

## Section 2: The Adolescent Learner

*All kids are indeed capable of generating powerful ideas; they can rise to the occasion. It turns out that ideas are not luxuries gained at the expense of the 3 Rs, but instead enhance them.*

–Deborah Meier (1995)

*The Power of Their Ideas*

*This section is taken directly from the 1996 draft of the **Intermediate Levels Handbook**. When considering approaches and strategies for learning, it is essential to have an understanding of the nature of the learner. While the information in this section is merely a starting point, it is sufficient to provide a rationale for the kinds of approaches and strategies described in Section 4 of this document.*

### The Learner

Adolescence represents a period or stage in the process of development leading to maturity or adulthood. Because of their important role in helping young people prepare for the adult world, educators need to know and appreciate adolescent characteristics and their application to learning.

The adolescent learner in the intermediate grades is involved in a period of rapid and significant change with respect to physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual and moral development. These changes are often intense and varied and, therefore, need to be acknowledged by those who direct and foster adolescents' development and learning.

For this document, which deals with the adolescent learner in the intermediate grades, adolescence can be subdivided into early adolescence (ages 10–14), which encompasses the biological changes of puberty and a new interest in sexuality; and middle adolescence (ages 15–17), which is a time of increasing autonomy and self-discovery leading to clear identity formation. There is considerable difference in the characteristics of the early grade six adolescent and the late grade nine adolescent.

### Characteristics of the Learner

While some general characteristics for adolescents have been identified, there is a need to recognize that changing characteristics are on a continuum with many variations at each grade and age. Each young person is a unique individual and any attempt to classify must be regarded as extremely general.

The following scheme, adapted from *The Report of the Junior High Reorganization Committee (1985)* and *Adolescence: Healthy Lifestyles (1992)*, Department of Education and *A Portrait of Young Adolescents in the 1990s*, Centre for Early

Adolescence, highlights the characteristics of all young people and outlines educational implications for initiatives related to their learning.

The subsections include:

- Social Development
- Emotional Development
- Physical Development
- Intellectual Development
- Spiritual and Moral Development

This developmental outline should be considered as a working framework rather than as a definitive statement on the nature of adolescence.

## Social Development

<b><i>Characteristics:</i></b>	<b><i>Implications:</i></b>
Young adolescents attempt to define themselves independent of the family unit. Family allegiance diminishes as peer relationships take on increased importance.	Parental involvement is still crucial at this time and should be encouraged. Teachers and parents should continue to be positive role models.
As the adolescent engages in more interactions, many involving risk-taking behaviours, there is a transference of loyalty to the peer group.	Provide activities (role playing, sociodramas) which will allow students to explore ways of dealing with various situations that may arise.  Provide opportunities for the formation of positive peer relationships.
As interpersonal skills are being developed and parental values are explored, the adolescent appears to fluctuate between a demand for independence and a desire for guidance and direction. Authority still remains primarily with the family at this time but the adolescent will reserve the right to question or reject suggestions from adults.	Provide opportunities for students to become involved in setting standards for behaviour and establishing realistic goals.
There is a strong desire for social acceptance. Conformity to the peer group in terms of dress, speech, and behaviour is quite common.	Adults should not over react when extremes in those areas are displayed. Provide opportunities for positive social interaction with peers and adults.  Adolescents benefit from opportunities to work with peers in collaborative and small group learning activities. A tremendous amount of their learning occurs in a social context.

## Emotional Development

<b><i>Characteristics:</i></b>	<b><i>Implications:</i></b>
Emerging adolescents will display a multitude of emotions and in varying degrees in their search for independence and autonomy.	Design activities that allow students to play out their emotions and develop decision-making skills.
While their moods, temperaments, and behaviours are profound and intense, they are often times inconsistent and unpredictable. Feelings tend to shift between superiority and inferiority.	Adolescents should not be pressured to explain their emotions. Provide opportunities for releasing emotional stress.
Adolescents have a strong desire to establish acceptance among their peers. Appraisals of self are often overly critical and negative. They frequently make comparisons and see themselves deficient in many ways.	Self-evaluation and self-responsibility should be encouraged. Provide opportunities for self appraisal and the development of positive attitudes.
This age group is extremely sensitive to criticism of any kind. They are easily offended. Feelings of inadequacy, coupled with fear of rejection by their peer group contribute to low self-esteem.	Adults should avoid using sarcasm. Activities should be structured to enhance self esteem and recognize student accomplishments.
Adolescents see their problems as unique and often exaggerate simple occurrences.	Plan units that revolve around student issues so that adolescents become aware that their problems are not unique.

