MODULE 2.1

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT
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Adolescent development

Objectives
- School staff understand the typical challenges students face during adolescence and the type of skills and resources they require.

Outcomes
- School staff will develop an increased understanding of some of the challenges facing adolescents in their journey to adulthood.
- School staff will develop an increased understanding of the strengths of adolescents in their journey to adulthood.
- School staff will develop an increased awareness of the role of schools in supporting positive adolescent development.
- School leadership will be able to identify two or three existing or new strategies for the school that will promote positive development in students.
- Individual school staff will each have two or three ideas about things that they can do in their role to support positive development in their students.

Key messages
- Adolescence is a time of numerous biological, psychological and social changes.
- Young people’s relationships with school staff, parents and other adults change during adolescence, but these relationships are still fundamental in supporting their positive development.
- Schools can provide safe and supportive environments for young people to develop resilience and to grow up well.
- Individual staff can use their relationships with young people to foster resilience and promote positive development.
Why is this important?

Adolescence is a time of rapid biological, psychological, cognitive, emotional and social change. Young people's relationships with school staff, parents and other adults may change during adolescence, but these relationships are still fundamental to positive development.

By providing a safe and supportive environment, schools can help young people to develop resilience and to grow up well. Additionally, individual staff can build positive and respectful relationships with young people to promote positive development.
Dimensions of adolescent development

Adolescence is often considered a bridge between childhood and adulthood. It is a time where a number of significant changes occur in a relatively short period of time.

Broadly, these changes can be categorised as biological, psychological, cognitive, emotional and social; however, there is considerable overlap and interaction between these areas.

**Different times for different people**

All young people are unique and therefore the degree, rate and pace of specific change within these areas varies. For some young people their physical development advances more rapidly than their emotional, social and psychological development.

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The importance of resilience

Resilience refers to the ability of an individual, family or community to manage change. Because adolescence is a period of so many changes in a relatively short period of time, and because some of these changes may be challenging for young people, resilience is a particularly important idea. Resilient students are more able to manage the transitions that occur across these areas.
Physical development

The most noticeable and obvious changes in adolescence are the physical changes in puberty.

Puberty occurs at different times for different young people. While this might not seem significant to adults, differences in the timing of puberty can cause some young people to worry and stress. They might compare themselves to other people of the same age or ask themselves, “Am I normal?”.

School staff may become aware of student self-consciousness of their bodies as they experience growth spurts or other developmental changes. An example might be noticing an adolescent’s reluctance to engage in swimming classes.

School staff might notice banter, or even bullying, related to students whose physical development is at a different stage than their peers or different to that portrayed in the media.

Supporting positive body image

Schools can support young people to have positive body image through providing accurate information and education about physical changes, including the concept that different transitions occur for different people at different times. Schools can also provide explicit teaching of critical media literacy skills about techniques used by the media to manipulate images (e.g. airbrushing), how to analyse and challenge media messages and teach students skills to handle such pressure.
How does the MindMatters framework support physical development?

**Relationships and belonging**
Developing a sense of connectedness and inclusion throughout the school community can help create pro-social environments as students grow into their adult bodies.

**Developing resilience**
The kind of physical changes we undergo during adolescence are not always welcome, and can sometimes be the source of distress. Developing fundamental resilience skills can help vulnerable students manage their responses to their own growth.
Adolescent brains are a work in progress and not like adults’ brains.

Adolescence is a time of significant brain development. The main change is that unused connections in the thinking and processing part of their brain (grey matter) are ‘pruned’ away whereas connections that are consistently used are strengthened (‘use it or lose it’). This is the brain’s way of becoming more efficient.

This pruning process begins in the back of the brain. The front part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, is remodeled last. The prefrontal cortex is the decision-making part of the brain, responsible for one’s ability to plan and think about the consequences of actions, solve problems and control impulses.

Because the prefrontal cortex matures relatively late, adolescents at times rely on a part of the brain called the amygdala to make decisions and solve problems particularly in emotionally charged situations. The amygdala is associated with emotions, impulses, aggression and instinctive behaviour.

For this reason adolescents are more likely to:

- act on impulse
- misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions
- get into accidents
- get involved in fights
- engage in dangerous or risky behaviour.
**Tips**

- Often adolescents require more time to process information and need instructions repeated calmly and succinctly, as well as benefiting from explanations or alternatives.
- It is often better to identify and suggest preferred behaviours rather than tell adolescents what not to do.
- Generally the outcomes are better when teachers approach adolescents in an emotionally neutral manner and focus on their own behaviours, language and timing as well as those of the adolescent.

**Don’t underestimate adolescents**

Ultimately, these brain differences do not mean that young people cannot make rational decisions or tell the difference between right and wrong; nor does it mean they should not be held responsible for their actions.

Adolescent development is often described through the metaphor of an incomplete car: “All gas, no brakes”. While this metaphor can be somewhat useful in explaining how adolescents might be driven to seek particular sensations and emotions, and avoid others, it can also undermine the immense capacity of adolescents. This can cause school staff to deprive adolescents of opportunities that might enhance resilience such as the opportunity to be involved in decision-making in the school environment.
The brain is made up of different parts that develop at different times.

