

# Working with Adolescents —Strategies for Instructors

Brain development theories indicate several strategies are particularly effective in working with adolescent learners.

## ● Give straightforward directions

The memories of adolescents may not be able to accommodate multiple ideas all at once. Review each step of an assignment or project to make sure each component is understood completely before moving on to the next step.

## ● Use models, and vary your material

Any student is more likely to understand and process information when multiple modes of instruction are used; this is particularly important for adolescent learners. Try to incorporate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (tactile) material when introducing a topic or assignment or giving a lecture. Demonstration during explanation can be particularly useful, as can graphics and concrete examples.

## ● Ensure students develop competence

Give students a variety of opportunities to build skills and strategies, particularly during class when you can informally assess where gaps in learning occur. Use quizzes, tests, and assignments to emphasize material that seems challenging for students. Although it may seem repetitive, going over answers to assignments and tests after handing back work also can help “cement” information and build competence.

## ● Incorporate decision-making into class work

Due to the nature of adolescent brain development, decision-making can be flawed. Discussions in class can help students assess the key concepts that contribute to solid decisions and develop decision-making skills. Give students opportunities to choose what they will do, read, and work on during an assignment. Selecting a reading (either article A or article B), for example, helps students learn to consider the merits of their choices and develop skills in reasoning and critical thinking.

### Resources

Find links to more information on this topic at [www.careerladdersproject.org/dual-enrollment-links](http://www.careerladdersproject.org/dual-enrollment-links)

## Background: Brain Development

Major changes occur during adolescence when the brain undergoes structural changes (Jensen, 2005). Most importantly, the frontal lobe, which handles abstract reasoning and problem solving, is still developing until students reach their mid-twenties, and the prefrontal cortex, which controls judgment and impulses, matures very slowly (Shute, 2009). This helps explain the impulsivity of most adolescents.

Five factors influence brain development, especially during adolescence:

1. genetics
2. nutrition
3. steroids
4. teratogens
5. environmental stimulation

Educators have the power to shape one factor in particular: environmental stimulation. They can contribute to the amount and quality of cognitive stimulation students receive.

Stimulation begins before birth, and people receive environmental stimulation throughout their lives. But environmental stimulation has significant impact during adolescence and young adulthood, when the brain is still developing. In fact, brain development slows when environmental stimulation is missing or minimal. So it is imperative to embrace the “use it or lose it” strategy, and strengthen the brain during adolescence.

*Schunk, D. (2016). Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective, 7th ed. Boston: Pearson.*