

Voice: Don Bower

It is my pleasure today to talk with you about some of the developmental changes that we see in our 4-H'ers. Many young people have special needs as they're growing up that are important to understand. However, the focus of this module will be to talk about average, typical developmental changes that will be important in your work. However, I want you to remember that only a few teens develop "normally" in all areas – physically, socially, and cognitively. Hi, I'm Don Bower, a UGA Extension specialist in Human Development and Family Science. I'll be discussing those developmental changes and why they're important in our 4-H work.

Why is understanding youth development important when working with teens? I can think of a couple of reasons. First, many adults who work with young people today bring their own experiences as a young person, but sometimes not much more. That experience might be excellent preparation for working with youth, but we know there are some important differences between yesterday's youth and today's. Let's think about how to combine your own experiences with today's research and use the best aspects of both.

And second, the best youth development programming is based on a simple premise: youth developmental needs should match the programming that we offer in 4-H, and our programming should match youth developmental needs. It's a cycle. If you don't align the goals of your programming to meet the needs of your youth, your impact and your success will be limited.

So, let's take a look at some of the needs and changes that we see the most in 4-H programming that starts about 4th grade through 12th -- ages 9-19. The most obvious kind of changes we see among these young people are the physical changes of puberty. Other kinds of change include social/emotional development and cognitive, or intellectual, development. These three areas in youth development are the most researched.

First, within any given teen, the level of development among those three areas can vary dramatically. You might have a 12-year-old teen who has the physical development of a 15-year-old, but the emotional development of a 10-year-old. His physical, social, and cognitive domains develop individually, so teens should be understood according to those variations.

Next, youth development experts tend to talk in terms of BP and AP, before puberty and after puberty - as if that was a single event that took place overnight. Actually, the changes of puberty typically take three to five years to complete – some quicker, some slower. Many of the teens you'll work with will be right in the midst of these changes.

Take a look at the page in your notebook titled “What’s Normal in Ages and Stages of Youth Development.” Be thinking about what we just mentioned –the variability in so-called normal development – and how our programming matches that development.

Physical Development

Let’s start with the change that’s easiest to see, physical development. One characteristic that is obvious among 4th – 8th graders is that they’re very active! They’re moving, so as leaders, let’s design lively programs to keep them attentive and on track. Recent research shows us that children and teens actually learn better when physical activity is involved.

On average, girls will begin the changes of puberty six months to a year before boys of their same age, which usually includes a growth spurt. Many girls wind up being taller than many of the boys of their age. Also at this time, romantic interests begin forming – usually first among girls. Many 6th graders, however, are still not sure why *anyone* would have a romantic interest. This is a good example of those varying levels of development. Menstruation and ejaculation will begin soon, if they have not already. Lots of girls begin menstruation by the age of eight or nine, and be prepared that if they haven’t begun yet, they probably will when they get to camp. You’ll also see the development of other characteristics such as facial hair, breast development, voice change, and other physical features. These changes are the topic of immense fascination among teenagers this age and late night cabin discussions. However, I encourage you as leaders to avoid commenting about, or calling attention to, physical changes. Many teens are very self-conscious about their physical appearance. Even an innocent compliment such as “I love your red hair” or “Look how tall you are” can backfire. Due to the great differences in physical development among young people, please plan different kinds of physical activities, not just sporting competitions, and mix boys and girls on the same team to include everyone.

Social and Emotional Development

Next, let’s look at social and emotional development, the changes around young people and their social involvement. An important transition of puberty is moving from hanging out with people of the same gender to hanging out in mixed groups of boys and girls. You may remember that scary time and how some teens take dumb risks just to impress each other. While some young teens are natural joiners and mix easily with both old and new friends, others prefer to be around just one or two close friends. Plan your programming to be inclusive of all youth, regardless of their personality and social development. 4-H provides great opportunities for teens to make new friends, such as at camp, but some may need a gentle assist from you.

Also, during puberty, teens develop something called Imaginary Audience Syndrome. Basically, these teens are convinced that everyone around them (their “audience”) is focused on every

detail of that teenager's behavior, of their face, of their skin, of their hair, of their fingernails, of the...you name it. They believe the world is watching their every detail. This is part of the reason they seem so obsessed with their appearance – and why they are sometimes mortified by their parents. As adults, we realize that's imaginary. For teens, however, it is a very real experience. It doesn't do much good to try and convince them otherwise. The good news is that for the most part, they will grow out of it.

The imaginary audience phenomenon is a result of young teens being very egocentric, meaning they are very focused on their own wants and needs. This is related to another interesting aspect of teen social/emotional development – the so-called personal fable. Young teens tend to believe that what they're feeling is unique, and that nobody understands them or has ever felt this way before. This is the "story" – the fable – that they tell themselves. Why is this important? Well, if you are unique, then all those things that your parents warn you about – sex, drugs, and rock n roll – don't really apply to you. You're invincible! You can take lots of risks and you won't get burned! Or so these teens tell themselves. As a result, they make some dumb and risky decisions, especially by boys.

