

# Implementation Tips for USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community

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## Definitions

**Life-cycle approach:** This approach takes into consideration major developmental stages in a person's life, such as a young person's current emotional and physical state and their interests.

**Sex:** the classification of people as male or female. At birth, every infant is assigned a sex based on a combination of biological characteristics, including: chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, and genitalia.

**Gender:** the socially defined set of roles, rights, responsibilities, entitlements, and obligations of females and males in societies. The social definitions of what it means to be female or male vary among cultures and change over time.

## Developing Tailored Youth Activities

**Q** How can I effectively engage different segments of youth in my activities?

**A** USAID recognizes youth as a life stage that is not finite or linear based on specific ages; however, for the purposes of its programming, USAID has identified youth to be between 10–29 years of age. This is a broad timeframe during which young people go through a number of significant physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. The needs and interests of a 10-year-old are very different than those of a 29-year-old. Therefore, it is crucial that organizations tailor their youth activities to take into consideration the specific needs, characteristics, and interests of different youth segments. The context you're working in and the objectives and planned activities for your project could affect which segments are most relevant, but typically youth segments take into consideration some of the following characteristics: developmental stage, gender, level of vulnerability, school status, or disability.

### Developmental characteristics

Regardless of context or objectives, implementers are encouraged to consider developmental characteristics in defining how to segment youth and design programs based on the unique characteristics of that period of life. USAID distinguishes between segments of youth based on four major developmental stages, as shown in Figure 1. These stages have been defined by developmental psychologists, but programs and implementers might choose different age groupings based on other factors such as major school transitions, cultural norms, particularly as they relate to initiation rites, legal age of employment, age of marriage, or age of becoming a parent, among others.

*Figure 1: Developmental Stages*

Stage	Age Range
Early Adolescence	10–14 years
Adolescence	15–19 years
Emerging Adulthood	20–24 years
Transition into Adulthood	25–29 years

Source: USAID Youth in Development Policy (see Resources)

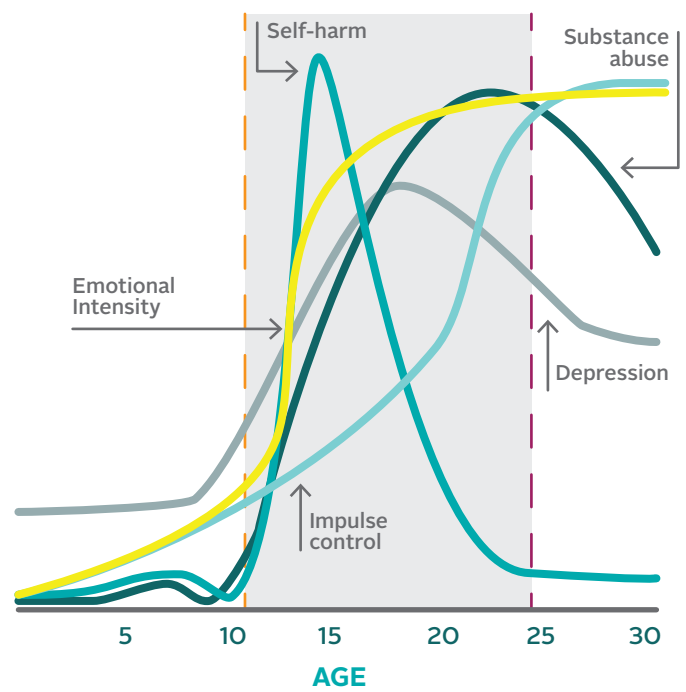
## How should programs address these age segments differently?

Regardless of how a program decides to segment youth, programs should consider the developmental characteristics of each youth cohort to ensure that interventions are age appropriate. Interventions should be designed based on an understanding of the characteristics of each developmental stage and designed to leverage youth's interests and capacities. The following provides a description of the major developmental characteristics of each stage and the types of programming and implementation strategies that could be most effective for each cohort. Since local context and culture may impact how youth experience each developmental stage, strategies may need to be adapted.

