

## UNDERSTANDING AGES AND STAGES OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

### *Positive Youth Development Domain*

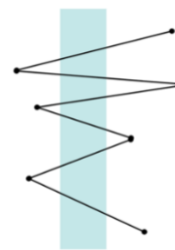
The concept of ages and stages has been used to describe the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development that occurs in youth. We list age groups in categories, such as early and middle childhood and early and middle adolescence, based on the works of early youth development researchers and theorists such as Erickson<sup>1</sup> and Piaget<sup>2</sup>.

These ages and stages descriptions were based on what an average youth, at a particular age, could be expected to do, think, and feel. The idea of averages was meant to be helpful to educators for selecting teaching methods for each age group of youth. However, what we know today is that there is no such thing as an average youth. Individuals grow and learn at their own pace and have different needs based on their growth points.

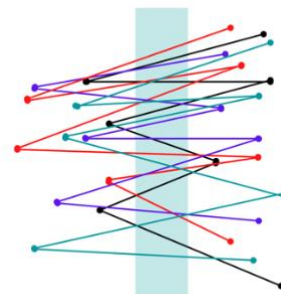
The science of individuality, as described by Todd Rose and his colleagues<sup>3</sup>, offers educators the opportunity to understand unique patterns of behavior based on three principles: jaggedness, context, and pathways.

**Jaggedness** is the idea that if we plot the growth points for one individual, those points will not line up nicely on the

average line for anyone (Figure 1). The line represents the growth of pattern of one individual. It never lands on the “average” (the shaded bar down the middle). If we plot multiple people, we can see that if we serve the “average” person, we serve no one (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Growth points for one individual (line) plotted against the population average (blue bar).



**Figure 2.** Growth points for multiple individuals (lines) plotted against the population average (blue bar).

**Context** matters. Personality has been thought of as composed of stable traits. However, it can also be that behaviors and actions vary with the context. For example, *when* Jose is at a 4-H project meeting, he is self-conscious. However, *when* Jose is at school, he is confident. Jose may act differently because he is in a different setting, with different people, and doing different things.

The **pathways** principle says there is not a single, “normal” pathway for any type of human development—biological, mental, moral, or professional. There are many equally valid ways to reach the same outcome and what works for one person depends on how well-suited it is to them.

These principles challenge volunteers to move away from developing educational materials that sorts youth into categories and moves toward creating flexible-paced opportunities for all youth. A flexible-paced system allows each child to be seen as a talented, creative, and valuable individual with their own set of strengths and contributions.

You can refocus your educational plans to individual growth and still work in groups using these strategies:

- **Group youth by goals, not age.** What are their goals for this week, month, year? Use this information to create groups.
- **Use inquiry-based questions.** Practice using open-ended

questions to help youth make meaning from their experiences.

- **Use active listening.** Pay close attention to what youth are saying. It will provide insight into what works for everyone. Use what you hear to reinforce learning and correct any misunderstandings.
- **Watch closely.** Some youth find it difficult to talk about what excites them or how they learn best. Youth watch and attend to things that interest them. Pay attention to what *they* are paying close attention to.
- **Let youth teach others.** Given that each youth is on their own trajectory of growth, offer opportunities for leadership to youth who want leadership opportunities, have previous knowledge of the content, and can teach others.

When you apply these principles, there are also some practices to avoid.

- Normalizing some traits and skills, and not others.
- Setting group agreements or expectations that not all youth can agree to. For example, if the group determines that everyone will complete all the work by the end of the meeting—some youth may need more time to complete an assignment, making this agreement unattainable for some. If all members cannot agree to a statement, it should not be



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- included in group agreements. Rather, the agreement could be that youth work at their own pace and set individual completion goals.
- Labeling youth. Remember, context matters, and what youth are like and how they behave may change based on the setting.
- Insisting on only one “right” way to learn something. Let youth figure out how to do something by experimenting what works for them. *Note:* Safety rules for use of equipment to protect people and animals are a priority and there may be instances where there is only one way to use a specific tool.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. W. W. Norton & Company.

<sup>2</sup>Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1966). *The psychology of the child*. Basic Books.

<sup>3</sup>Rose, T., Rouhani, P., & Fischer, K. W. (2013). The science of the individual. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 7(3), 152–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12021>

*The original resource 4-H Positive Youth Development: Understanding Ages & Stages of Youth Development (VRKC: Volunteer Research, Knowledge, & Competency Taxonomy) was developed by Sue Pleskac.*

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**Authors** (September 2022)

Gemma Miner, University of California

T. Ashley Burns, Ph.D., Clemson University

Jen Lobley, University of Maine