

## READING

# Understanding Adolescents

Adolescence is the developmental period between childhood and adulthood, beginning around age 10 and continuing until the mid-20s. It is a dynamic time of growth, change, and possibility, when young people explore their identities, seek new experiences and relationships, and form values, passions and goals that will shape their futures.

Decades of research in adolescent development have identified key physical, cognitive, social, moral, and emotional transformations of adolescence.

**Cognitively**, adolescents are developing new capacities to think critically and deeply. They are newly able to self-reflect and can also consider multiple perspectives different from their own. Adolescents can think theoretically and abstractly. They ask “what if?” and imagine possible futures—possibilities they themselves can have a hand in shaping.

**Morally**, adolescents are invested in questions of fairness, justice, and ultimate meaning. They have a growing capacity for relational connection, care, and responsiveness to the needs of others. The cognitive ability to take different perspectives enables their development of deeper empathy.

**Socially**, adolescents are attuned to their peers. They seek respect and belonging in groups where they can be supported, heard, and understood. They are also increasingly aware of their own social identities and the meanings—both positive and negative—that may be attached to their race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, ability, or other qualities. Changes in adolescents’ brains make them especially sensitive and adaptable to their social and physical environments.

All of these and other aspects of development converge as adolescents ask the question “**Who am I?**” Answering this question is one of the primary tasks of adolescence. While the question may appear simple and straightforward, the concept of identity is complex, multi-dimensional, and fluid. The answer to “Who am I?” depends on a range of factors: how we define ourselves, our membership in certain groups, and how other individuals and society label us. Some aspects of identity may remain the same throughout our lives, while others are more fluid and change over time. The adolescents in our classrooms are deeply invested in exploring their own identities and do so by engaging with peer groups, forming friendships, trying out new activities and interests, by testing boundaries and taking risks. They make sense of all these new encounters and experiences through storytelling. Psychologists Mike Nakkula and Eric Toshalis suggest that adolescents build self-understanding and “actively create development itself” through narrating and interpreting their own stories.

Nakkula and Toshalis point out,

We do not construct our life stories on our own. We are, rather, in a constant state of co-creating who we are with the people whom we are in closest connection and within those contexts that hold most meaning for our day-to-day existence.<sup>1</sup>

School environments and relationships are a critical factor in this development. Nakkula and Toshalis ask,

How then do we, as professional educators, support our teenage students in the productive imagination of themselves and their worlds? How can we best encourage and even join them in their experiments in possibility development? Are our pedagogies, curricula, counseling approaches, and even disciplinary practices aligned with these efforts, or do they get in the way? Questions such as these must be kept central in our work with adolescents . . . ”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Nakkula and Eric Toshalis, *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.