

Adolescent Developmental Changes and Goals: The Importance of Early Intervention

One of the central lessons of *Youth: Choices and Change* is that the foundation for successfully instilling lifelong healthy behaviors among adolescents is early intervention, beginning in the preadolescence period, before health-compromising behaviors have become deeply rooted. A continuous approach, targeting key areas (e.g., physical activity and nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, and prevention of violence and of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use), should ideally begin during the early childhood years, mediated by the influence of positive role models whose presence remains palpable during the middle childhood period and particularly vigilant throughout adolescence and youth. This type of approach allows young people to practice skills learned during each successive development phase with greater feelings of self-efficacy and supportiveness, while at the same time increasing behavioral independence to positively confront peer, social, and media pressures.

Universal Changes during the Preadolescent and Early Adolescent Stages

PAHO strongly urges early intervention, in contrast to the more prevalent current practice of focusing health promotion interventions on the 15- to 19-year-old age group. By following the suggested steps in this book, adolescent health program developers can provide a continuum of comprehensive support for young people through the provision of interventions at the individual, interpersonal, community, and policy levels and guidance in the mastery of developmental goals appropriate for each age group.

	UNIVERSAL CHANGES DURING THE PREADOLESCENT STAGE	UNIVERSAL CHANGES DURING THE EARLY ADOLESCENT STAGE
Body Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Appearance of secondary sex characteristics — Increase in and redistribution of body fat and weight — Emerging signs of significant growth spurt — Heightened need for sensation-seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Beginning of menstruation (median age = 12.4 years) — Beginning of ejaculation (median age = 13.4 years) — Increase in sexual arousal, masturbation — Experiencing of most significant growth spurt — Marked increase in desire for sensation-seeking experiences, particularly among boys
Brain Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Shift from egocentric to socio-centric thought — Capacity for more concrete, logical thinking, with conservation asks in the process of being acquired — Accelerated information-craving, although language is still concrete — Little development of frontal lobe and executive functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Capacity for more abstract thinking (formal operations), accompanied by more abstract language — Use of less concrete thinking, with conservation tasks expected to be acquired by most early adolescents — Still little development of executive functions, particularly among boys
Sexuality Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Exploration of more differentiated masculine and feminine roles by boys and girls compared to previous years — For girls, androgyny is a viable alternative to exclusive femininity while for boys exclusive masculinity remains most socially expected role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Increased feelings of sexual arousal and need for masturbation — Occurrence of other types of autoerotic behaviors (e.g., sexual fantasies and wet dreams) — Stability of gender identity becomes increasingly challenged by development of sexual orientation, preference, and sexual exploration involving another person, including sometimes the emergence of confusing homosexual feelings
Emotional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Gradual increase in self-consciousness and fluctuations of self-image with increasing feelings of embarrassment — Emerging need for greater privacy, individuation, and more emotional autonomy from parents: to feel individuated within the relationship with parents (e.g., to feel that parents don't know things about them), to depend more on themselves rather than on their parents, and to gradually de-idealize their parents — Fluctuations in verbal and nonverbal expression (facial gestures) of intense emotions (e.g., aggression, frustration, excitement, boredom) — Ability to explore multiple reasons for a feeling, compare feelings, and understand triadic interactions among feeling states — Ability to differentiate shades and gradations among feeling states (e.g., "I feel a little angry") — Gradual shift from pre-conventional (rewards and punishments) to conventional morality (society's rules) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — High self-consciousness and fluctuations in self-image — Increased levels of stress, particularly among girls — Continued need for more emotional autonomy from parents, stronger de-idealization of parents, and increased defining of one's own opinions — Increase in emotional dependency upon friends, with intimacy, loyalty, and shared values and attitudes holding great weight — Increase in empathy and responsiveness toward close friends — Emergent ability to reflect on feelings in relationship to an internalized sense of self ("I shouldn't feel this angry")
Social Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Emerging need for a same-sex best friend — Emerging need to have fun and share secrets with best friend — Time spent with parents and parental supervision still present but begins gradually to decrease — Gradual increase in conflicts with parents — Increase in academic and social demands and expectations — Increase in susceptibility to peer pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Assumption of conventional morality — More time spent with social subgroups (cliques) and/or alone — Emerging interest in opposite sex ("different") friend — Less time spent with parents, decrease in parental supervision, and increase in conflicts about independence — Enjoyment of new social privileges (e.g., watching more adult-plot movies for 13 years and older) — Peaking of susceptibility to peer pressure

