

This is a time of life when very little is normative. It is a period of frequent change and exploration for older adolescents in many aspects of life, including home, family, work, school, resources, and role. The process of becoming an adult is more gradual and varied today than in the past. Young people take longer to achieve economic and psychological autonomy and early adulthood experiences vary greatly by gender, race and ethnicity, and social class.

Adjust to new physical sense of self.

Physical and sexual body changes in late adolescence /young adulthood are mostly complete.

- Individuals assigned male at birth (AMAB) may continue growing physically until age 21.
- All genders tend to experience increasing acceptance of physical appearance.

Adjust to a sexually maturing body and feelings

In adolescence, youth establish a sense of sexual and gender identity. This includes deciding on values about sexual behavior and developing skills for romantic relationships. By young adulthood:

- Young people tend to have a clear sexual and gender identity.
- They consider serious relationships and their potential for emotional and physical intimacy (What kind of person am I? What kind of person would suit me best as a partner?).
- Serious intimate relationships begin to develop. A majority of young adults regard love, fidelity and lifelong commitment as very important to a successful relationship.
- Most are sexually experienced.

Develop and apply abstract thinking skills

Adolescents experience significant changes in their capacity to think. Throughout adolescence, they become increasingly able to understand and grapple with abstract ideas, think about possibilities, think ahead, think about thinking, and “put themselves in another person’s shoes.” In other words, they become more sophisticated in their ability to think about themselves, others, and the world around them. This is a gradual process. In young adulthood:

- The capacity for abstract thought is established. Now, the individual can think abstractly and hypothetically; discern the underlying principles, and apply them to new situations. They can think about the future, considering many possibilities and logical outcomes of possible events.

The range of “normal” for a young adult is broad in terms of:

- Where they live;
- Who they live with;
- School and labor force participation;
- Parenting status;
- Relationships with own parents;
- Romantic relationship status;
- Community participation (connection to institutions and systems).

- Young people can hold and manipulate clusters of abstract ideas and create systems for organizing abstract thoughts.
- They have greater ability to consider different points of view at the same time, which can result in increased empathy and concern for others, and new interest in societal issues. It also allows youth to value a diversity of people (and their perspectives) and appreciate that there may be many right answers to a problem.
- Young people at this age are philosophical and idealistic.

Define a personal sense of identity

Adolescents move from identifying themselves as an extension of their parents (childhood) to recognizing their uniqueness and separateness from parents. They develop a sense of self as an individual and as a person connected to valuable people and groups. They refine their sense of identity around issues such as gender, physical attributes, sexuality, ethnicity. They explore issues such as Who am I? How do I fit in? Am I loveable and loving? How am I competent? This process often manifests as exploration of styles of dress, jewelry, music, hair, manner, and lifestyle. By late adolescence (young adulthood):

- Young people have a firmer sense of identity, although this is still a time of identity exploration (especially in areas of personal relationships, education, work, family).
- Many feel “in-between,” – seeing themselves as neither an adolescent nor an adult.

Brain Development

By age 6 (on average), a young person’s brain is 95% of adult size. However, the brain continues to physically develop in the teen years and even into the 20s with a second growth spurt of gray matter (peaking at age 11 for girls and 12 for boys) followed by a “pruning” process in which connections among neurons in the brain that are not used wither away and those that are used remain.

The front part of the brain, responsible for functions such as complex reasoning, problem- solving, thinking ahead, prioritizing, long-term planning, self-evaluation and regulation of emotion, begins to develop in early adolescence with a final developmental push starting at age 16 or 17. ***It is not that these tasks cannot be done before young adulthood, but rather that it takes more effort and requires practice.***

Adopt a personal value system

Adolescents develop a more complex understanding of moral behavior and underlying principles of justice. They question and assess beliefs from childhood and restructure these beliefs into a personal ideology (e.g. more personally meaningful values, religious views, and belief systems to guide decisions and behavior). Young adults:

- Experience less influence from their peers on their decision-making and values.
- Can see multiple viewpoints, value a diversity of people and perspectives and appreciate that there can be many right answers to a problem.
- Identify values and viewpoints that work for themselves while respecting viewpoints/values of others.

Renegotiate relationship with parents/caregivers

Adolescents negotiate a change in relationship with parents that begins to balance autonomy (independence) with connection. Overall, the adolescent's task is one of separating in some ways, while maintaining and redefining connections in others. Through this process, they make room for a more adult relationship that meets cultural expectations and provides necessary support.

In young adulthood, this presents as:

- An improved ability to see parents as individuals and take their perspectives into account.
- Having conflicts with parents with decreasing frequency as young people age.
- Renegotiating parent-child roles, especially for those who live at home (nearly half of all U.S. young adults in their late teens and early twenties still live with their parents). This is important as rates of residential change is highest in late adolescence/young adulthood than any other age group (young people living at home, moving out and living independently or with peers/partners, moving back home, etc).

Develop stable and productive peer relationships

Peer relationships change during adolescence to provide youth with more support and connections as they spend less time with adults and in supervised activity. Peer relationships often compete with parents and schools in terms of their influence on teen's attitudes and behaviors. As networks with peers broaden, peer relationships become deeper and play an increasing role in shaping an individual teen's self-concept and interaction.

Throughout adolescence, young people experience three transformations in peer relationships:

1. Reorientation of friendships from activity-based relationships of childhood to more stable, affectively oriented friendships based on idea and value sharing.
2. Growth of romantic and sexually oriented relationships.
3. Emergence of peer "crowds."

Throughout adolescence, friendships become more stable, intimate and supportive; they provide a cornerstone for learning about adult relationships.

In young adulthood, adolescents:

- Relate more to individual peers than to their peer group.
- Have more mature styles of peer relationships (stability, intimacy and supportiveness).
- Increasingly strike a balance between the influences of family and peers.

Meet demands of increasing mature roles and responsibilities

Young adults gradually take on the roles expected of them in adulthood. They learn the skills necessary for these roles and manage the demands of the labor market as well as meet family, community, and citizenship commitments.

Young adults have:

- Stable interests.
- An ability to compromise.
- Self-reliance.
- Greater concern for others.
- Higher levels of concern for the future.
- Thoughts about their specific role in life.
- Non-linear transitions to work, college, and independent living, frequently combined with work and periods of non-attendance in school.
- Tend to have difficulty adhering to an orderly and predictable sequence of education, full-time employment, home-leaving, cohabitation or marriage, and parenthood when growing up in less resourced neighborhoods.
- More focus on making their work experiences a foundation for their adult occupation.

Understanding Adolescence a developmental lens

EARLY ADOLESCENCE	MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE	LATE ADOLESCENCE / EMERGING ADULTHOOD
10 – 14 Grades 5 – 9	15 – 17 Grades 9 - 12	18 – 24 Post high-school

Developmental tasks

Adjust to new physical sense of self (including body image)

Adjust to a sexually maturing body and feelings

Develop and apply abstract thinking skills

Define a personal sense of identity

Adopt a personal value system

Renegotiate relationship with parents/caregivers

Develop stable and productive peer relationships

Meet demands of increasingly mature roles and responsibilities

Tasks of Late Adolescence (ages 18-24 years)

This synthesis of adolescent development research was compiled by Kristin Teipel, 2012, revised by Katie Pierson, 2023, [State Adolescent Health Resource Center](#), University