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Ages and Stages of Child and Youth Development

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A Guide for 4-H Leaders

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Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.
In cooperation with the Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

Ages and Stages of Child and Youth Development

A Guide for 4-H Leaders

**Jeanne Karns, Graduate Assistant, and
Judith A. Myers-Walls, Extension Specialist, Human Development,
Department of Child Development and Family Studies,
Purdue University**

How do young people change as they grow? How do these changes affect you as a 4-H leader and the programs you plan for your club?

This guide is written for you, the 4-H leader. With it, we hope to give you insight into the needs and interests of your club members. The guide discusses the characteristics that are common to children at each age level. Although children differ as to the speed with which they develop (and it is important to remember that each person is unique), the order of the stages does not change very much.

Some needs and interests are universal for all ages to insure successful development. All people need:

- * to experience a positive self-concept.
- * to experience success in what they attempt to do.
- * to become increasingly independent.
- * to develop and accept their own sex identity.
- * to give and receive affection.
- * to experience adventure.
- * to be accepted by people of different ages--peers as well as those in authority.

These needs continue from infancy through old age. Other needs vary for different children and different ages. It is important to remember that *children develop at their own pace, and all characteristics will not be observed in all children at the same age or at the same stage of development.*

How This Guide Will Help

You can use this guide:

- *To encourage 4-H members to develop and learn.
- *To help you plan your 4-H year.
- *To assist you as you plan specific activities.
- *To analyze the situation when activities are unsuccessful

Encouraging 4-H Members to Develop and Learn

This guide discusses the common physical, cognitive (thinking), social, and emotional characteristics for each age group. As you read, keep in mind that no two children develop according to the same schedule. In addition, transitions are gradual. A member who seems very responsible and mature at one meeting may be noisy and bored at the next. By accepting the members at their current developmental stage and offering challenging opportunities to help them make the transition into the next, you as a leader can help make 4-H a rewarding and fulfilling experience for your club members at the same time that you help them grow and develop.

This publication was adapted from *Guide for Leaders: Boys, Girls and Youth Programs*, NE-226, Cooperative Extension services of the Northeast States.

Planning Your 4-H Year

You are faced with charting the course for your entire 4-H year. Take a few minutes to look over the enrollment cards of your members. What are the ages of the club members? Are there any potential junior leaders? Is your group a "young" club of beginners, an "old," experienced club that has been together as a group for several years, or is it a mix of all 4-H ages? After you have answered these questions, this guide can alert you to possible strengths of the group and to potential difficulties.

Is yours a mixed-gender club or one that has just girls or boys? Boys and girls have different time-tables for emotional and physical development, as you will see from the descriptions in this guide. This means that planning activities for a mixed-gender club may take more careful preparation.

Get to know your members as individuals. Some projects and activities may require more writing skills, artistic ability, or physical coordination than other projects and activities. While no 4-H member should be discouraged from pursuing an area of interest, a thoughtful leader can guide members to projects that are challenging and interesting without being overwhelming for their individual levels of development.

Planning Specific Activities

Perhaps a number of members of your club are enrolled in the same project, so you decide to plan a workshop. Perhaps your club plans an annual completion party to be held after the fair.

Take a close look at your members. During a hands-on workshop, are they going to be able to work with some degree of independence, following directions and cleaning up afterwards? Or will some members need individual guidance? How long can you expect them to pay attention? The length of your activity, the number of demonstrators included, and the number of members at the workshop will be affected by these factors.

If you plan a party, will all members of a mixed-age group enjoy the same activity? Guard against allowing the decision makers (usually the older members of the club) to select an activity that appeals to only a portion of the age range. For example, an evening hay ride that includes dates might sound great to a junior leader group but could be very scary and even unpleasant to 10-year-old members. An awareness of developmental stages will help you plan appropriate activities for mixed-age groups and a variety of skill levels. You may find that you need to have special programs for various age groups or for members interested in specific project areas.

Analyzing the Situation When Activities Are Unsuccessful

Every group has an unsuccessful activity once in a while. A discussion during a meeting deteriorates into a squabble. Small groups of members have conversations of their own all during a workshop. A field trip is planned, but no one attends. The leader usually is left wondering why.