CHARACTERISTICS	ACTIVITIES
<p><b>Early Adolescence (10–14)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This a period of rapid physical growth and maturation of sexual organs; this occurs earlier for girls than boys.</li> <li>• Young adolescents have higher levels of emotional sensitivity, have broad mood swings, and are at greater risk of depression and self-harm.</li> <li>• Young people's identity is heavily influenced by peers; they place a high value on being accepted or belonging to peer groups and can be highly social.</li> <li>• Young teens are curious. They may have many interests but can be easily distracted so prefer hands-on learning that is relevant to their lives. Young teens may argue to clarify their thinking.</li> <li>• Youth are becoming less ego-centric and are thinking more about others. They are beginning to develop their own personal values. They can be idealistic and have a strong sense of fairness, but they may also push back against rules and limits.</li> <li>• The brain begins a period of pruning of neurons by making those parts of the brain that are used stronger and faster; unused neurons may wither away and die, making it an important time for youth to continue school and be exposed to a variety of learning and skill building opportunities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help youth understand the physical changes they are undergoing by teaching them about their changing bodies in a safe environment, building knowledge relating to sexual and reproductive health and awareness and gender-based violence, and promoting good eating habits and healthy behaviors.</li> <li>• Embrace youth's natural social interests by using group learning, and connecting them to youth groups, clubs, student government, and other activities that provide an opportunity for social interaction and skill building. Establish clear standards of behavior that prevent bullying and enhance social skills and understanding of diversity.</li> <li>• Help youth to be aware of and to manage emotions, to begin thinking about future goals, and to prioritize tasks and effectively manage time.</li> <li>• Teach critical thinking and problem solving to promote cognitive growth and expose youth to different types of learning opportunities (e.g., academic, music, social-emotional, etc.); provide support with planning, time management, and other executive function skills; and encourage youth to stay in school and begin thinking about their future.</li> <li>• Promote ethical development by providing opportunities for youth to define their own values and their sense of right and wrong, debate points rather than accept ideas as fact (e.g., give voice to diverse perspectives), and engage in community service.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Adolescence (15–19)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Girls have completed their physical growth, while boys continue to grow. Physical appearance becomes very important for boys and girls.</li> <li>• Youth's capacity for abstract, critical, and meta-cognitive thinking increases. Youth are increasingly critical and argumentative. Their ability for planning and organization has improved.</li> <li>• Risk taking behaviors emerge (e.g., experimenting with tobacco, alcohol, drugs, unprotected sex, and reckless driving) and youth still lack impulse control although they have higher capacity for emotional regulation than in early adolescence.</li> <li>• Teens have intense self-involvement, alternating between high expectations and poor self-identity.</li> <li>• Peer relationships remain important, yet youth are increasingly concerned for the well-being of others. Youth have more intimate relationships as they experience feelings of love and passion and have increasing interest in sex.</li> <li>• Teens tend to distance themselves from their parents and have a continued drive for independence.</li> <li>• Youth continue to develop values and morals and are capable of pondering more complex issues. They continue to be idealistic and focused on personal dignity, ethics, and rights.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As the potential for risky behaviors increases, promote knowledge about sexual reproductive health and how to access family planning advice and services. Encourage youth to take healthy risks in safe settings by engaging youth in decision-making, community activities, sports, arts, debate, and other novel and challenging activities.</li> <li>• Introduce learning activities that promote solving complex, real-world problems and provide opportunities for debate, criticism, and persuasion to promote critical thinking in formal education and second chance learning programs.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for youth to build social and emotional competencies, including positive self-concept, empathy, and higher order thinking skills, and explore and refine their current and future identity (e.g., self-assessments/goal setting and career exploration).</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for advocacy, community service, and other activities that allow youth to debate and address real-world problem-solving and allow for greater independence and responsibility.</li> <li>• Expose youth to different career and income-generating opportunities.</li> </ul>

CHARACTERISTICS	ACTIVITIES
<b>Emerging Adulthood (20–24)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As young people enter their 20s, girls complete their physical development while boys may continue to grow.</li> <li>Cognitive abilities have improved. Youth are more capable of thinking through ideas from the beginning to the end, are able to delay gratification, and have increased concern for the future and continued interest in moral reasoning.</li> <li>Youth have a firmer sense of identity, including sexual identity; have increased emotional stability, concern for others, and independence and self-reliance. They still place importance on peer relationships while they develop more serious relationships and regain some interest in social and cultural traditions</li> <li>Youth who have not yet started a family may feel pressure to marry and begin a family.</li> <li>Youth become increasingly focused on income generation, career development, and achieving independence from families.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support youth to make positive and constructive decisions and weigh the consequences of those decisions.</li> <li>Ensure that youth programs focus increasingly on economic opportunities, citizenship, life, and leadership skills, as well as reproductive and maternal health and family support.</li> </ul>
<b>Transition into Adulthood (25–29)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pressure to marry and have children will likely increase and youth may have greater obligations as their own family expands.</li> <li>The pressure for income generation, career building, and creating or providing for one's own home increases.</li> </ul>	<p>Programming will no longer be focused on developmental issues and will continue with the following types of activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Link youth to employment, entrepreneurship support, and access to financial services. Offer on-the-job training.</li> <li>Promote opportunities for civic and political participation and continued support to address reproductive health services, maternal health, and parenting.</li> <li>In post-conflict situations, it may be necessary to provide accelerated learning opportunities and psychosocial support programs.</li> </ul>

