

The Ten Tasks of Adolescence

TASK 1: *Adjust to Sexually Maturing Bodies and Feelings*

Teens are faced with adjusting to bodies that as much as double in size and that acquire sexual characteristics, as well as learning to manage the accompanying biological changes and sexual feelings and to engage in healthy sexual behaviors. This task also includes establishing a sexual identity and developing the skills for romantic relationships.

TASK 2: *Develop and Apply Abstract Thinking Skills*

Teens typically undergo profound changes in their way of thinking during adolescence, allowing them more effectively to understand and coordinate abstract ideas, to think about possibilities, to try out hypotheses, to think ahead, to think about thinking, and to construct philosophies.

TASK 3: *Develop and Apply a More Complex Level of Perspective Taking*

Teens typically acquire a powerful new ability to understand human relationships, in which, having learned to “put themselves in another person’s shoes,” they learn to take into account both their perspective and another person’s at the same time, and to use this new ability in resolving problems and conflicts in relationships.

TASK 4: *Develop and Apply New Coping Skills (e.g. decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution)*

Related to all these dramatic shifts, teens are involved in acquiring new abilities to think about and plan for the future, to engage in more sophisticated strategies for decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution, and to moderate their risk taking to serve goals rather than jeopardize them.

TASK 5: *Identify Meaningful Moral Standards, Values, and Belief Systems*

Building on these changes and resulting skills, teens typically develop a more complex understanding of moral behavior and underlying principles of justice and care, questioning beliefs from childhood and adopting more personally meaningful values, religious views, and belief systems to guide their decisions and behavior.

TASK 6: *Understand and Express More Complex Emotional Experiences*

Also related to these changes are shifts for teens toward an ability to identify and communicate more complex emotions, to understand the emotions of others in more sophisticated ways, and to think about emotions in abstract ways.

TASK 7: *Form Friendships that are Mutually Close and Supportive*

Although youngsters typically have friends throughout childhood, teens generally develop peer relationships that play much more powerful roles in providing support and connection in their lives. They tend to shift from friendships based largely on the sharing of interests and activities to those based on the sharing of ideas and feelings, with the development of mutual trust and understanding.

TASK 8: *Establish Key Aspects of Identity*

Identity formation is in a sense a lifelong process, but crucial aspects of identity are typically forged at adolescence, including developing an identity that reflects a sense of individuality as well as connection to valued people and groups. Another part of this task is developing a positive identity around gender, physical attributes, sexuality, and ethnicity and, if appropriate, having been adopted, as well as sensitivity to the diversity of groups that make up American society.

TASK 9: *Meet the Demands of Increasingly Mature Roles and Responsibilities*

Teens gradually take on the roles that will be expected of them in adulthood, learning to acquire the skills and manage the multiple demands that will allow them to move into the labor market, as well as to meet expectations regarding commitment to family, community, and citizenship.

TASK 10: *Renegotiate Relationships with Adults in Parenting Roles*

Although the task of adolescence has sometimes been described as “separating” from parents and other caregivers, it is more widely seen now as adults and teens working together to negotiate a change in the relationship that accommodates a balance of autonomy and ongoing connection, with the emphasis on each depending in part on the family’s ethnic background.

Stages of Healthy Adolescent Development

Characteristic Developmental Milestones and Tasks

Stage with Age Range (Approx)	Early Adolescence (ages 10-14 years)	Middle Adolescence (ages 15-17 years)	Late Adolescence (ages 18-21 years)
Physical Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puberty: Rapid growth period • Secondary sexual characteristics appear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary sexual characteristics advanced • 95% of adult height reached 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical maturity and reproductive growth leveling off and ending
Intellectual/Cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concrete thought dominates “here and now” • Cause-effect relationships underdeveloped • Stronger “self” than “social awareness:” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth in abstract thought; reverts to concrete thought under stress • Cause-effect relationships better understood • Very self-absorbed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstract thought established • Future oriented; able to understand, plan and pursue long range goals • Philosophical and idealistic
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge authority, family; anti-parent • Loneliness • Wide mood swings • Things of childhood rejected • Argumentative and disobedient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict with family predominates due to ambivalence about emerging independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emancipation: -vocational/technical/college and/or work -adult lifestyle
Body Image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preoccupation with physical changes and critical of appearance • Anxieties about secondary sexual characteristic changes • Peers used as a standard for normal appearance (comparison of self to peers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less concern about physical changes but increased interest in personal attractiveness • Excessive physical activity alternating with lethargy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually comfortable with body image
Peer Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves a developmental purpose • Intense friendship with same sex • Contact with opposite sex in groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong peer allegiances – fad behaviors • Sexual drives emerge and teens begin to explore ability to date and attract a partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions/values less influenced by peers • Relates to individuals more than to peer group • Selection of partner based on individual preference
Identity Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Am I normal?” • Daydreaming • Vocational goals change frequently • Begin to develop own value system • Emerging sexual feelings and sexual exploration • Imaginary audience • Desire for privacy • Magnify own problems: “no one understands” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimentation – sex, drugs, friends, jobs, risk-taking behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue realistic vocational goals with training or career employment • Relate to family as adult • Realizations of own limitations & mortality • Establishment of sexual identity, sexual activity is more common • Establishment of ethical and moral value system • More capable of intimate, complex relationships