UW–MADISON EXTENSION

It is important to consider the ages and developmental stages of a 4-H group when planning projects and activities. This document is intended to provide some general characteristics of youth at different stages of development as well as implications that these characteristics have for programming. Please keep the following considerations in mind:

- Individual youth develop at their own pace, but typically work through these stages in order.
- Transitions are gradual. The same group may demonstrate characteristics from different categories, depending on the situation.
- There are many factors at play in development: gender, trauma/life experience, physical/emotional/mental needs, etc.
- The most appropriate way to plan activities for your group is to get to know the interests and needs of the individuals in the group.

In the tables below, you will find the characteristics of youth in that age group are listed on the left. Suggestions are provided on the right for how to best lead or adapt programming to meet their developmental needs.

Early Childhood (Ages 5-8)

Characteristics	Implications for Programming
Physical	
Period of slow, steady growth.	Create opportunities to practice new skills.
Still learning small and large motor skills.	Choose project that can be successfully completed. Expect messiness.
Learn best through physical activity.	Prioritize activities that include physical activity.
Intellectual	
More interested in process than product.	Focus on doing activities rather than completion.
Thinking is concrete. Must have experienced it in order to think about it.	Share directions orally and through demonstration. Create new experiences to broaden thinking.
Seeking to understand world: naturally curious.	Be flexible. Allow opportunities for exploration and discovery.
Excited to try new things, but short attention spans.	Plan lots of shorter activities to fill the time.
Social	
Learning how to be friends; may have multiple "best friends".	Create small group activities to focus on social skills.
Boys and girls may enjoy playing together.	Engage in mixed- gender activities.
Still developing empathy.	Offer opportunities for make-believe and role-playing to explore others' feelings.
Emotional	
Sensitive to criticism and failure.	Focus on cooperative activities that allow for group success. Assist and encourage frequently.
Dependent on parents and adults for approval and affection.	Increase adult to youth ratio (1 adult for every 3-4 youth). Offer lots of adult support.

Middle Childhood (Ages 9-11)

Characteristics	Implications for Programming
Physical	
Enthusiastic; lots of energy.	Provide active learning experiences.
Girls maturing more quickly; some may be nearing puberty.	Avoid girl/boy competition.
Increased muscle development, strength, balance, coordination.	Encourage large and small motor movement.
Intellectual	
Attention spans still shorter; interests change rapidly.	Create multiple shorter learning experiences; give simple & short directions.
Wide variation in reasoning and academic abilities.	Activities should allow for wide range of success.
Enthusiastic; eager to try new things.	Offer wide variety of activities.
Social	
Enjoy group activities & cooperation; loyal to group.	Create group learning experiences; allow group to work together to plan and manage time.
More aware of sex & gender.	Youth may want to do activities in gendered groups, but not all will feel comfortable identifying with specific group.
Admire & imitate older youth.	Engage in mentoring experiences with older youth.
Require guidance from adults for best performance.	Enlist older youth and other adults to help keep youth on task.
Emotional	
Delicate sense of self-confidence: require individual recognition rather than comparison with others.	Compare present and past performances for individual youth.

Young Teens (Ages 12-14)

Characteristics	Implications for Programming
Physical	
Rapid physical change (puberty), growth spurt often happens earlier for girls.	Be aware that youth may feel embarrassed about changes. Find ways to normalize these changes through conversation, etc.
Onset of sexual feelings & interest in their own bodies.	Provide fact based, non-judgmental information and opportunities for learning & discussion.
Interested in sports & active games.	Create active, engaging learning opportunities.
Intellectual	
Interested in youth centered solutions.	Engage youth in activity planning and setting forth expectations.
Increased abstract, hypothetical, logical and cause and effect thinking abilities.	Provide opportunities to create their own solution and engage in predicting and problem solving.
Able to plan and evaluate their own work.	Youth can help plan activities, follow through, and evaluate the outcome.
Social	
Interested in public appearance, peer interactions and approval.	Be patient with excessive grooming habits. Offer activities focused on self-love & self-confidence as well as outside relationships.
More dependent on peer approval than adult approval.	Reassure parents that this is normal youth development, not a rejection of family.
Interested in activities that involve both genders.	Provide low stakes opportunities for groups to mix. Youth can plan these activities themselves.
Emotional	
Struggle with self-esteem: can be critical and self-conscious.	Plan variety of activities where lots of participants can be successful and recognized by others.
Hormone changes can lead to volatile emotional state.	Typical human development leads to drama and extreme feelings. Be open, accepting, understanding.
Torn between independence and reliance on parents.	Encourage asking for help from adults and older youth.

Middle Teens (Ages 15-17)

Characteristics	Implications for Programming
Physical	
End of puberty; some still changing rapidly. Many self-conscious of body image.	Avoid comments about stature, size, and shape.
Intellectual	
High levels of abstract thinking and problem solving.	Engage in real-life problem-solving situations, allowing youth to take the lead in brainstorming, decision making, and evaluating outcomes.
Invested in community well-being and interests of others.	Plan civic and community service projects.
Development of personal philosophy and self-knowledge.	Create opportunities for youth to explore and express personal philosophies.
Preparing for lots of life changes; may need guidance.	Offer opportunities to explore schools, careers, and networking with college students and working adults.
Social	
Desire status among peer group.	Encourage peer support in learning environment.
Interested in developing relationships, platonic and romantic.	Encourage teens to plan group activities and projects.
Seeking leadership roles.	Give teens opportunities to create their own learning opportunities.
Seeking belonging and individual recognition.	Emphasize personal development when possible.
Emotional	
Imposter syndrome, low self-esteem are common.	Find ways to show youth their own self-worth.
Moving toward independence & individual identity.	Allow teens to take on increased responsibility and opportunities for self-exploration of identity, values, and beliefs.

Older Teens (Ages 18-19)

Characteristics	Implications for Programming
Physical	
Growth has tapered off. Brain is still developing.	Although living in adult bodies, may not be prepared for adulthood.
Intellectual	
Future goals are important.	Help youth consider ways that these activities can continue into the adulthood.
Strong planning & leadership abilities.	Only general directions are necessary for familiar tasks.
Social	
Relationships (romantic and platonic) are shifting.	New relationships may take the place of those created within club or group.
Need adult support when making decisions.	Be a resource for youth considering future plans.
Emotional	
Ready to be treated as an adult.	Give recognition for leadership activities; club activities and rituals may no longer be fulfilling.