SUMMARY OF PREADOLESCENCE AND EARLY ADOLESCENCE LIFESTYLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:

PREADOLESCENCE

Safer sex practices

- to be able to read nonverbal and verbal cues that suggest inappropriate sexual intentions from others
- to be able to anticipate, react to, and protect themselves from unwanted sexual advances and coercion
- to identify a supportive adult with whom to share questions about sexuality development and experiences
- to know parents' values and expectations regarding appropriate behaviors when interacting with the opposite sex
- to develop media literacy skills for messages and advertising with sexual content
- to believe that girls and boys should possess equal rights and responsibilities
- to be empowered to explore sexuality and express affection through behaviors such as kissing and holding hands
- to have a personal conviction against early sexual relationships
- to demonstrate respect and acceptance for those whose interests and manners of self-expression are different from the ones traditionally expected of their gender

Responsible and reasonable alcohol experimentation

- if choosing to experiment with alcohol, to be willing to do so only on certain social occasions and under adult supervision
- to know parents' values and expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for alcohol experimentation
- to be able to identify and adopt alternative options to hanging out with friends and drinking alcohol
- to develop media literacy skills for alcohol messages and advertising
- to critically analyze role model behaviors that involve excessive and irresponsible drinking
- to critically analyze and resist social pressures to begin drinking as a rite of passage
- to understand the varying alcohol contents of different beverages and the social and legal limits of "reasonable and responsible" drinking

Tobacco and drug resistance skills

- to understand the consequences of tobacco and drug use
- to develop skills to refuse tobacco and drugs from peers
- to have a personal conviction against tobacco and drug use
- to identify a supportive adult with whom to share questions and concerns about tobacco and drug use and experiences of having been offered them
- to know parents' values and expectations regarding tobacco and drug use
- to develop media literacy skills for tobacco and drug messages
- to be empowered to exercise the right to enjoy smoke-free environments where adolescents live, learn, work, and play

Nonviolent anger expression and conflict resolution

- to identify feelings of anger and other negative feelings and to adopt nonviolent strategies to express these feelings in socially acceptable ways
- to develop media literacy skills for messages and advertisements depicting violence
- to critically analyze role model behaviors involving violence
- to critically analyze and resist social pressures to use violence as an expression of manhood (boys) or strength and toughness (girls)
- to identify a supportive adult with whom to share intense negative feelings
- to know parents' values and expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for anger expression and conflict resolution

Healthy nutrition

- to identify foods that are healthy, enjoyable, and easily available that will help them to maintain a healthy body weight
- to identify nutritional snacks available at home and school that will satisfy appetite and serve as healthier alternatives to foods high in sugars, carbohydrates, and/or fats
- to identify a supportive adult who can guide them in the choice of satisfying and healthy meals and snacks
- to know parents' values and expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for satisfying their appetite and maintaining a healthy weight
- to be able to regulate and control daily consumption of sugars, carbohydrates, and fats
- to understand the growth curve, be aware of the ideal weight for their age and height, and understand how food choices contribute to achieving and maintaining this ideal weight
- to be aware of the interrelationship between healthy nutrition and positive body image
- to develop media literacy skills for messages and advertising involving impulsive eating, eating disorders, and fast food consumption