**Integrating a Life-Cycle Approach into Program Design**



In addition to considering how to support different youth cohorts, program design should take a life-cycle approach and consider when to intervene to prepare youth for major transitions and to reduce vulnerabilities to negative outcomes such as school drop-out, risky behaviors, or early pregnancy. For example, programs seeking to reduce teen pregnancy among adolescents should begin earlier by helping early adolescents entering puberty to understand reproductive health. The graph above provides a timeline of when youth are likely to exhibit some of the more challenging aspects of adolescence and young adulthood; it is important to engage appropriately prior to peak periods of vulnerability.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from graphic developed by George Patton, University of Melbourne.

## Resources

[Developing Adolescents: A Reference for Professionals](#)

[The Adolescent Brain: A Second Window of Opportunity, A Compendium](#)

[UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti](#)

[USAID Youth in Development Policy](#)

## For More Information

For this or other issues of *Implementation Tips*, please visit [NGOConnect.net](https://ngoconnect.net).

The Web site is a dynamic and interactive portal dedicated to connecting and strengthening CSOs, networks, and CSO support organizations worldwide.

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## Gender and social inclusion

### Why should programs incorporate gender concerns for different youth programs?

Gender plays a dynamic role in the lives of youth and can directly impact their thoughts, actions, and emotions. The role of gender will vary from society to society but will always have an impact on how youth behave, as well as their interest in and ability to engage in programs. Ultimately, gender can play a vital role in the potential effectiveness of a program. If gender dynamics are considered and incorporated appropriately into programs, the program will likely have a more positive impact.

With the onset of puberty, gender differences become more pronounced as social roles and expectations start to change. The ways in which young people manage the multi-dimensional aspects of the transition from childhood to adulthood have enormous implications for their gender and sexual identity, choices relating to work and livelihoods, health-related behaviors, decisions related to family formation, and the way they relate to and engage in their community. Pubertal changes occur differently in each sex, with girls experiencing these changes 12 to 18 months earlier (on average) than boys, and the timing of pubertal maturity can influence the development of a young person differently.<sup>2</sup>

Gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity can have a negative impact on all youth, leading to risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, violence, and early sexual debut. Societal norms such as early marriage and childbearing put girls and young women at high risk for maternal mortality and morbidity and can cut off opportunities to complete and succeed in primary and secondary education, leading to reduced economic opportunities and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Gender norms can have a significant impact on how young people make decisions relating to their career choices and decisions relating to when and whom to marry, as well as the size and timing of their families. Gender-based violence (GBV) – including domestic violence, school-related violence, and sexual violence – can impact both young women and young men in profound ways. For more information on GBV, see the *Implementation Tip* on [Designing and Implementing an Effective GBV Program](#).

### How can programs integrate gender considerations for youth?

Youth programs should consider the different norms, roles, and responsibilities that influence the ways that males and females experience adolescence and young adulthood when deciding how to target and segment youth. Programs should consider whether

<sup>2</sup> American Psychological Association, [Developing Adolescents: A Reference for Professionals](#)

programs should be segmented by sex and the different factors that affect girls' and boys' abilities to participate in programs, including family support, domestic and economic responsibilities, and the time and location of program offerings.

Given strong cultural norms regarding gender, youth programs may also need to address norms at the community level and/or with parents and spouses—particularly for females, since family members may limit girls' abilities to participate in the program and influence other decisions that will impact youth and program outcomes.

Young people are often open to challenging gender and social norms, making adolescence an opportune time to promote gender equitable attitudes, roles and responsibilities in their families and communities. Programs should therefore seek to address gender norms in age-appropriate ways beginning in early adolescence as the impact of gender stereotypes becomes more pronounced.

### Why should programs incorporate social inclusion considerations for youth?

Some youth are particularly vulnerable because their gender/sexual identity, sexual orientation, gender expression, and sexual behavior do not conform to the expectations of what it means to be a girl or a boy in a particular context. LGBTQ youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience challenges such as bullying, teasing, harassment, physical assault, and suicide-related behaviors.

### How can programs integrate social inclusion considerations for youth?

Programs should consider whether barriers exist to accessing programs or feeling comfortable participating in activities. For example, if staff notice that youth from certain minority or marginalized groups are not actively participating, they should seek their input and opinions during or after the activity. The program should include activities that help youth understand where stereotypes originate from, and why they are not true and/or hurtful.