This guide may help you better understand what happened. Think back to just before the problem became evident. Did the business session of the meeting go on too long for the younger members? Did the workshop require coordination or skill levels beyond the ability of some of the participants? Was the field trip planned by only a few members or leaders? Did it take into account the members' experience and interests? An annual field trip is great, but an annual field trip to the fire station soon gets boring. A 16-year-old is not apt to be eager to see the local fire engine for the seventh time. This guide should help you to avoid some of these problems by discussing common activities that members of different ages generally do or do not enjoy.

Ages and Stages

6 7 8

Early Elementary (Age 6 to 8)

These children are the members of mini 4-H. Even if you do not work directly with this group, it is helpful to know what stage your new 4-H'ers have just completed.

Physical Growth

Early-elementary-age children are at a period of slow, steady growth. The rapid changes of the infant/preschooler are behind them. The adolescent growth spurt is far away.

Six- to 8-year-olds are busy learning how to use their bodies by mastering physical skills. This includes everything from small muscle skills like printing with a pencil to large muscle skills like catching a fly ball. Because these skills are not yet polished, craft projects often end up messy, with crooked nails and too much glue. Activities need to be just that-active. Provide opportunities to practice skills, but use projects that can be completed successfully by beginners.

Growth in Thinking

Early-elementary-age children are moving out of what psychologist Erik Erikson has called the "stage of initiative" and into the "stage of industry." The child at this stage of development is more interested in the process than in the resulting product. Eventually, finishing a project will become as important as beginning it. But don't count on that just yet. During the stage of industry children are less interested in completing a project than in working on it. (This is just as well, however, because young children's limited physical abilities mean that the finished products will not be perfect.)

Thinking is very concrete at this time. If they have never seen it, heard it, felt it, tasted it, or smelled it, they have a hard time thinking of it. They enjoy activities and materials that are very concrete, as well. Rather than simply giving instructions verbally, leaders should demonstrate the activity. Doing is important for both the children and the leader.

Another thinking skill early elementary children are developing is learning to sort things into categories. This skill is one characteristic that makes collecting things so important and so much fun at this age. Collecting-type activities can be good for both group meetings and individual projects at this point.

Social Growth

School-age activities take children away from home and parents, some for the first time, and put them in environments where they face new responsibilities and demands. As children move away from dependence on parents, they need to transfer that dependence to another adult, so the leader may become a central figure to the child.

Children are just learning how to be friends and may have several "best friends" at a time. Boys and girls sometimes enjoy playing together at this age, although by the end of this period the separation of the sexes will occur during most play. Fights, although occurring often, seldom have lasting effects.

The opinion of peers is becoming very important. Often, the 6- to 8-year-olds care more about being successful when their peers are watching than when just Mom or Dad are around. Small group activities are effective, but the children still need an adult to share approval.

Emotional Growth

Early-elementary-age children are wrapped up in themselves. Their thinking capacity does not yet allow them to imagine clearly what other people think and feel. "Dramatic play" or making believe they are someone else is the way children at this age begin to build that ability. Six- to 8-year-olds need and seek the approval of adults, because they are not yet confident enough to set their own standards.

Children at this stage like to play games. Rules and rituals become fascinating, but the children are not yet ready to accept losing. That is why success needs to be emphasized, even if it is small. Cooperative games in which every child wins can be especially enjoyable at this age. Failures should be minimized, and some measure of success should be found in every experience to ease the blows to young egos.

When an activity fails, the leader can help the children by interpreting the reasons behind the failures. Learning to cope with problems is a skill the 4-H leader can encourage in the 4-H members. The usual 4-H practice of awarding competitive ribbons should be minimized or avoided here. Competition with others is inappropriate at the mini-4-H level.

9 10 11

Middle School (Age 9 to 11)

These children are the beginning 4-H members, new to the experience of club meetings and projects.

Physical Growth

Physical growth at this stage is still rather slow for most children, but they are anything but still and quiet. Puberty may be starting for some very early-maturing girls.

Activities for the middle school-age children should encourage physical involvement. These children like the movement of ball games and swimming. Hands-on involvement with objects can be very helpful. They like field trips to science museums or parks, but only if they are not expected to stay confined to one area or to do one thing for a long period of time. They need opportunities to share their thoughts and reactions, as well.

