

#9 - Developmental Characteristics of 15-18 Year Olds

Just as every adult has her or his unique attributes, so does every adolescent. There are, however, some things we know about teenagers in general. Here's a snapshot of what you might see if your mentee is 15-18 years old:

Social

Older adolescents are beginning to see that they have a lot to contribute to society. They also understand that adults don't always have the right answers. They are, therefore, coming to a point where they want to be treated with more respect...they want to feel more like adults.

- Tend to romanticize sexuality, but moving toward a more realistic understanding.
- Search for intimacy, pursue romantic relationships.
- Renegotiate relationships, test sexual attractiveness
- Make commitments. Can commit to follow through with community service, personal goals, and work responsibilities.
- Desire respect; want adult leadership roles.
- Are apt to reject goals set by others.

Intellectual

This can be a time of life when teens are mastering abstract thinking. They no longer want to be told "how things are," they want to make their own interpretations based on what they see, feel, and experience.

- Can imagine impact of present behavior on future consequences.
- Enjoy demonstrating acquired knowledge.
- Develop theories to explain how things happen.
- Create new possibilities from information.
- Will lose patience with meaningless activity.

Emotional

Older adolescents are more complex emotionally than their younger peers. They are relating to others more as confident individuals, and are gaining more autonomy. Furthermore, attaching themselves to things and people, that they value and respect, is becoming a high priority.

- Begin to accept and enjoy their own uniqueness, but still seeking status and approval of peer group.
- Develop their own set of values and beliefs, but look for confidence from others in their decisions.
- Take on multiple roles.
- Gain autonomy.
- Can see self from viewpoint of others.
- Take fewer risks in relationships and friendships.
- Search for career possibilities and place in the world.

Physical

Young people at this age are going through a lot of growth and change, including brain development. While their brains have at this point reached full size, the pathways that will help them do things like make positive choices, have healthy relationships, regulate their emotions and reactions, and plan ahead are actually in the process of being hardwired. Many teens have reached sexual maturity by age 15, and certainly most have by 18.

- Concerned about body image.
- Smaller range and fewer differences in size and maturity among peers (than previous years).
- Tend to develop a more realistic view of limits to which body can be tested.

What Does This Mean for Me as a Mentor?

Partly it's just good to have a sense of where your teen mentee might be coming from. It can also help you understand more about how your relationship is developing. When Neal Starkman was writing the book *Walking Your Talk: Building Assets in Organizations that Serve Youth* he talked with adolescents about what they really want from the adults in their lives. Combined with information about adolescent developmental characteristics, it helps paint a powerful picture of how you as a mentor can make a difference:

1. Young people want to be listened to...and they don't typically feel they are.
2. Young people want to be supported when they make mistakes as well as recognized when they succeed.
3. Young people want to learn about themselves and about each other.
4. Young people want to be challenged, to be taught useful information and skills.
5. Young people want to be valued.
6. Young people want to give something to their communities.

Makes You Think

"What seem to be small gestures of thoughtfulness and kindness can mean a lot – a whole lot."

- Mary Allyn, age 17¹

Start by *Changing the Rules-*

Starkman has also interviewed youth and adults from New Moon Publishing in Duluth, Minnesota. They have developed a list of usual rules and new rules for youth-adult relationships. Here are some examples:

Usual Rules

- Don't be honest with young people—they can't handle it.
- Young people can't understand adult feelings and experiences.
- Young people don't know what real life (and real disappointment) is.
- Young people aren't interested in talking with adults.
- Young people don't listen.

New Rules: *Share the Power*

- Not talking is okay, but not listening is not okay.
- Welcome disagreement but end in compromise.
- Express your deep feelings passionately, and if something isn't too important to you personally, defer to someone who does have very strong feelings.
- No one knows all the answers.
- Be open to learning from each other.
- Make decisions with young people, not for them. This takes more time!

¹From <http://www.generationterrorists.com/quotes/kids.html>, downloaded on November 8, 2006.