



Stepping Stones

A RESOURCE FOR EDUCATORS
WORKING WITH YOUTH
AGED 12 TO 25

An Introduction

Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development has been created to serve as a tool to guide the development and delivery of high quality services and supports for youth across the province. It was created by the Ontario government in broad consultation with researchers, youth, community leaders and service providers.

Stepping Stones can support and enhance the work of educators working with youth by presenting a shared understanding of how youth develop. The information is presented in a clear and cohesive way through “developmental maps” that show key developmental events for early adolescents, adolescents and young adults. While every person is unique, the stages of development between childhood and adulthood are consistent across populations and generations. Today’s youth face a complex and constantly evolving world, and in order to support them, it’s more important than ever to understand the stages and dimensions of their development.

How can educators use Stepping Stones?

Stepping Stones can support the work of Ontario educators:

- by providing summaries of developmental milestones that can be used to plan curriculum-based lessons that will be suitably challenging and engaging for youth at different ages;
- by providing important information about the context in which youth develop, with reminders about factors that affect the ways that youth learn, relate and grow;
- by providing messages from youth themselves about what they want adults to know about them and how adults can act as the supports that they need them to be;
- as a useful reference and communication tool when talking with parents, families and caregivers, child and youth workers, and other adults who support and influence the well-being and development of youth.

Understanding youth development

Ages and stage

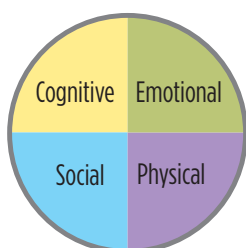
Youth development occurs uniquely for each individual.

While there are a number of developmental events that are common to today's youth, development is also affected by a multitude of individual factors. Some individuals will reach milestones at an early age, while others may take more time or might not reach certain milestones at all.

From straight lines to circles

The developmental events presented are packaged neatly into specific domains and age-specific segments to make the resource practical and easier to use. In reality, human growth is much more complex.

The interrelated and interdependent nature of human development can be considered as a circle (as shown below), in which growth in one domain impacts and is connected to the others (Simard, 2011; Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2011). As you move through the developmental maps, it is important to remember that maturation always takes place as part of the whole. Healthy development of the mind, body and spirit is—as our Aboriginal partners have long affirmed—contingent on balance and interconnectedness.



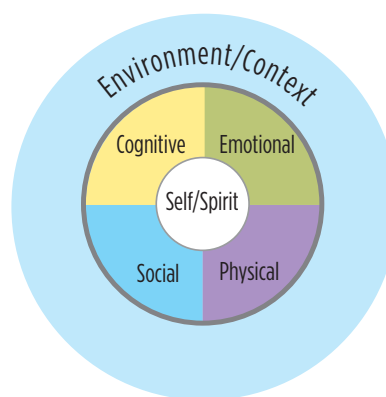
Context matters!

Throughout conversations with researchers, community leaders, and youth across the province about youth development, one message was clear: context matters. It matters whether a young person is growing up in an urban or rural setting, a high or low socio-economic status neighbourhood, in a minority setting for a Francophone, or in a particular cultural community, for example, one of the many Aboriginal communities in Ontario.

Environment, history and life events impact the experiences youth have, the challenges they face, the supports and opportunities they have access to and the choices that they make.

Sense of self: a core concept

Many researchers, youth and community leaders told us that, despite all the rapid and significant changes that take place as a child becomes an adult, there remains an enduring (yet changing) core or *sense of self* in each person. It is this “force of gravity” that connects aspects of development and experience together.



The concept of self takes on different meanings for different people.

For example:

- For some individuals of Aboriginal descent, the sense of self has a spiritual significance. Simard (2011) notes that “feeding the spirit is as equally important as feeding the body and both must be attended to in a caring manner.”
- The self may take on a cultural meaning. Francophone youth, for example, may perceive their French heritage and language as a central component of their core self.
- Some may consider their self to be religious in nature.
- There may also be some young people who pay little attention to, or have little awareness of, their sense of self.

When thinking about the individual and contextual issues that influence youth development, it is important to keep this additional factor of self in mind. By acknowledging the core self, you can demonstrate sensitivity and greater understanding of a young person's unique

needs. And while the nature of a youth's self may not be immediately apparent, the individual youth's core self can often be discovered through discussion and attentive listening. A young person's sense of self can be a valuable platform for making youth development experiences relevant and engaging to them. It can also further their developmental growth (for example, identity formation, social group-esteem).

Engaging youth in a way that connects with their self should be done sensitively and thoughtfully. If you feel that you do not have the skills or knowledge, or feel comfortable, in engaging youth in this way, it can be helpful to seek out, and partner with, individuals (for example, elders or community leaders) or organizations that have this expertise.

