Adolescent Development (11-18 years)

Physical Development
The beginning of adolescence marks significant body changes as children approach puberty. Menstruation may begin for girls (if it hasn’t already started) and spontaneous erections are common among boys at this age (Marotz & Allen, 2013). Muscle and strength increase along with rapid growth spurts are also common during this stage (Marotz & Allen, 2013). Physically, children will reach adult maturity during this phase (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

Cognitive Development
As brain connectivity continues to expand rapidly, the adolescent’s prefrontal cortex becomes more effective in its “speed of thinking, attention, memory, planning, capacity to integrate information, and regulation of cognition and emotion” (Berk, 2013, p.190). All of these increased cognitive functions lead to improved decision-making tactics and reasoning strategies, including propositional thought (Berk, 2013). During this stage children also develop longer attention spans, increased long-term memory capacity, and a more complex understanding of cause and effect (Marotz & Allen, 2013). Emotional control and decision making are still developing, making impulsive and illogical decisions somewhat common during this phase (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

Language Development
Adolescents can comprehend over 40,000 words including abstract expressions (Berk, 2013). At this stage, they can understand non-literal and more complex meanings of words and irony, sarcasm, and proverbs (Berk, 2013). This period can also be characterized by children who “talk and argue, often nonstop, with anyone who will listen” (Marotz & Allen, 2013, p.201). The use of social slang and language are also common during adolescence, especially online and in social networking (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

Social-Emotional Development
During adolescence children typically struggle with self-identity issues. This is particularly evident when there are “real or perceived differences from one’s peers” including ethnicity, special needs, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or the child is adopted (Marotz & Allen, 2013, p.224). In this age group children are maturing into adults, evident by their more serious interest in forming serious romantic relationships and strong desire to achieve autonomy from their family (Marotz & Allen, 2013).
Moral Development
Self-regulation continues to strengthen and improve in this stage and aggression behaviors decrease (Berk, 2013). By sixteen years old adolescents are able to clearly recognize right from wrong, however they still make decision that contradict this understanding (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

Signs of Atypical Development
By the end of this stage, children should be able to take responsibility for their behaviors and “use reasonable judgement in regulating emotions” (Marotz & Allen, 2013, p.233). If they have not achieved functional literacy in reading and writing, that is a cause for concern (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

Factors that Influence Development
As adolescents self-identity and self-esteem are fragile during this stage, social and cultural influences can be extremely impactful. Regularly referred to as rebellious years, peer pressure and influence are major contributors to the development of teenagers. Teens adopt clothing styles and behaviors of peer groups and many experiment with risky behaviors including drugs, sexual activity, and alcohol in order to feel accepted (Marotz & Allen, 2013). Family and cultural expectations can also make a teen feel pressured.

Family strategies
During adolescence it is important that families retain open communication with their children. Spending quality time together, being supportive and encouraging, answering their questions and concerns, and providing personal health information about sex, disease, drugs/alcohol, and other concerns is important (Marotz & Allen, 2013). Parents/caregivers should discuss risky behaviors and offer guidance to support their child’s growing independence. Assisting them with new experiences such as purchasing a car, applying for a job, or opening a bank account will ease the transition into adulthood and offer additional support (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

Play-Based Activities
As adolescents search to find their identity and the unique role they will fill in society it is important to give them autonomy and support. Helping them discover their talents and interests can be a major support as they transition into adulthood. Following their passions and interests, we can support fun activities that promote socialization and learning. Many teens find satisfaction and fulfillment through involvement with sports programs. Other avenues include scholastic clubs or events, church groups, other interest groups, or volunteering.