

Understanding Young Adolescent Development

Adapted from *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4–14*, 3rd edition

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLDS

Now it's time for the boys to join the girls in spending hours in front of the mirror. Many fourteen-year-old boys are entering puberty. Most of the girls are already there. Along with a shared awareness of their own and each other's physical selves, both genders at fourteen also share a need to distance themselves from adults as they do the all-important work of this age: beginning to forge a sense of self and a group identity.

In adolescence, the developing person begins to focus on the "Who am I?" question that is so central to human existence. Young adolescents often seem preoccupied with how others see them versus how they see themselves. To the fourteen-year-old, questions about "who I am" seem best answered in terms of "who we are." Both boys and girls put enormous physical, emotional, and cognitive energy into the development of an adolescent subculture. Clothes, hairstyle, music, and language—portable aspects of self—advertise fourteens' understanding of what is "cool" in the teen subculture. Traveling with teens as they move around in school or on the street, these portable image advertisements serve the all-important function of attracting other teens—while tending to put off adults.

This movement toward peers and away from parents and teachers as the central figures in their lives is a key step in the distancing dance of young adolescents. Distancing from adults is also expressed by the awkward embarrassment at this age of being seen with parents, of having parents wear uncool clothes, drive an old car, or say the wrong thing. Eye-rolling, hair tossing, and scornful facial expressions are some of the distancing gestures parents can expect to see from fourteen-year-olds.



Challenging the authority of the adult now becomes almost a visceral reaction. Teens this age often seem to argue for arguing's sake; they want to do it their way, to have freedom, to be on their own. They're looking constantly for opportunities to decide for themselves what they will do—such as get a part-time job, play a sport, join a rock band—and at the same time they fear activities that would expose them to ridicule or self-doubt. Such embarrassing activities might include going out to eat with parents or dressing up.

This typically teen behavior, which often peaks at fifteen, has to do with the search for *fidelity*—here meaning a strong loyalty or devotion to an emerging sense of self, to some other person or persons, to ideas or fads. Fourteen-year-olds can exhibit this intense devotion to a sport or a musical instrument, to body piercing, or to a friendship or an idol. All of this practice around issues of fidelity helps prepare adolescents to participate as disciplined, loving partners and full-fledged citizens when they become adults.

Successful development of fidelity depends substantially on the guidelines, customs, and rites of passage provided by family, heritage, and society at large. Yet, for the fourteen-year-old school is the main structured social setting where society makes its demands. How the school is structured and how it places demands on students are critically important factors in the development of healthy young adults prepared for high school and the future.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLDS

Moving Toward Independence

- Crave adult connection even while fighting for their own identity; need adults to listen and negotiate rules and requirements
- Often embarrassed to be seen with their parents; fiercely critical of parents' dress, habits, friends, and ideas
- Adult personality continues to develop
- Take pleasure in developing individual skills (for example, music, art, or crafts) that express their emerging adult intelligence
- Like having a chance to evaluate and improve their own work and can also constructively critique other students' work
- Interested in learning and discovery as a means of answering the "Who am I?" question
- Like to cram as much into each day as they possibly can

Typical Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Behaviors

- Respond well to academic variety and challenge
- Learn well in small discussion or cooperative learning groups
- Enjoy and do well with lengthier project assignments
- Intrigued by research and putting together research reports in the proper format

- Many show increased interest in math and science
- Enjoy talking about current events formally in class or informally with their peers
- Better at figuring out cause and effect and doing other abstract thinking
- Because being with peers is so important, most would rather go to school than stay home when they're sick
- Like learning how things work
- Often say "I'm bored" to mean "I don't understand" or say work is too easy when they find it plenty challenging
- Typically loud and rambunctious; balance in classroom expectations is important (that is, requiring silence sometimes, but not always)
- Are in a "know it all" stage, in which they especially dislike and respond poorly to adult lectures, feeling they know what will be said once they hear the first few words
- Very concerned about learning how to communicate in the adult world
- Will engage more in group discussion
- Interested in word meanings and in developing a broader vocabulary
- Complain about homework, but often enjoy the challenge

Ethics and Self-Direction

- More willing to admit an error and try something a second or third time
- Very aware of problems in the larger world and invested in learning more and finding solutions
- May give in to peer pressure to see doing well in school as uncool
- Exploratory classes, service projects, sports, and other group undertakings often lead to a first career interest
- Begin to develop distinctive sense of humor; can be extremely funny and creative

Managing Physical Changes

- Very energetic; need as much physical release as possible through brief periods of physical activity outdoors or a stretch/mind break in the classroom
- If given time to re-energize, often perform and behave better in the afternoon
- Need lots of exercise, snacks, and sleep
- Girls are almost fully developed
- Growth spurts continue for boys, and their upper body strength begins to develop
- Both genders are more interested in sex; some are sexually active



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