Children at this stage are still fairly concrete thinkers. Speakers and demonstrators will get more attention if they bring things that can be seen and handled. Projects that involve making or doing something will be of interest to the middle school-age children.

Growth in Thinking

Children at this stage are beginning to think logically and symbolically. They still think in terms of concrete objects and can handle ideas better if they are related to some thing they can do or experience with their senses, but they are moving toward understanding abstract ideas. As they begin to deal with ideas, they think of things as black or white. Something is either right or wrong, fabulous or disgusting, fun or boring. There is very little middle ground.

Children at this stage still will look to the adult for approval. They now appear to follow rules primarily out of respect for an adult. Individual evaluation by an adult is preferable to group competition where only one can be the best. Middle-school-age children will want to know how much they have improved and what they should do to be better next time. Children at this age often are surprised at what they can accomplish, especially with encouragement from an adult.

Social Growth

Joining a club is popular with this age group. In fact, the period from 6 to 12 years has been called "the gang age." Children are beginning to identify with peers, although they still look to an adult for guidance. They like to be in an organized group of others similar to themselves.

Although middle school-age children still have difficulty understanding another person's thinking, the 9- to 11-year-olds are beginning to discover the benefits of making other people happy. Primarily they are developing an "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" philosophy, but near the end of this age range they begin to realize other benefits of pleasing others apart from immediate self-reward. During most of this period, however, the satisfaction of completing a project comes more from pleasing the leader or the parents than from the value or importance of the activity itself.

Toward the end of this age range, children are ready to move ahead with the task of taking responsibility for their own actions. Although the teaching of responsibility is a long process that should begin in infancy, some very concrete steps may be taken at this point. Club meetings offer the opportunity for members to have a voice in determining their own activities. Decision-making skills are developed as the leader moves away from dictating directions to giving reassurance and support.

For many activities, children of this age will divide themselves into sex-segregated groups. Project interests may separate into traditional male/female areas. This distinction is not as prevalent as it was at younger ages, however. At the same time that these children are thinking in black and white terms about male/female issues, they also are developing an increased independence of thought and action that may allow them to try new things. Members showing interest in projects not traditional for their gender may need additional support and encouragement from adults to be successful.

Emotional Growth

Middle-school-age children have a strong need to feel accepted and worthwhile. School becomes increasingly difficult and demanding for these children.

Other pressures are added, too. Successes, even small ones, should continue to be emphasized. Failures should be minimized. (All people learn better and try harder if they believe in themselves and think they can succeed!)

Comparison with the success of others is difficult for children at this age. It tends to erode self-confidence. In addition, it can cause problems in dealing with peers at a time when they are trying to understand and build friendships. Instead of comparing children with each other, build positive self-concepts by comparing present to past performance for the individual.

Project judgments that allow each article to win or lose on its own merit, rather than in competition with others, are preferable. If all successful projects can earn blue ribbons, the children will be more encouraged than if projects must compete for only a few available placings.

12 13 14

Young Teens (Age 12 to 14)

These children have some experience in 4-H, are ready to become junior leaders, but also may be tempted to drop out of the organization. This is a time of great developmental variety among peers.

Physical Growth

Girls from last year's club may return this year as young women. Some boys of 13 may still be the size of an 11-year-old, while other boys of the same age may have grown 6 inches. The growth spurt that marks beginning adolescence may occur across a wide range of ages, with girls maturing before boys.

Rapid changes in physical appearance may make new teens uncomfortable with their changing body images. Hands and feet grow first, creating a problem with clumsiness. Acne, voice changes, and unpredictable menstrual cycles all set up situations of great embarrassment. At the same time, slower developing teens may be uneasy about the lack of changes. But even without the outside physical changes of adolescence, social growth, changes in thinking, and emotional development may be occurring.

Growth in Thinking

Young teens enjoy playing with ideas as much as playing sports. Young teens move from concrete to more abstract thinking during this time. They still tend to think in all-or-nothing terms, however. If a subject is of interest, it will be intensely explored. Ready-made solutions from adults often are rejected in favor of the young teens finding solutions on their own. Leaders who

provide supervision without interference can have a great influence on these 4-H'ers. If an adult leader is respected, his or her opinion will be highly valued by young teens.

