

Adolescence (11-18 years) Factsheet

Prepared by Child Witness Service

Development continues during adolescence although at a less accelerated rate than for younger children. Due to their advances in cognitive, communication, social and emotional capacities there is a risk that adolescents may be perceived as adults without the same abilities as adults. There are wide differences between adolescents in the same age group. Their rate of development is dependent on their early learning and being actively engaged in education. Up to the age of 14 or so, adolescents may have many of the cognitive and linguistic capacities as children in the middle years (7 to 10).

Words and Language

- Many adolescents have well developed narrative and complex grammar skills developed through education and practice at school.
- Their vocabulary continues to grow, and they are more able to figure out the meaning of a word from its context, however they may not truly understand the meaning of the word.
- The adversarial process, legal phrases and jargon are unfamiliar and often misunderstood i.e. "I put it to you..."
- Difficulty with tag questions, i.e. "He didn't touch you, did he?"
- Continue to struggle with complex forms of negation, i.e. multiple negatives, or phrases where a negative must be applied to a different clause in the sentence.
- Until later adolescences, they continue to have difficulty with the passive voice.
- Maybe confused by linguistic ambiguity such as jokes, metaphors and idioms.
- Often lose track of a question when it is long and complex.

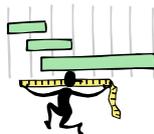
Cognitive

- Adolescents are learning to think abstractly and to understand generalisations. This increases their problem solving capacity, and ability to consider hypothetical situations.
- Adolescents are also more able to make inferences about others intentions and emotions.
- Being able to think more abstractly allows adolescents to think about ethics and answer questions about whether something was right or wrong.
- Under stress will have difficulty self-regulating their emotions. Confusing and embarrassing questions may cause an emotional outburst including refusal to answer or an angry response.
- Many adolescents will not ask for clarification of a question or acknowledge they do not understand a question.



Time and measurement

- Adolescents have a better sense of time than younger children, i.e. they are more likely to be able to estimate a date when something happened when they cannot remember exactly.
- Much less likely, than adults to take note of dates as they pay less attention to how time progresses around them.
- Older adolescents can accurately estimate times, distances and physical dimensions using measured units.



Things that are helpful

- Check the adolescent understanding of a long and complex question or an unusual word.
- Questions should still be no longer than the age of the witness i.e. no more than 14 words in a sentence for a 14 year old
- Offer a short break regularly or a longer break when the witness is looking confused or distressed.
- Visual cues, such as photo books or maps assist with accurate estimating of distances and physical dimensions.



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