

Unit 4: Ages and Stages

You work on the front lines with children and youth from many different age groups - and often at the same time! This unit describes the basic characteristics of the various age groups to help make your job of working with young people easier.

Learning Objectives

1. You will understand how youth grow and develop at different ages and stages.
2. You will better understand how to prepare and plan 4-H activities and programs for youth in different age groups.

Preview Questions

1. How do volunteers benefit from understanding how youth grow and develop at different ages and stages?
2. How do your 4-H members benefit from you understanding how youth grow and development at different ages and stages?

The Missouri 4-H Program serves all youth ages 5-18. Because this includes such a wide age range, it is important to note the differences between various age groups. How youth grow and develop at different ages is often referred to as Ages and Stages. Not all youth of the same age grow and develop at the same rate; however, the order of development is generally the same for all youth. For example, five-year-olds don't have the physical, cognitive and social/emotional ability to compete in a livestock contest but fourteen-year-olds probably do. Sixteen-year-olds have different social needs than ten-year-olds.

The challenge of planning successful 4-H activities becomes clear when 4-H leaders receive their youth club roster – typically representing several different age ranges! This unit focuses on the unique physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of youth within a similar age range. By understanding norms, volunteers will be better prepared to plan 4-H activities with children from these age groups: five to seven, eight to ten, eleven to thirteen and fourteen to eighteen.

Young Childhood (5-7 Year Olds)

Missouri's Clover Kids program is designed for children under the age of eight. Clover Kids give this age group a variety of educational and recreational experiences in a non-competitive environment.

Children who are aged 5 to 7 are busy and fun. They are extremely concrete thinkers and process words literally. For example, a child may say, “My mommy said the moon was ‘full,’ so it must have a full tummy.” For this age group, 4-H volunteers may be more successful using these strategies:

- Give instructions that are simple and clear.
- Break tasks down into more manageable steps. For example, “We are going to make fruit salad. First, I want you to walk to the bathroom and wash your hands with soap and water. Then use a paper towel to dry off your hands”. Children aged 5 to 7 are not yet able to set

goals and carry out projects over a longer period of time. For this reason, Clover Kids do not participate in 4-H project work.

- Give rules to help this age understand new environments and expectations. Just because children are aware of rules does not mean that they will follow them! However, when they are following the rules, they quickly notice when others do not. That is why tattling is common at this age!
- Identify group rules such as "no talking when others are talking," "take turns," and so forth. Enforce the rules consistently.
- Appeal to children's curiosity and need to explore. Children have a natural joy of learning many different things. Clover Kids leaders can foster the joy of learning for this age group by having them experience science, arts/crafts, music, field trips, technology and more.
- Focus on doing. Children aged 5 to 7 are more interested in the process of making or doing something than they are with the end product. For example, children like the process of making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich more than eating it. They enjoy spreading peanut butter with a knife, experiencing the texture of the peanut butter and bread, and putting the sandwich together. Hands-on experiences for this age group are very important because they need to be doing whether it is making a snack, planting seeds, or playing games. Clover Kids should not have long periods of sitting and listening.
- Encourage cooperation, not competition. Children aged 5 to 7 simply are not ready cognitively, socially or emotionally for competition. They don't have the maturity to deal with winning and losing in a positive way. Children cannot separate who they are as a person from the results of winning or losing. In their concrete thinking, they say to themselves, "If I win, I am a winner. If I lose, I am a loser." Because self-worth can be damaged if they are put in competitive situations, Clover Kids are not allowed to compete. Instead, encourage cooperation and learning to get along with others.

Five- to seven-year-old children are still learning to control their bodies and themselves in group settings. 4-H leaders can avoid problems by providing hands-on activities and establishing clear behavior expectations that are child-friendly and engaging. Here are some simple rhyming phrases you can use to help guide behavior of groups of 5 to 7 year olds:

"Dot, dot, not a lot"

This helps children limit the use of glue during craft or messy cooking activities.

"If you can hear my voice, clap your hands 3 times."

This helps children focus their attention, quiet down, and make a smoother transition to the next activity.

Leader says, "One two three, eyes on me." Children respond by saying, "One two, eyes on you."

This phrase helps five- to seven-year-olds transition between activities and/or quiet down.

"Shake out the wiggles."

This helps children release energy so they can better focus on the activity at hand.

Middle Childhood (8-10 Year Olds)

A characteristic of the normal child is he doesn't act that way very often.

~Author Unknown

4-H members aged 8 to 10 can begin to set goals and carry out projects over a longer period of time. The greater language ability allows children this age to express their thoughts and feelings. Arguments are more likely to be verbal than physical. Some general characteristics of this age group:

- Rules – Eight- to ten-year-olds are terrific at finding loop holes! Once they understand the rules, they begin to question them.
- Helping others - Eight- to ten-year-olds can help younger children understand and follow rules in club or project meetings.
- Friendships – Youth have a heightened need to form friendships and be part of a group. Forming and keeping friends requires very complex skills such as listening, supporting, communicating, and getting along with others. Youth aged 8 to 10 still need a lot of help in developing these skills. Remember that the social part of the 4-H program is just as important to foster as project work, community service, citizenship and character development. One strategy for building these skills is to encourage youth in this age group to be mentors or friends to younger children.
- Cooperative – Youth this age are generally cooperative and want to please adults. They are also easily motivated and eager to try new things.
- Same Sex Preferences – Eight- to ten-year-olds prefer to be with children of their own gender. Because they admire and imitate older boys and girls, this is a good age to have older, same sex club members help with projects and activities.

