



16 to 25: Building Pathways toward a Thriving Adulthood

Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity, when support and experiences that align with our social, emotional, and cognitive development can shape positive trajectories that last throughout our lives.

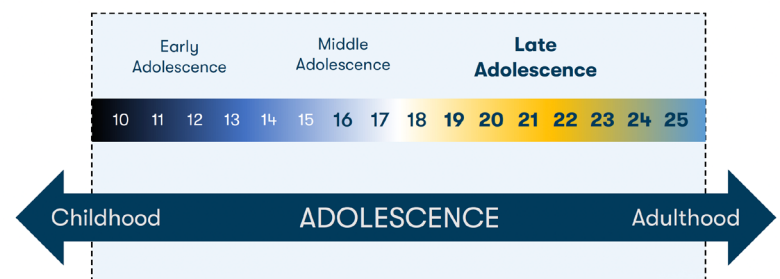
Between 16 and 25 years old, we are motivated to learn, explore, and connect with others in ways that help us transition to the agency and responsibilities of adulthood. During these years, access to opportunities for discovery and exploration, along with emotional, practical, and sometimes economic support and guidance can help us learn new skills, manage uncertainty, and harness our behavior and emotions toward long-term personal and professional goals. This is an important time to build meaningful pathways that can support our own success and also help our families and communities thrive.

Brain and Social Development

Throughout adolescence, we are motivated to take risks and explore new opportunities. As we transition to adulthood we become more adept at strategically directing our exploration towards experiences that allow us to learn, often through trial and error and other hands-on efforts, in service of our longer-term aspirations. We are exceptionally skilled learners at this stage, driven to seek out opportunities that will help us learn more about the things we care about and to adapt our behaviors based on what we have experienced.

We also have more agency to make our own decisions alongside more responsibilities for ourselves and others. This relative independence

Developmental Periods of Adolescence



Adapted from The Promise of Adolescence, NASEM

introduces [a period of heightened exploration](#), when we have the motivation and freedom to discover potential career paths and relationships, and build a deeper sense of who we are.

This directed exploration and increasing agency is bolstered by the ongoing development within our brain, which continues to refine and strengthen neural connections that help us [regulate our emotions](#), strengthen social connections, [reduce impulsivity](#), and apply knowledge to guide our decisions. The network of areas in our brain that activates in social interactions matures rapidly during our adolescent years, [deepening our understanding](#) of the complex feelings, perspectives, and needs of other people. Our experiences during these years help these neural connections continue to become more efficient as we enter early adulthood.



Changing Social Contexts

The years between 16 and 25 are also a period of multiple, significant life transitions. For example, these are the years when we leave high school to enter college, vocational training, or the workforce. Many of us move out of our childhood home for the first time during this developmental stage. Youth in late adolescence may [change their place of residence](#) multiple times and move more frequently than other age groups.

Our increasing agency comes with new civic duties and responsibilities, as we obtain the right to vote and begin to pay taxes. Some of us become solely responsible for supporting ourselves financially and materially for the first time.

We also become increasingly able to contribute to our family in more meaningful ways, including financially. In the United States, the majority of young adults who live with their parents report that [they contribute financially to household expenses](#) and youth with lower incomes are more likely to contribute financially to their parents. For many young people, planning for the future not only involves considering their individual goals, but also how they can support their family.

Our sense of who we are and who we want to become solidifies, too. New experiences and expanded opportunities are important, as we transform our broader dreams about what we can be into more concrete goals for our future, based on the resources and options available to us. As we continue to learn from our experiences, often through trial and error, it is also important that opportunities remain open—offering multiple “on-ramps” to a thriving adulthood as we discover more about the future we want for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

Unfortunately, the social systems that serve us during these years often fail to provide the support we need as we navigate the transition

to adulthood. Obstacles such as poverty, discrimination, and earlier trauma can create steeper climbs for many young people, reinforcing inequities and amplifying risks of negative outcomes. Adults must work to transform these systems to ensure all youth have the support needed to build positive life-long trajectories.



Key Developmental Needs

During these later adolescent years, young people need policies and programs to help them connect with the people and institutions that will help support economic opportunity and agency as they move into adulthood. In addition to more concrete opportunities such as food, housing, and quality education and job training, older youth need:

- Opportunities for **strategic exploration and goal-directed risk taking**, such as internships or other real-world practice, to widen young people’s vision of what is possible for their lives and help harness their motivation to take risks in positive directions.
- Support to **make and learn from decisions and to navigate emotions** in the face of new uncertainties and higher stakes.



- **Room to learn from mistakes** and to make new decisions based on experiences. Having multiple “on-ramps” to the pathways to a thriving adulthood is important during these years as youth consider who they want to be and how they can contribute.
- Avenues to **cultivate a sense of purpose and identity** by exploring interests, discovering what is most meaningful to them, and understanding how they might make a positive difference in their communities.
- Continued **support from caring adults and particularly “natural mentors”** (non-parent adults who provide support and guidance) that is adapted to this older adolescent stage by providing emotional support and guidance where necessary, but allowing young people to have agency over their own decision making.
- Consideration for the **importance of sleep to mental and physical health** during these years in the development of shift schedules or policies related to housing or other areas could impact sleep for older adolescents.

Conclusion

The years between 16 and 25 are an important window to build pathways toward a thriving adulthood. By later adolescence, we have the cognitive abilities and social understanding to connect with others and navigate the world in new ways. We have new agency to pursue our own goals and new responsibilities that motivate us to contribute more meaningfully to those around us. Support and guidance from caring adults that enhances our agency still matters as we find the best routes to learn the skills, knowledge, and savvy we’ll need throughout our lives. Supporting positive development during these later adolescent years can help young people, their families, and their communities flourish.

About the UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent

The Center for the Developing Adolescent recognizes adolescence as a pivotal period of opportunity to shape positive outcomes for all young people. We work toward a world in which every adolescent has what they need to build their future and contribute to their community.

Our mission is to promote the integration of developmental science into policies, practices, and public discourse and advance a shared commitment to creating the conditions that support adolescents.

For more information, visit our website www.developingadolescent.org.