An overview: adolescence and early adulthood

Adolescence is a period of rapid change

Adolescents and young adults experience many changes, often occurring simultaneously or in rapid succession. Beginning with puberty, youth undergo major physical changes at the same time that:

- their capacities for thinking and reasoning begin to mature
- their emotional responses become more intense
- their social worlds expand as peer groups become more important and romantic relationships begin.

While negotiating these changes, young people also grapple with their emerging identities, make important decisions about the future, and face a number of transitions:

- into and out of high school
- into post-secondary education and/or the job market
- reaching legal driving age and then legal adulthood
- leaving their family home and establishing independence.

Supporting youth development: developmental maps.

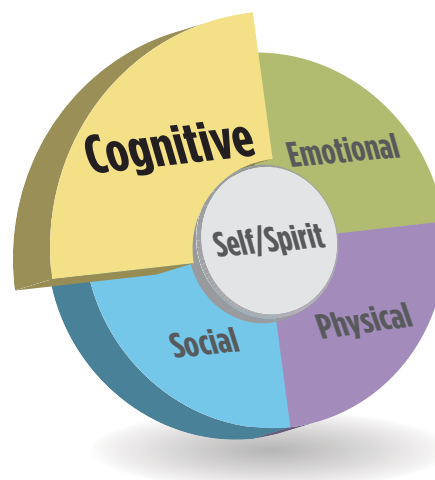
About the youth developmental maps

In order to present the complexities of youth development in a clear and compact form, and provide a practical and convenient working tool, developmental events are summarized in the youth development "maps".

Maps are provided to describe predictable development events for youth who are in:

- Early adolescence (12–14 years)
- Adolescence (13–19 years)
- Early adulthood (17–25 years).

Maps are organized across four domains:



- **Cognitive development**
(brain-based development, reasoning skills)
- **Emotional development**
(experiencing emotions, self-regulation, empathy)
- **Social development**
(identity, relationships with peers, romantic partners and family)
- **Physical development**
(physical activity, growth and physical development, body image and nutrition)

These domains are interconnected; maturation always takes place as part of the whole.

Events are “stage” rather than “age” dependent

While developmental events are also categorized into the age ranges in which they generally occur, it is important to recognize that the maps represent a sequence of developmental events more than the specific ages at which they occur. Many aspects of youth development are independent of age because they depend on exposure to opportunities and experiences. As a result, there are large individual differences in the ages at which developmental events in adolescence and early adulthood occur.

Youth development presented through four dimensions

How the maps are organized

For each domain—cognitive, emotional, social and physical—the maps are consistently organized across three columns, and are designed to answer three corresponding key questions you may have about key developmental events:

What is happening?

A description of

- physical
- cognitive
- emotional
- social developmental events that may be taking place in early adolescence, adolescence, or early adulthood.

How can I tell?

Noticeable indicators you can look for in order to determine whether or not the developmental event has taken place, or is taking place.

The information in “*What is Happening?*” and “*How can I tell?*” are taken from leading edge research on youth development.

How can I help?

Suggested ways you can positively support youth at this stage of development. This information came from discussions with Ontario’s youth, supported by research.

Tips for Implementation: Five Key Themes

1. **Be supportive: Guide, don’t dictate.** Youth want information so they can make their own decisions. You don’t need to provide all the answers – ask thought-provoking questions and support students to develop their own answers.
2. **Be patient and available.** Don’t be discouraged if your first offer of support is turned down as youth will often come around when they feel up to it and the time is right. Offers of support in class and outside of class can make a difference.
3. **Be open.** When they come to you, listen, listen, listen! Listen to what they say and to what they may not be saying.
4. **Be understanding.** Youth learn and grow through failure and mistakes—the important issue is how youth and their support systems respond to setbacks. Remember that, as an educator, you are part of a very important support system for youth.
5. **Be empathetic.** Don’t belittle the feelings of youth or be patronizing—“my feelings are real and important, even if whatever I’m going through doesn’t seem like a big deal to you, it is to me right now.” As an educator, you can help youth build awareness of their feelings and the skills to respond.

Every interaction with youth provides an opportunity to support their development. Whether it’s through intentional lesson and unit planning or those unplanned, quick conversations in the hall, every interaction is an opportunity. It’s about what we do every day.

Learn more:

- Read the full version of Stepping Stones at www.ontario.ca/steppingstones
- Adolescent Literacy Guide www.edugains.ca/newsite/literacy2/index.html
- Find out more about [the Ontario curriculum K-12](#)