Early Adolescence (11-13 Year Olds)

We cannot always build the future for our youth but we can build our youth for the future.

~Franklin D. Roosevelt

Youth aged 11 to 13, often called tweens, are moving toward more abstract thinking. They have better problem solving abilities, can imagine multiple possibilities and take on more responsibilities. The most effective 4-H volunteers provide this age group with plenty of opportunities for leadership and planning. Note that as these youth develop their cognitive and communication skills, they may argue more – mainly with parents!

Common characteristics of ages 11 - 13:

- Rules – Eleven- to-thirteen-year-olds now begin to test and break the rules.
- Friendships – “Fitting in” is very important. The “right” clothes and music is a big focus. Friendships and cliques form based on similar interests and values. Youth who do not have friends and positive groups are at risk for developing negative and anti-social behavior. 4-H provides youth with supportive and positive social opportunities. 4-H volunteers are key in helping shape a positive environment where youth feel accepted and appreciated.
- Self-consciousness – Eleven- to-thirteen-year-olds are generally self-conscious and may have difficulty in activities involving the opposite gender or older youth. They may also feel too

“cool” to be a part of experiences involving younger youth. Be sensitive to these age appropriate challenges.

- **Invincibility** – These youth often feel invincible, as though they will not experience the consequences of risk-taking behavior. For example, they may think, “If I sneak out of the house at night to hang out in the park with my friends, I won’t get hurt - even though others have been hurt there in the past.”
- **Imaginary Audience** – Youth at this age tend to fall into one of two categories. Some eleven-to-thirteen-year-olds think, “The world is a stage and I am the star.” Others tend to have ongoing stage fright and are extremely self-conscious. They truly believe, “Everybody notices everything about me from the way I dress, my body type, how my hair looks and whether I have a pimple.” Adolescents aren’t making up these feelings – they’re very real to them.
- **Risk Taking** - Youth this age often want to try new things and take risks. 4-H volunteers can help by being sensitive and encouraging. The 4-H program can also help counter risk-taking desires of some youth by offering more positive alternatives such as challenge activities. 4-H experiences such as club officers, Teen Conference, camps, junior council opportunities, and other fun educational/social events can help satisfy the need to try new things.
- **Relationship with Adults** – Youth are not as interested in pleasing adults as they were earlier. They are moving toward independence, often with one foot still in the childhood camp and one foot in the teenage camp. One day they may delight in playing with an old set of Polly Pocket dolls and, the next day, they are focused on the upcoming dance and what to wear. This behavior may seem erratic; however it is critical that adults treat them with dignity and respect during this time.
- **Attitude** – Sometimes young adolescents come to us with an attitude. They may roll their eyes, cross their arms and make negative comments. Although it is disrespectful, it is normal behavior. To establish what behavior is acceptable and to have a sense of humor is one way to deal with this age group. Adults' humor can change attitude and better engage youth.
- **Hormones** – These youth have increased hormonal activity that affects moods, bodies and physical images. Even an off-hand comment about their appearance may have a very negative effect.

Adolescence (14-18 Year Olds)

The best way to keep children at home is to make the home atmosphere pleasant and let the air out of the tires.

~Dorothy Parker

Adolescents 14 to 18, often called teens, are better able to think in abstract terms. They are better problem solvers and able to think in shades of gray rather than right or wrong, in or out, and all or nothing. Many begin to have their thoughts and opinions about politics, government, social issues and more.

Common characteristics of the fourteen- to eighteen-year-old age group:

- **Leadership** – Fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds see leadership as a skill to be mastered. Youth look for different opportunities to practice leadership. In a 4-H setting, for example, older youth can be given opportunities to plan and carry out activities for and with younger youth.

- Group and Individual Identify – Being part of a group is still important for these youth, but individual identity is becoming essential too. This age group is focused on who they are and how they connect or fit in with society. Youth have opportunities to learn more about themselves and the world around them through interactions with caring 4-H leaders.
- Same Sex Preferences - Mixed gender activities are interesting to this group. Leaders can encourage teens to plan mixed gender activities and group oriented projects.
- Self-exploration – Youth need opportunities to try new things and learn more about themselves. 4-H leaders need to promote new experiences such as 4-H trips, career exploration, etc. Many researchers believe that adolescence is a time of “storm and stress” with parents. Current research shows that conflict may arise over things like dress, curfew, body piercing, and music; however, core values such as education and religion are often shared between the parents and the youth.
- Future Oriented – Adolescents are sometimes viewed as self-focused and selfish. No wonder this age group is often focused on themselves given the many huge life decisions looming ahead of them such as “Am I going to college, workforce, or the military? What kind of relationships do I want outside of my family? or What will the world be like as I get older?” The decisions they are making will affect the rest of their lives!
- Missouri 4-H volunteers are in an ideal position to help youth explore these important life choices while also encouraging concern for others. 4-H leaders should also note that some youth at this age are overwhelmed with these decisions and may withdraw leading sometimes to depression or risky behavior. Your concern and support can make a difference.