Small groups provide an opportunity for young teens to test ideas. Young teens can be very self-conscious, and a smaller group usually is less intimidating. Small clubs with many positions for developing leadership are ideal for this age.

As they start to deal with abstract ideas and values, justice and equality become important issues for the early teens. Project judging now may be viewed in terms of what is fair, as well as being regarded as a reflection of the self-worth of the individual.

Social Growth

In the process of moving away from dependence on parents toward eventual independence, early teens enjoy participating in activities away from home. Dependence on the opinions of parents or other adults shifts to dependence on the opinions of peers. By late adolescence, independence will emerge. Young teens no longer are afraid to be away from their parents and are beginning to develop mature friendship skills. Parents may need help in understanding that this is a healthy sign of growing maturity, not a rejection of past family activities.

Groups and clubs provide an opportunity for the early teens to feel social acceptance. Rather than the adult recognition sought earlier, young teens now seek peer recognition.

Providing members with the opportunity to learn to feel at ease with members of the opposite sex is an important function of group social activities. For most activities, boys still will cluster with boys and girls with girls, although they will begin to be very interested in what the other group is doing. Opportunities are needed for boys and girls to mix without feeling uncomfortable. This seems to work best if the teens plan the activities themselves and the boys are slightly older than the girls (because the girls often mature earlier).

Emotional Growth

As puberty approaches, young people's emotions begin the roller coaster ride that will characterize them throughout adolescence. Changes in hormones contribute to the mood swings, as do changes in thinking. The early teen years are a time for beginning to test values. Spending time with adults who are accepting and willing to talk about values and morals has a lasting effect on young people.

This period seems to present the biggest challenge to a young person's self concept. So many changes occur-everything from entering a new school

to developing a new and unfamiliar body-that young people hardly know who they are. This is a time for adults to help with self-knowledge and self-discovering activities.

It still is important to avoid comparing young people with each other; instead, a young person's present performance should be compared with his past accomplishments. Be especially careful at this age not to embarrass the young person. Teens feel the need to be part of something important. An activity that provides good things for others and demonstrates the teen's growing sense of responsibility is ideal. Junior leader organizations often are popular with teens toward the end of this age group.

15 16 17

Middle Teens (Age 15 to 17)

The middle teen years are a peak time for leadership in clubs but also a time of possible declining interest in past activities as jobs, school, and dating compete for the teen's time and energy,

Physical Growth

By the middle teen years, body changes have been accepted by most young people. The awkwardness has been overcome in most cases, although some boys still will be growing at a fast pace. Gone is the early teen, who was adjusting to the seemingly ever-changing size and shape of the adolescent body. Most teens of this age know their own abilities and talents. Many perfect athletic talent during intense hours of training and competition. New skills, such as driving a car, serve to move teens further away from the family and into the community as independent people.

Growth in Thinking

Adolescents are beginning to be able to think about the future and make realistic plans. Because they are mastering abstract thinking, they can imagine things that never were in a way that challenges-and sometimes threatens-many adults. They still have difficulty understanding compromise, however, and may label adult efforts to cope with the inconsistencies of life as "hypocrisy."

As middle teens think about the future, tomorrow's vocational goal influences today's activities. The middle teen years are a time of exploration and preparation for future careers. The teens set goals based on feelings of personal need and priorities. Any goals set by

others are apt to be rejected. College visits, part-time jobs, field trips to factories and businesses, and conversations with college students and adults working in a wide variety of fields can assist teens with making education and career decisions.

The middle years of adolescence are a time when teens can initiate and carry out their own tasks without supervision. Advanced divisions of projects, requiring research and creativity, give teens the opportunity to demonstrate to themselves and others how much they have learned and how much they can accomplish on their own.

The leader can be especially helpful to teens at this age by arranging new experiences in areas of interest. Information about trips and other projects associated with 4-H and reserved for older members could be made available. To be successful in these activities, the members need a leader to take the time to guide them through the qualification requirements while allowing plenty of input from the teens. As teens prepare for jobs, advanced schooling, and scholarship opportunities, a leader who knows the members well is a valuable resource for references.

