

#8 - Developmental Characteristics of 12-14 Year Olds

Just as every adult has her or his unique attributes, so does every adolescent. There are, however, some things we know about teenagers in general. Here's a snapshot of what you might see if your mentee is 12-14 years old:

Social

This is a time in life when young people are doing a lot of "renegotiating" of their relationships. The influence and approval of their friends, including friends of the opposite sex, is becoming more important; and while they still look up to certain adults as role models, they also want to assert their independence and make many of their own decisions.

- Still figuring out how to interact with the opposite sex.
- Looking increasingly to peers rather than parents for opinions and recognition.
- Searching for adult role models; but may reject ready-made solutions from adults in favor of their own ideas.
- Questioning authority and family's values.

Emotional

Most young people at this point in their lives are pretty self-focused. They are exploring who they are and where they belong. They want to fit in with friends, and to belong to something bigger and important, but also feel unsure and sometimes self-conscious because their bodies are rapidly changing, their parents don't seem so great anymore, and their emotions are often see-sawing. Many young people have entered puberty by this age.

- Compare themselves to others; concerned about body changes and emerging sexuality.
- Feel like they are always on center stage.
- Concerned about fitting in and being liked by peers.
- Strive for independence; yet need information about decision-making
- Seek privacy from parents/adults.

Intellectual

This tends to be a period of thinking a lot about justice and equality. Young people can see a bigger picture and understand complex issues and topics more thoroughly than they could when they were younger; they want to know what they and others can do to make the world a better place.

- Find justice and equality to be important issues, especially issues of fairness.
- Starting to move from concrete to abstract thinking; can understand cause and effect.
- Are ready for in-depth, long-term experiences; want to explore the world beyond their own communities.
- Are moving from fantasy to realistic focus on their life's goals, can imagine consequences.
- Have a lot of questions, want to challenge assumptions.

Physical

This is a time when young people are going through a lot of growth and change, including brain development. While their brains have at this point reached full size, the pathways that will help them do things like make positive choices, have healthy relationships, regulate their emotions and reactions, and plan ahead, are actually in the process of being hardwired.

- Experiencing rapid changes in physical appearance, perhaps causing embarrassment and self-consciousness.
- There is a wide range of sexual maturity and growth patterns between genders as well as within gender groups.
- The variations in development can lead to young people feeling out of place and can be stressful in terms of peer relations, especially when youths' physical appearance causes them to be seen and treated as more mature than their actual age.

What Does This Mean for Me as a Mentor?

Partly it's just good to have a sense of where your teen mentee might be coming from. It can also help you understand more about how your relationship is developing. When Neal Starkman was writing the book *Walking Your Talk: Building Assets in Organizations that Serve Youth* he talked with adolescents about what they really want from the adults in their lives. Combined with information about adolescent developmental characteristics, it helps paint a powerful picture of how you as a mentor can make a difference:

1. Young people want to be listened to...and they don't typically feel they are.
2. Young people want to be supported when they make mistakes as well as recognized when they succeed.
3. Young people want to learn about themselves and about each other.
4. Young people want to be challenged, to be taught useful information and skills.
5. Young people want to be valued.
6. Young people want to give something to their communities.

Makes You Think

"I can remember what flavor of ice cream cone my grandmother and I shared at Disneyworld; but most of the time, I can't remember what day it is. I guess it depends on what you think is important."

- Katherine, age 13¹

Start by *Changing the Rules*

Starkman has also interviewed youth and adults from New Moon Publishing in Duluth, Minnesota. They have developed a list of usual rules and new rules for youth-adult relationships. Here are some examples:

Usual Rules

- Don't be honest with young people—they can't handle it.
- Young people can't understand adult feelings and experiences.
- Young people don't know what real life (and real disappointment) is.
- Young people aren't interested in talking with adults.
- Young people don't listen.

New Rules: *Share the Power*

- Not talking is okay, but not listening is not okay.
- Welcome disagreement but end in compromise.
- Express your deep feelings passionately, and if something isn't too important to you personally, defer to someone who does have very strong feelings.
- No one knows all the answers.
- Be open to learning from each other.
- Make decisions with young people, not for them. This takes more time!

¹From <http://www.generationterrorists.com/quotes/kids.html>, downloaded on November 8, 2006.