As youth grow older and reach high school, they'll spend more time working. They'll have a greater need for belonging as well as for independence. Considering these characteristics, use 4-H to help teens to explore their interests and provide opportunities for them to plan their own learning activities. Expect them to follow through on their choices and offer your feedback when needed.

Cognitive Development

Moving on to the third area, cognitive development, these are the changes in a young person's ability to understand and systematically process information. Typically, before age 12 or so, young people are stuck in what we call concrete thinking – which does not mean they are hard-headed. They mostly understand what they can see and touch; they understand the here and now. They can do projects that have two or three steps, but probably not projects with fifteen or twenty steps. Also, they begin independent decision making, often rejecting solutions given by adults, and can become obsessed with their subject of interest. As brains continue developing after puberty, the capacity for more abstract thinking develops. Teens can, then, plan better for more complex projects, set goals based on their needs and interests, explore future roles, and gradually begin to ponder big ideas - such as, how can I tell if I'm really in love?, and what will I want to do as a career when I grow up? Now is an ideal time to encourage teens to make decisions, evaluate how those decisions worked out, get involved in community service and explore career options. Of course, 4-H offers perfect options for all this.

Research on teen brain development is helping to shed light on one of the “mysteries of the universe:” Why don’t teenagers think before they act? It turns out that the last part of the brain to fully develop, the pre-frontal cortex, the part right here behind your forehead, is still developing until people reach their mid-twenties. Now, that part of your brain is the rational and mature part of your brain that is supposed to tell the wilder, crazier, more impulsive part of your brain to cool it; that it’s probably not a good idea to show everybody just how fast that car can go. Sometimes when teens do “dumb” things and we ask them why, and they say they don’t know why, that may be the truth. They really may not understand why they didn’t make better decisions when they actually knew better. Of course, in some people, the pre-frontal cortex of the brain may not *ever* fully develop. In 4-H, offer teens a wide range of activities – that should help involve them, whatever stage their brains are at.

Speaking of brains, new research has identified another development in teen brains that explains a lot. There is a part of the brain called the nucleus accumbens. It’s our pleasure center, the source of our feelings of fun and enjoyment. Guess what – this part of our brain is the largest it ever gets during adolescence, after which time it shrinks. This means that teens are hyper-attuned to any idea that sounds new and fun – much more so than younger kids or adults. Thus they really feel the temptation to take crazy risks that seem fun.

As adults, it may be a tough pill to swallow, but some risk-taking by teens is actually a good thing. For some teens, even joining a 4-H club is taking a risk that takes them outside of their usual comfort zone. We can help teens understand the difference between positive risks and negative, harmful ones. For example, running for office in the 4-H club – good risk. Texting while driving to the 4-H meeting – dumb risk. Driving with a bunch of their friends in the car – very dumb risk. (A teen driving with other teens in the car is 4 times more likely to crash than a teen driving alone.) Taking risks is part of the process of learning to make good decisions. We just need to try to manage the consequences of dumb decisions.

With all this rapid change in teen brains, maybe it’s no surprise that things can get off track. About 70% of all mental illnesses begin during the teen years. Depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, eating disorders, addictions and other disorders often begin during this time. Be alert to red flags of these disorders as you work with 4-H’ers.

A moment ago, I mentioned that all of us are influenced by our own experiences when we were teens as we work with teens now. 4-H’ers today face many of the same challenges we did – but with one major difference. That experience is their involvement in social media. Teens today spend huge amounts of time with “screens” – phones, computers and TV. The research to date on this is that it has some benefits and some drawbacks. One kind of screen time, however -- time spent on social media (texting, Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook) -- is strongly correlated

with teen unhappiness, loneliness and depression. This is especially true for girls. The learning activities that 4-H provides can be a strong counterpoint to this trend.

Summary

To sum up, we've looked at three parts of development of young people: physical development, social and emotional development, and cognitive development. There are also others such as moral development and spiritual development that we won't get into today. There is a consistent thread, however, that runs through all of these types of development. Research has shown that for all these changes to proceed on course, one factor must be present - that factor is not the type of cell phone they use, being the quarterback or homecoming queen, and not even driving the biggest SUV. If teens are to grow into caring, capable adults, they need consistent support from, and monitoring by, an adult who sees their mistakes, who loves them anyway, and who still expects them to do well and do good as they grow up. For some young teens in 4-H, you may be that important adult in their lives.

There is a saying about teen development that goes like this: "Problem free is not fully prepared." The more we understand about teen development, the more we can help them become fully prepared, and the better youth leaders we can be. Let's make 4-H a safe place for teens to grow.

For additional resources, refer to your notebook and talk with your local county Extension staff during your face-to-face meeting. They can also address any questions you have. Best wishes to you and to the teens you'll get to know and love. Have fun!

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References:

Georgia 4-H (Don Bower). 2003. Overnight Chaperone Training: Ages and Stages