what behavior or ideas are negotiable or flexible.

Young teens enjoy working with their hands—in the dirt—to learn how to make things grow, as well as to learn craft and artistic skills.

Playing music, painting, sculpting and wood building are activities to which young teenagers are drawn. Consider the age of budding graffiti artists. When self-expression is denied appropriate venues, graffiti speaks to the young teens' predilections for adventure, challenge, opposing adults, creating new groups and developing artistic skills.

Poetry is a strong interest for this age person.

Often the only time in our lives that we read or write poetry is in our early teens. Finding powerful words for self-expression occupies the young teen.

The teen is in a time for developing caring and human compassion.

Because of the other five qualities emerging in the young teen—adventure, opposing adults, group orientation, love of poetry and using the hands to learn to make a living—we might overlook this quality in the young teen. Learning how to become a caring, warm-hearted human being characterizes the young teen's development.

The young teen needs opportunities for the following:

- To strengthen self-identity
- To develop the intellect through critical analysis and debate
- To build community within a peer setting
- To serve others
- To understand societal methods and norms
- To express new and powerful emotions
- To understand the ways of the natural world

When these possibilities for growth are not met in the young teen's environment, we may see rebellious, angry expressions of these unfulfilled needs, or conversely, we may encounter depressed and directionless young people.

Make a list of activities you see young teenagers do, and consider how those actions relate to the developmental needs of the adolescent.

The young teen is trying to build a person who will be a strong adult. Let's give our teens as many chances to do so as possible, in our homes, in our schools, in our churches and in our communities.

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