Other functions that soon follow are things like responding to sensory inputs such as sound, smell, taste and touch, and feeling emotions. By adolescence, these parts of the brain are usually well-developed.

The parts of the brain that are involved in basic functions mature first. "Basic functions" include things such as breathing, heart rate and regulating temperature.

The parts of the brain that control higher-order or 'executive' functioning mature last. Executive functioning involves putting together information from other parts of the brain. Executive functioning involves actions like forward planning a response to an event or anticipating the consequences of an action.
Building a healthy adolescent brain

How young people spend their time is crucial to brain development – it’s worth thinking of activities and experiences a young person is exposed to – music, sports, study, languages, video games and how these may be shaping the emerging adult brain.

While families are central, schools are an important part of a adolescent’s environment. The experiences and activities they provide are important. Ultimately, schools and teachers can help adolescents to develop their higher order planning, thinking and problem solving skills through both planned activities and everyday interactions.

Some tips for strengthening positive brain connections include:

- Help students find new creative and expressive outlines for their feelings as vehicles to learn strategies for managing emotions – e.g. sport, music, writing.
- Help students to explore immediate and long-term consequences of actions.
- Support development of empathy by talking about emotions and how people will have different reactions to events depending on their circumstances.
- Help students develop problem solving and decision-making skills by supporting them to develop a process of defining the problem, working through options and considering outcomes.
- Be a positive role model by talking to students about how you process information and deal with emotions and challenges.
- Deliver social and emotional or resilience skills programs to students.
How does the MindMatters framework support brain development?

**Relationships and belonging** 1.4
A deliberate approach to developing relationships and belonging with all members of the school community can improve student engagement in school.

**Developing resilience** 2.2
Developing resilience skills can help students respond directly to the challenges of school as well as manage their emotional responses to day to day events.

**Empowering students** 2.4
Genuine opportunities for student-led initiatives, with skilled adult support, can help individuals mature and develop their executive function.

**Meeting parents’ information needs** 3.1
Making sense of an adolescent can be challenging and schools can fulfill a valuable role in helping families sustain a positive, supportive relationship with their young members.
Psychological and social development

In adolescence, identity development, developing relationships and increasing independence are key developmental tasks.

Identity and experimentation

Our identities consist of things like our relationship style, our values and morals, gender identity, sexual identity, how we perceive that others see us and ‘roles’. A big part of how identity develops is through experimentation (including trying out some things so that they can be either incorporated or rejected in future).

Adolescents might explore new relationships, trial different ways of behaving in response to patterns of morals and experiment with different educational, recreational and vocational interests.

Individuation and peer identification

Identity development typically sees the adolescent individuating from their family of origin and other significant adults, so this might see the adolescent experimenting with behaviours, activities and beliefs that are different from those of their family.

Individuation is perhaps most obvious in the way a young person relates to their peer group, where they practice building and maintaining close interpersonal relationships and develop their communication skills.

During early and late childhood the family is typically the place where expectations about behaviour, values and self-expression are set. In adolescence, many young people look to their peer group to set these expectations.

Some adolescents will ‘posture’ (challenge authority) when with peers to obtain status; they have a propensity to argue and ‘go down in a blaze of glory’ rather than accede to simple requests from a school staff member. Generally, the outcomes for the student (and staff) are worse when they are put into a corner. It is helpful for school staff to be mindful that students will find it hard to back down in front of peers and finding a ‘face-saving’ solution is important.

The family continues to have a crucial role in providing a safe, supportive and accepting environment where boundaries are clear, reasonable and consistent. Where this is not provided, it can lead to challenges for the adolescent in managing developmental tasks.
Respecting experimentation
School staff may notice students trying out different ways of behaving such as how they dress or who they socialise with. Far from being minimised as a ‘phase’ a student goes through, these experiments should be understood as an important part of how young people develop a positive sense of identity.

Supporting connections
Schools often foster positive development by supporting young people to develop connections with a peer group (particularly for students who feel isolated, new students or students who have had periods of absence). Paired and group work, when well-structured and thoughtful, can also foster peer connections and skill development. Making positive group skills explicit, inviting students to reflect on them after a task and providing formative assessment of them is a good way to support adolescent development and mastery.

Enabling socialisation
Remember recess, lunch break and other less-structured times in the school day provide opportunities for students to build skills through their social relationships. Schools can offer a variety of positive social opportunities during break times such as peer support in the yard, interest clubs, library access, skateboard day, sporting opportunities and so on. School staff can provide wonderful opportunities to support the young person as they look outside the home for affirmation of their identity and their humanity. “I am different from my parents but who am I?” – hearing people outside the family/carers, whom the young person respects, say ‘yes, you are unique and you are OK’ can be powerful.

