

Understanding Ages of Youth



4-H Clubs are made up of a mixture of ages of youth and adults. It is a strength of 4-H, but also a challenge. Today's communities have very few places where ages are not separated into individual groups. That makes 4-H unique. It is important to know what to expect of the different ages of youth. By doing so, you will better understand what behavior to expect and what needs the youth have.

Gen Y (Millennials, Echo Boomers, Nexters)

These are all terms for the upcoming generation, born between 1981-2003. There are 1.1 million in this group in Minnesota; the group is three times larger than Gen X'ers. Half of this age group are not yet adolescents. They come from radically, culturally diverse backgrounds:

- 1 in 3 are non-white;
- 1 in 4 live in single parent households; and
- 3 in 4 have working moms.

The Gen Y's have a good relationship with their parents. They are very tech savvy. The group has a practical view of the world. When planning activities and events, remember the ages and stages. In addition, remember the upcoming Gen Y group and their characteristics.

Cloverbuds

These members, K-2nd graders, are very curious. A child in this stage is more interested in the process than in the resulting product; the child is more inclined to con-

tinue working on a project than to complete it. Thinking is concrete at this age. If these members have never seen it, heard it, felt it, tasted it, or smelled it, they have a hard time thinking about it. They also enjoy activities and materials that are real and tangible. Rather than simply giving instructions verbally, you should demonstrate the activity. The opinion of peers is becoming important. Children at this age like to play games, but hate to lose. Try to establish some measure of success in every experience to ease blows to young egos.

Young Children (grades K-3)

Physical Development

- In a period of slow physical growth.
- Learning to master physical skills.
- Lack muscular coordination skills.

Emotional Development

- Are egocentric/self-centered (4-H should provide experiences which require sharing/cooperation to help children move beyond self-centeredness).
- Need and seek approval from adults (by the end of this stage begin to compare themselves with others, like to play games, but can't accept losing).
- Intellectual development.
- More interested in doing things than in the end product. (Need practice focusing on one thing at a time to move to the next stage.)

Social Development

- Learning to be friends with others.
- Younger kids enjoy playing together, but by the end of the stage, boys and girls will separate.
- Fighting occurs, but does not have lasting effects.

School Age Children (grades 4-8)

Physical Development

- Very active and enjoy things which involve movement, cannot sit still for long periods of time.
- Beginning of adolescent is marked by a growth spurt which occurs across a wide range of ages, with females maturing before males. (Rapid physical changes are often a source of embarrassment for young teens.)

Emotional Development

- Have a weak sense of individual identity. (Need to feel accepted and worthwhile, successes should be emphasized and failures kept in perspective as learning opportunities.)
- By the end of the period, begin to demonstrate Kohlberg's post-conventional moral thinking.
- During puberty, changes in hormones and changes in thinking contribute to mood swings.
- Begin to test value. (Justice and equality become regarded as important issues.)
- Feel the need to be part of something important.

Intellectual Development

- Until around age 10 or 11, think concretely in absolutes (black/white, right/wrong), but are beginning to think logically (new ideas are best understood if related to previous experiences.)
- Around age 10 or 11, begin to demonstrate formal, operational thinking and think abstractly, but still tend to think in all-or-nothing terms.

- Will intensely explore subjects of interest.
- Often reject solutions offered by adults in favor of finding their own solutions.

Social Development

- Joining clubs and groups becomes very important around age 9-10. (Will form clubs with a group of others similar to themselves.)
- Have difficulty understanding others' thinking, but understand the benefit of making others happy.
- Satisfaction in completing projects comes more from pleasing adults in their lives, than from the value of the activity itself.
- By the end of this period:
 - Ready to start being responsible for actions;
 - Move away from dependence on parents toward eventual independence;
 - Dependence on opinions of adults shifts to dependence on opinions of peers, enjoy doing activities away from home.

High School Age Youth

Physical Development

- Physical changes are accepted by most teens, and most awkwardness is past, although some boys are still growing quickly.
- Most females reach maximum height by age 14, most males by age 16, males gain muscle, females gain fat. Both sexes are still developing bone mass.

Emotional Development

- Searching for independence and identity, usually achieved around age 16.
- Seeking emotional autonomy from parents.

- Younger teens have difficulty with compromise.
- Unsettled emotions are common.
- Take pride in responsibility and respect of others.

Intellectual Development

- Continue to gain cognitive and study skills, can adapt language to different contexts.
- Mastering abstract thinking.
- Exploring and preparing for future careers and roles.
- Set goals based on feelings of personal needs and priorities, likely to reject goals set by others.

Social Development

- Generally self-centered, but capable of empathy.
- Relationship skills are well developed.
- Dating increases and moves from group dates to double dates to couple only dating and intimacy.
- Accepted by opposite sex is of high importance.
- Want to belong to groups, but be recognized as unique individuals within the groups.
- Employment and education fill the need for social relationships, which were earlier filled by club and group activities.

Acknowledgements: Kathryn J. Cox Extension 4-H Specialist, Youth Development. Ohio State University.