Adequate levels of physical activity

- to be aware of their natural abilities and skill regarding particular sports or other related activities involving physical exercise
- to identify sports or other physical activities they enjoy that are accessible to them and provide sufficient exercise to maintain a healthy weight
- to organize, with parents' support, after-school time and determine the optimal amount of physical activity that should occur during this period of the day
- to be aware of the interrelationship between adequate levels of physical activity and positive body image
- to understand how different types of physical activity enable the body to burn excess calories
- to critically analyze activities and technologies promoting sedentary behaviors and determine how to alternate or combine these with more physical activities
- to identify physical activity as a strategy to decrease stress or anxiety

EARLY ADOLESCENCE

Safer sex practices

- to learn to regulate and control feelings of sexual arousal by respecting and not forcing others into unwanted sexual situations
- to be able to distinguish between sexual attraction, love, and intimacy
- to continue to be able to identify one or more supportive adults with whom to share questions about sexual arousal and exploration
- to know parents' values and expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for sexuality exploration
- to be empowered to explore sexuality and express affection through behaviors such as kissing and holding hands, yet holding a personal conviction about not moving into intercourse until one feels emotionally ready
- to have developed loyalty and caring for the other person's safety and well-being as strong values in close relationships
- to be able to identify personal goals that would be negatively affected by becoming a mother or father or by contracting STIs or HIV
- to believe girls and boys should possess equal sexual rights and responsibilities
- to be able to set limits in sexuality exploration and negotiate alternative behaviors to intercourse for channeling sexual arousal
- to have the capacity to recognize and critically analyze social pressures to have early sex as a rite of passage, as well as the skills to resist them
- to demonstrate respect and acceptance for boys and girls who do not possess characteristics associated with traditional gender roles

Responsible and reasonable alcohol experimentation

- to have the capacity to identify and walk away from unsupervised social gatherings or parties that involve alcohol to experiment with alcohol tasting only under adult supervision
- to have the capacity to identify and adopt safer and healthier alternatives to drinking alcohol when hanging out with friends
- to be able to identify highly valued personal behaviors and opportunities that might be negatively affected by alcohol consumption

Tobacco and drug resistance skills

- to be able to identify and walk away from unsupervised social gatherings or parties that involve tobacco and drug use
- to continue to be able to identify one or more supportive adults with whom to share personal experiences of drugs and tobacco being offered in social settings
- to be able to identify and adopt healthier and safer alternatives to tobacco and drug use when hanging out with friends
- to be able to identify highly valued personal behaviors and opportunities that might be negatively affected by tobacco and/or drug use
- to be empowered to exercise the right to smoke-free environments where adolescents live, learn, work, and play

Nonviolent anger expression and conflict resolution

- to be able to identify causes for feelings of anger, frustration, jealousy, and envy and adopt nonviolent strategies to express these feelings in socially acceptable ways
- to have developed the capacity to identify and critically analyze PG-13-rated violence as depicted on television, and in movies, musical videos, books, and magazines (media literacy skills)
- to have developed the capacity to critically analyze and apply learned skills to resist social pressures to use violence as an expression of manhood
- to be able to identify a supportive friend with whom to share intense negative feelings to continue to be able to identify one or more supportive adults with whom to share intense negative feelings
- to know parents' values and expectations regarding appropriate behaviors for anger expression and conflict resolution

Healthy nutrition

- to be able to identify tasty, healthy foods and food combinations that are easily available when hanging out with friends
- to be able to identify tasty, healthy snacks that are affordable and can be kept handy to eat and share with friends in moments of intense hunger
- to be able to identify one or more supportive adults to whom to turn for help in selecting tasty, healthy foods and snacks for social gatherings with friends
- to be able to regulate and control, when alone or in social group situations, and without adult supervision, the daily consumption of sugars, carbohydrates, and fats

Physical activity

- to be able to identify sports and other physical activities that are fun, attractive, affordable, and easy to do with friends as a group after school or on weekends
- to be able to organize, with parental support, their after-school time to fit in opportunities for physical activity among other school-, work-, and home-related responsibilities