

Cognitive Development in the Teen Years



What is cognitive development?

Cognitive development means the growth of a child's ability to think and reason. This growth happens differently from ages 6 to 12, and from ages 12 to 18.

Children ages 6 to 12 years old develop the ability to think in concrete ways. These are called concrete operations. These things are called concrete because they're done around objects and events. This includes knowing how to:

- Combine (add)
- Separate (subtract or divide)
- Order (alphabetize and sort)
- Transform objects and actions (change things, such as 5 pennies = 1 nickel)

Ages 12 to 18 is called adolescence. Kids and teens in this age group do more complex thinking. This type of thinking is also known as formal logical operations. This includes the ability to:

- **Do abstract thinking.** This means thinking about possibilities.
- **Reason from known principles.** This means forming own new ideas or questions.
- **Consider many points of view.** This means to compare or debate ideas or opinions.
- **Think about the process of thinking.** This means being aware of the act of thought processes.

How cognitive growth happens during the teen years

From ages 12 to 18, children grow in the way they think. They move from concrete thinking to formal logical operations. It's important to note that:

- Each child moves ahead at their own rate in their ability to think in more complex ways.
- Each child develops their own view of the world.
- Some children may be able to use logical operations in schoolwork long before they can use them for personal problems.
- When emotional issues come up, they can cause problems with a child's ability to think in complex ways.
- The ability to consider possibilities and facts may affect decision-making. This can happen in either positive or negative ways.

Types of cognitive growth through the years

A child in early adolescence:

- Uses more complex thinking focused on personal decision-making in school and at home
- Begins to show use of formal logical operations in schoolwork

- Begins to question authority and society's standards
- Begins to form and speak their own thoughts and views on many topics. You may hear your child talk about which sports or groups they prefer, what kinds of personal appearance is attractive, and what parental rules should be changed.

A child in middle adolescence:

- Has some experience in using more complex thinking processes
- Expands thinking to include more philosophical and futuristic concerns
- Often questions more extensively
- Often analyzes more extensively
- Thinks about and begins to form their own code of ethics (for example, What do I think is right?)
- Thinks about different possibilities and begins to develop own identity (for example, Who am I?)
- Thinks about and begins to systematically consider possible future goals (for example, What do I want?)
- Thinks about and begins to make their own plans
- Begins to think long-term
- Uses systematic thinking and begins to influence relationships with others

A child in late adolescence:

- Uses complex thinking to focus on less self-centered concepts and personal decision-making
- Has increased thoughts about more global concepts, such as justice, history, politics, and patriotism
- Often develops idealistic views on specific topics or concerns
- May debate and develop intolerance of opposing views
- Begins to focus thinking on making career decisions
- Begins to focus thinking on their emerging role in adult society

How you can encourage healthy cognitive growth

To help encourage positive and healthy cognitive growth in your teen, you can:

- Include them in discussions about a variety of topics, issues, and current events.
- Encourage your child to share ideas and thoughts with you.
- Encourage your teen to think independently and develop their own ideas.
- Help your child in setting goals.
- Challenge them to think about possibilities for the future.
- Compliment and praise your teen for well-thought-out decisions.
- Help them in reevaluating poorly made decisions.

If you have concerns about your child's cognitive development, talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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