

Stages of Adolescent and Young Adult Development (18-25)

This chart displays the “common” characteristics of adolescent and young adult development; however, young people will likely experience and display these behaviors at varying ages and in varying degrees of growth.

Adapted from: MIT Young Adult Development Project, Rae Simpson, Ph.D. MIT Center for Work, Family and Personal Life.

<http://hrweb.mit.edu/worklife/youngadult/index.html>

	Adolescence (puberty through 18)	Young Adulthood (18-25)	Later adulthood (mid 20s +)
Cognitive Development	<i>Abstract thinking.</i> Mental visor can hold not only concrete objects and experiences, but concepts for organizing them into categories and patterns. (i.e. abstract concepts like friendship and fairness, addition and subtraction as “opposites” not just carrying out the functions.)	<i>More complex thinking.</i> Increased ability to hold on their mental visors not only single abstractions, but clusters of abstractions and systems for organizing abstract thought. This assists them in math and science, as well as thinking about ideas, values and perspectives.	<i>New levels of abstract analysis.</i> An increased ability to not only organize abstractions but to do so self-consciously, and to evaluate ways of doing so.
Moral Development and Problem Solving	<i>Right/wrong framework.</i> Tendency to hold on one’s mental screen only one concept of what is right at a time. Ideas are either right or wrong. You are either right or wrong. They are either right or wrong.	<i>Appreciation for diverse views.</i> Development of a more “multiplistic” framework in which they can “see” multiple points of view, value diversity of people and perspectives and appreciate that there may be many right answers to a problem.	<i>More complex problem solving.</i> Greater sophistication in analyzing problems that have no right answers, such as moral dilemmas; and to articulate resolutions based on more complex types of thought
Interpersonal Development	<i>Instrumental relationships.</i> Relationships tend to be about alternating reciprocity (i.e. you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours). Can put themselves in someone else’s shoes, but have difficulty holding another point of view and theirs at the same time. Under stress, the needs of others fall off the mental visor.	<i>Mutuality in relationships.</i> Can form relationships with peers based on observing that they care about the same things; and loyalties to institutions based on observing that they share the same values. Can understand constructive criticism, appreciating that the other person is intending to be helpful. More likely to switch from instrumental orientation to more “socializable” orientation (like the Golden Rule.)	<i>Enhanced leadership capacity.</i> Able to put themselves on their mental visor and observe the ways in which they play an active role in shaping their values and decisions. Thus, they can create as well as follow rules and engage in processes by which individuals do so.
Emotional Development	<i>Intensity of emotions.</i> Triggered by hormones at puberty, teens are more aroused and aroused more easily—whether by something that makes them happy, angry or excited.	<i>Emotional regulation.</i> Acquire significantly greater capacity for integration of thought and emotion. Ability to hold past, present and future on their mental visor, and weigh immediate rewards against future consequences. Able to put more brakes on emotional intensity and sensation seeking.	<i>Greater capacity for self-evaluation.</i> Ability to see themselves as actors on the stage of life, they can also evaluate how effectively they do so, and how satisfied they or their employers, partners and others are with their performance and the impact.

Caveats

- The advent of a new developmental skill does not mean that one uses that skill all the time. Rather, it becomes a new option, one that at first can be tapped only with a great deal of support, probably in one particular area, such as an academic subject. Gradually it becomes easier and more familiar and hence used more frequently across a wider range of life experiences.
- A more sobering caveat is that some people never fully achieve these milestones at all. Although they occur in young adulthood if all goes well, they are by no means automatic, and they can be delayed or severely limited by a number of circumstances, including mental illness; learning disabilities; frequent use of alcohol or other drugs; and abuse, neglect, deprivation, violence, and other traumas.

Individual Differences

Development can be impacted by any number of individual differences:

- *Age, Education, Gender*--Certain demographics make a difference in the timing and likelihood of developmental shifts, notably age, gender, and exposure to formal education.
- *Abuse, Neglect, Trauma*--Traumatic events, such as abuse, neglect, severe deprivation, and exposure to violence, take a costly toll. Young adults with a history of trauma are vulnerable to getting "stuck" developmentally, or to growing more slowly and/or unevenly than otherwise.
- *Race, Ethnicity, Sexual Identity*--Anything that adds to challenges around identity can make the developmental tasks of young adulthood more difficult, including challenges associated with belonging to an oppressed, victimized, or stigmatized group within society.
- *Temperament*--People are born with varying degrees of openness to change and to the experiences that facilitate certain types of developmental change.

- *Parenting Style*--Parents vary in the extent to which they provide opportunities for young adults to receive the support and the challenges that foster development. The role of parents in young adult development is only just beginning to be studied and appreciated, but it is clear that parents continue to have an important and evolving influence.
- *Illness*--Any serious illness, especially mental illness, can create delays in healthy development. The high rates of depression and other mental illnesses among young adults in the U.S. are of particular concern.
- *Disabilities*--Learning disabilities are a factor in development, as are differences between the learning style of the young adult and the educational approach of her or his learning environment.
- *Substance Abuse*--Growing evidence points to the serious impact of chronic substance abuse on young adult development. Recent research is demonstrating ways in which alcohol and other drugs affect the growing brain, causing damage that may or may not be possible to repair.
- *Culture*--Differences in young adult development across culture are just beginning to be explored, differences that allow some kinds of growth to occur earlier in some cultures than others. For example, young adults in cultures that emphasize interdependence and interconnectedness may adopt a more "multiplistic" view sooner than those in societies that emphasize individuality and independence.
- *Getting Stuck*--Because of any of these circumstances, or a combination, some people may not make the kinds of shifts in complexity of thinking that typically occur in young adulthood. They struggle with the expectations and demands of modern life in part because they are handicapped by thinking capacities that are more typical in some ways of adolescence and younger ages.

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