The continued importance of family
It is not necessarily true that adolescents want to ‘break free’ of their families and in practice this belief can lead to under-involvement of families in schools, community activities and healthcare. Evidence shows that strong relationships with family allow young people to explore their identity safely and develop skills for adulthood. Similarly, high levels of family involvement in adolescent education, extracurricular activity and healthcare is predictive of good outcomes.
Sexual identity

Adolescence is a time of exploration, experimentation and decision-making for students as they establish a sense of identity. Students dealing with issues of sexuality and gender often face additional challenges as they begin to question societal norms, develop personal identities and deal with the difficulties associated with disclosure of feelings and emotions. Many students may be questioning issues of sexuality and/or gender and may not have assumed a fixed identity. Others may be dealing with the formation of new identities and the risks associated with disclosure such as fear of rejection from family and friends.

Research in Australia and abroad has shown that the mental health of young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people can be severely impacted by negative societal attitudes, including discrimination, homophobia and heterosexism. The prevalence of these attitudes can present challenges for teachers and schools, but can also offer valuable opportunities for championing diversity and promoting safe and inclusive environments for LGBTI students.

Create supportive environments

The provision of safe and supportive environments for LGBTI young people can make a profound difference to their experience of school. It can also affect their future attitudes and resilience in significant ways. Strategies include:

- adopting and enforcing a zero tolerance policy to homophobic bullying, which includes identifying actions to address name-calling when used as either a direct or general term of abuse, such as the use of ‘that’s so gay’
- ensuring that staff are familiar with relevant state and Commonwealth legislation and policies and are trained on how to take appropriate action to address homophobia
- encouraging students to form a ‘gay-straight’ alliance group within the school with allocated resources and staff support that is inclusive of all LGBTI people
- considering strategies to handle any backlash against anti-homophobia education
- guaranteeing confidentiality
- setting aside time to discuss issues and challenges in a safe environment.
Anticipating adult roles

An important part of identity development is the chance to try out what ‘roles’ adolescents want to have in adulthood.

School staff may notice students changing subject selection or proposed educational or vocational pathways frequently. This may be related to the student’s changing relationship with their environment, shifts in their self-concept or identity, or new things that the student has noticed about their values.

Connecting with work

Schools have important roles to play in assisting students to consider vocational roles. Transition planning is important, as are opportunities to experiment and ‘try out’ different vocational interests. This is most often planned through work experience. There is also opportunity for schools to show an interest in and value the part time work that many students already undertake. Often, these jobs are the places that initiate many of the organisational and leadership skills that adolescents need to develop.
How does the MindMatters framework support psychological and social development?

### Relationships and belonging

1.4

Relationships and connectedness are at the foundation of mental health. Supporting the social development of adolescents is a core function of secondary schools. MindMatters can help schools take a strategic approach to building relationships, developing a sense of belonging and creating an inclusive school community.

### Developing resilience

2.2

Social identity and acceptance is of critical importance to adolescents, but even in the best circumstances we can find ourselves struggling with relationships, especially when we’re all just learning what to do. Resilience is the Swiss army knife of mental health skills, helping young people cope and respond to social and relationship difficulties when they arise.

### Empowering students

2.4

The desire for autonomy and making your own mark on the world can be supported through a well-framed and well-supported student empowerment initiative, allowing students to genuinely set their own agenda, have their voices, opinions and ideas heard and acknowledged, take charge of their experience and develop interpersonal and leadership skills.

### Meeting parents’ information needs

3.1

Adolescence involves changes in the ways in which young people relate to school staff, parents and other adults, as well as how they relate to peers. However, relationships with adults continue to be of immense importance in fostering resilience and supporting young people to grow up well, and engaging families in the school community boosts mental health outcomes.
Diversity and adolescent development

There is considerable diversity in young people of Australia as a function of their cultural, economic and family backgrounds etc. Young people (and adults) will have different views regarding what healthy adolescent development and resilience looks like and how schools can best support students in these areas. The most important thing a school can do is provide an inclusive environment for all students and families - one that is geared towards supporting individuals develop their strengths, a positive self-concept and identity. This may necessitate specific strategies or programs for specific groups.

For example

- Respectful and culturally appropriate involvement of family, community organisations and elders in the school may be important strategies for promoting Indigenous young people’s resilience.

- Young people who experience their school environment as ‘friendly’ towards homosexuality are more likely to experience positive self-concept related to their own sexuality and identity. Friendliness includes a range of factors such as availability of library resources related to sexual diversity, posters about sexual diversity, inclusion of same-sex partners at school functions, and people who speak up against homophobia.

- Young people who have been providing care (such as to a parent with an illness, or to a sibling with a disability) can have their development affected. Particular strategies may need to be adopted to assist the young person to attend to a range of developmental tasks. For example, providing flexibility in terms of homework (providing extra time or a quiet space at school) and understanding if being late to school is a care-related issue.

- Young people who have experienced trauma (such as neglect, physical abuse, sexual assault or abuse) can experience particular barriers to developing resilience. For children in Out of Home Care, the developmental tasks of adolescence can be overwhelming without the secure base of their parents to assist. Schools need clear and effective partnerships with external services supporting these young people so that actions taken are appropriate and helpful. Creating school as a safe, trustworthy and predictable environment can include inviting the student to nominate a staff member they would like to have as a mentor or sounding board.

MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by beyondblue with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au
References