## Physical Development

<b><i>Characteristics:</i></b>	<b><i>Implications:</i></b>
Early adolescence is a period of accelerated development. This is complicated by the fact that in any group of young adolescents of similar chronological age, there is enormous variability in growth rates.	<p>The school should provide experiences and opportunities that help students understand their own physical development.</p> <p>Emphasis should be placed on how the teacher deals with the students within the social interaction of the school and the classroom. Classroom climate and methodology are extremely important.</p>
Strength, energy levels, stamina, and sexual maturity of boys and girls increase at different times and rates. The physical changes are related to perception of self and in differing ways for boys and girls.	<p>Opportunities must be provided for constructive social interaction and the establishment of a healthy, stable classroom environment.</p> <p>Problems in the psychomotor domain should be identified and instructional strategies developed to remedy those problems while encouraging and preserving self-esteem.</p> <p>Because of the wide diversity in sexual development between boys and girls what is taught and how it is taught should reflect the range of needs and interests of the students.</p>
The acceleration of growth and related physical changes make demands on the energies of early adolescents. In learning how to pace themselves to adjust to their “new body”, they have periods of over activity and listlessness. They tend to get more tired until they learn to moderate their activity.	<p>Physical activities should stress skill improvement: competition should be flexible enough to accommodate wide variations in size, weight, strength, endurance, and skill. Students should be motivated rather than forced to participate in activities.</p> <p>Because of their energy, young adolescents require a great deal of physical activity. An activity-oriented approach to learning is important.</p>

## Intellectual Development

<b><i>Characteristics:</i></b>	<b><i>Implications:</i></b>
Throughout early adolescence there is cognitive awakening which is characterized by an emerging ability to handle abstract and hypothetical concepts and to apply problem-solving approaches to complex issues. However this shift from concrete to operational thinking varies from individual to individual and from time to time.	The development of formal thinking is a major goal for the school system and the key to success in this aspect of teaching is to match the student's level of function and to gradually raise it. The level of function will vary from topic to topic and from student to student depending on the student's familiarity with it and the ability to deal with the concepts presented. Therefore, all programs must provide for movement from concrete to abstract thinking when and where appropriate.
Generally, eleven-year-old students are characterized by a predominance of concrete thinking where they think in terms of specifics. Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds have the ability to do more abstract thinking. They can consider possibilities and not just realities. They are able to see things from another person's viewpoint, are able to allow perceived consequences of behaviour to temper the desire for immediate gratification, and are also able to consider exceptions to the rule. Thirteen-year-olds on the other hand may fluctuate between the characteristics of both these groups. One day they may reason far beyond their years and the next day younger than their chronological age.	Young adolescents should be exposed to learning situations where they can apply skills to solve real-life problems.

Adolescents have a present focus as opposed to a future orientation. During this stage students retain a certain egocentrism which leads them to believe that they are unique, special, even invulnerable to harm.	Students require structure and guidance in setting clear limits that involve them in the decision-making process.
Adolescents may be unaware of the consequences of risk-taking behaviour.	Opportunities should be provided to affect awareness of and attitudes about issues involving risk-taking behaviour.
Young adolescents demand relevance in learning. In addition to wanting concrete information, they begin to question the relevance of what is taught. As their ability to process and relate information increases, their search for structure in the information also increases.	An experiential approach is required. The demand for relevance should be met by basing concepts in life, by using real people as exemplars, and by meaningful participation in families, school and communities.
The student's ability to process and relate information is increasing. There is a tendency to search for an understanding of rules and conventions and to question all experiences.	Programs should provide the opportunity to question and analyse situations to develop the skills of critical analysis and decision making.

## Spiritual and Moral Development

<b>Characteristics:</b>	<b>Implications:</b>
Young adolescents are moving from a morality based on convention or precept to one based on personal values. Their emerging search for values, their increased sexual awareness, and their need for meaning in life are powerful forces in determining the picture or image they present to the world.	<p>The change to “personal” rather than “imposed” values requires educator awareness of the values which permeate the educational system and to deal with them appropriately.</p> <p>Young people should be given the opportunity to examine values and to understand the values held by society and the reasons for advancing them, the values they hold for themselves and how to respond to conflicts in values.</p>
Young adolescents now question values, cultural expressions, and religious teachings. They are developing a sense of personal responsibility for their actions, their consciences are maturing and they often experience feelings of guilt.	<p>Examination of values requires that they be discussed in an open, enquiring atmosphere. Authoritarian approaches and judgmental statements should be avoided as they may inhibit discussion and prevent real attitudes and misunderstandings from finding expression.</p> <p>In establishing one’s values, it is useful to ask “what would one do in specific circumstances?”, but the critical question to ask is “What <i>should</i> one do?” The should question implies a belief in certain enduring values. These are expressed in religious theology and are often generally accepted by moral people in all societies. Programs should invite consideration of such values.</p> <p>Open discussion should also provide for an understanding of situations where values are in conflict. Students should be provided the time and opportunity to examine conflictual situations and to develop abilities to resolve them.</p>
Young adolescents have fairly rigid standards for right and wrong. As they become older, their concept of justice becomes less egocentric and rigid accompanied by a heightened sense of fairness.	<p>Positive values should be developed through specific content.</p> <p>Opportunities should be provided for the consideration and resolution of dilemmas of a social as well as a personal nature.</p>

<p>As they begin to value the benefits of cooperative group action, adolescents exhibit more concern for others.</p>	<p>Through group work, opportunities should be provided to help each other to gain a better understanding of individual differences and to develop group interaction skills.</p> <p>Young people should be given the opportunity to demonstrate concrete expressions of concern for others both in the school and in the larger community.</p>
<p>Young adolescents are searching for greater meaning and understanding regarding the ultimate meaning of life.</p>	<p>Opportunities should be provided to discuss questions related to spiritual growth and development.</p> <p>Plan units that revolve around student issues so that adolescents become aware that their problems are not unique.</p>