Social Growth

At this stage adolescents would be capable of understanding much of what other people feel-if they were not so wrapped up in themselves. Relationship skills are usually well-developed, however, and friendships formed at this stage are often sincere, close, and long-lasting. Recreation continues to move away from the family and now additionally away from the large group. Dating increases. Among most teens, group dates gradually give way to double dates and couples-only dates. Acceptance by members of the opposite sex is now of high importance.

Other activities, such as sports and clubs, are still important. Teens want to belong to the group, but now want to be recognized as unique individuals within that group. Teens' individually set priorities will determine how active they remain in past organizations. Leader/member relations should now change from that of director/follower to that of advisor/independent worker. Adults need to understand the many changes occurring in the teens' lives. Consistent treatment from adults is important even though the teens act like adults one day and like children the next.

Emotional Growth

Two important emotional goals of the middle teen years are independence and identity, although neither will be achieved completely during this time period. Factors in these goals include achieving a satisfactory adjustment to sexuality and definition of career goals. Middle teens are learning to cooperate with others on an adult level. Time is precious. If programs

are filled with "busy work" or meaningless activities, teens soon will lose patience and interest.

The task of learning to interact with members of the opposite sex may preoccupy teens. Unsettled emotions may cause the teen to be stormy or withdrawn at times. In general, though, the teens will pride themselves on increased ability to be responsible in the eyes of themselves, peers, and adults.

18 19

Older Teens/Young Adults (Age 18 and 19)

These young adults are completing their 4-H careers and moving on to college, jobs, marriage, and other adult responsibilities. They may continue in collegiate 4-H.

Physical Growth

Growth for almost all young adults has tapered off. Late teens are no longer as preoccupied with body image and body changes. In most ways they have adult bodies, although they may not be prepared entirely for adulthood.

Growth in Thinking

Future plans are important to teens making the transition to adult life. Goals they set for the future influence which activities the teens continue. Late teens can determine their own schedules. Only general directions are needed when they are assigned familiar tasks.

Social Growth

Close relationships develop as young people become preoccupied with their need for intimacy. Some will marry at this age. Part-time jobs or advanced schooling may fill the need for social relationships that were filled by club activities in the past.

As teens make and carry out serious decisions, the support and guidance of adults still are needed. The final decisions are made by the teens, of course, but leaders can act as resource persons. They can stimulate teens' thoughts. Leaders no longer can control a member's activities.

Emotional Growth

The trappings of clubs, such as meetings, rituals, and uniforms, have lost their appeal for late teens. This is a time when many teens enjoy looking back on their achievements as 10 year members of 4-H, often receiving special recognition for their leadership activities. Late teens feel they have reached the stage of full maturity and expect to be treated as such.

Some Final Thoughts

This guide is not meant to tell you all there is to know about child and youth development. It is meant to guide you in your activities as a leader. As you observe your club members think back to the descriptions for their ages.

How do you observe? Just pick a time when the club members are involved in some activity, perhaps during the business meeting, a demonstration, or refreshments. Pay attention to the actions of one member at a time. Think about physical, cognitive (thinking), social, and emotional development. What response does he make when approached by others? Can that member follow the instructions in a lengthy demonstration? Or does she soon lose interest and begin disruptive actions?

Observing the members of your club will give you clues to planning successful activities. But what do you do if a child is continuously a problem or seems to be lagging behind the

Here is where parents and leaders need to work together. Choose a quiet time, when neither you nor the parents are rushed.

Mention your concerns to the parents. Avoid confronting or judging them. Assure the parents that you are not being critical. Ask for their insight into the child's development or behavior. Suggest that parents might want to check with the school to see if the teachers have similar concerns.

Offer help and support to the parents if they would like it. Perhaps outside assistance is needed. Keep the best interests of the child in mind.

You, as a leader, are a valuable asset to your community and to the individual members of your club. This guide to the stages of child and youth development-in combination with your special skills-will help you plan a successful 4-H program.

For more reading on this subject

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*Papalia, D.E. and Olds, S.W. (1981). *Human Development*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Extension Services of Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. H. A. Wadsworth, Director, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, West Lafayette, IN 47907. Printed and distributed in cooperation with Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.