



Healthy Missoula Youth
Coalition

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

+1 (406) 258-3023



www.healthymissoulayouth.org



info@healthymissoulayouth.org



SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Purpose of the Section

- Review the Theories of Child Development and how this relates to prevention
- Introduce Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation

What Educators Can Do

- Tailor prevention interventions to the developmental level of the youth they work with
- Use Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation to evaluate their classroom, and improve student engagement

Why is this important?

Utilizing prevention interventions tailored to suit the needs & developmental level of the students you work with will increase the effectiveness of programs.

INTRODUCTION

The US Surgeon General released research which has shown that the younger an individual starts using substances, the more likely they are to develop a Substance Use Disorder². As such, it is crucial to implement prevention interventions starting at a young age, and continue the conversation more in depth as they grow older. Early intervention practices "not only save young lives from being wasted," but also prevents the onset of adult criminal careers and reduces the likelihood of youth perpetrating serious and violent offenses⁴. Focusing on protective and risk factors is one way to begin developing a safe and healthy environment where a child can thrive.

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Theories of Child Development

Prevention recommendations for each of the four levels of child development: Early Childhood, Middle Childhood, Early Adolescence, and Middle Adolescence.

Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation

An evaluation model to be used in schools and youth activities groups that will increase youth engagement.

“While the targeted developmental stage may change, the primary focus of these interventions is on reducing risk and increasing protective factors that can modify proximal outcomes (e.g., self-regulation, skill development) as well as long-term, distal outcomes including psychological health, substance abuse, physical health, and other important areas (e.g., improved academic achievement and employment).”

- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

It is important to acknowledge that different prevention interventions will (or will not) work, depending on which stage of development the individual is in. Specialists often categorize the stages of development from kindergarten to high school into four sections: Early Childhood, Middle Childhood, Early Adolescence, and Middle Adolescence.

The following is a table containing information on appropriate prevention interventions for each age group. These age groups are categorized based on the characteristics and criteria listed in Iowa State University's "Ages and Stages of Development," a resource created by youth development specialists to assist volunteers in forming age-appropriate youth engagement activities¹. The Healthy Missoula Youth Coalition has analyzed and adapted this resource to provide more information on how this relates to the field of prevention, and what prevention practices are appropriate for each age group.

Disclaimer: While most children develop in accordance with this order of stages, it is important to remember that they all grow at their own pace, and the age of a child may not necessarily match the stage of development they are in. **Age is not a perfect predictor of maturity.** A child may need different experiences or support systems than peers of their age group to reach their full potential.

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

EARLY CHILDHOOD (TYPICALLY AGES 5-8)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: GRADES K-3

Youth may be more interested in the process of doing something rather than the actual result.

- Give the opportunity for youth to engage in a variety of healthy behaviors and activities. For example: exercise, stretching, sports, etc.
- Use play-scenarios in which youth can pretend to be experiencing a healthy decision-making dilemma (ex: inviting a student who was isolated to play a game with them).

Attention spans are relatively brief as they may become distracted by new stimuli.

- Social development is an important focus. As they are building a network of peer support, give youth a variety of activities that will engage them in new ways with different people. This exposure in a safe environment at a young age helps teach them to moderate their stress response as they grow.
- Address positive choices consistently, as they come up organically. Ex: "Did you notice I stopped and looked both ways before I crossed the street? I did that to make sure it was safe for us to cross."
- Adults should take the initiative to be role models for youth. One-time presentations are not effective at this age, so the message should be continuously reinforced.

Prevention at this stage of development should be about promoting protective factors, and establishing a solid decision making process for healthy risk taking. A majority of prevention interventions at this stage are primarily focused on building healthy parent-child relationships, decreasing aggressive behavior, and building children's social, emotional, and cognitive competence².

Most of their learning will occur through interactions with others.

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

EARLY CHILDHOOD (TYPICALLY AGES 5-8)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: GRADES K-3

Youth at this stage of development have little to no impulse control.

- The idea that kids should “know what not to do” is NOT best practice for this age group - the lack of impulse control may actually influence the young individual to engage in the risky health behavior more frequently if they think of it.

- Model positive behavior when around youth of this stage. Developing brains need nurturing and predictability to avoid stress responses.
- Give opportunities to the youth where they can get validation from an adult. For example: Play pretend together and let the youth be the leader who teaches the adult about healthy decision making.

Youth seek adult approval because they are not confident enough yet to set their own standards.

Youth have a strong desire for affection and attention from adults, but are moving from dependence on parents to dependence on another adult.

- Provide positive encouragement and assistance. Plan many concrete learning activities in which success can be experienced. Set up situations that foster cooperation and teamwork rather than competition.

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (TYPICALLY AGES 9-11)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: GRADES 3-5

Youth this age are quite active, and continue to have interests which often change rapidly.

- Emphasize active learning experiences that take place in group settings or encourage interaction with their peers in a positive way. Continue to use brief learning experiences, or present work in small pieces.
- Interactions with their peers will encourage problem solving and self-regulation skills, as well as developing conflict management skills and improved communication.

These youth enjoy need recognition or praise for doing good work in order to grow feelings of competence and self-concept.

- Work closely with this age group, leading by example. Begin conversations about healthy decision making choices and how to say "no" when appropriate.
- Provide opportunities like a school "buddy" system or pen-pals with older grades. For example, mentoring programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters are beneficial.
- Address the protective factor Rewards for Prosocial Involvement by using positive reinforcement and expressing pride or approval when the individual does something correctly.
- Hold initiation ceremonies for new members of clubs. Present recognition in front of peers and parents for their accomplishments. Instead of comparing youth to each other, compare present to past performance of the individual.

There is still a nurturing aspect to prevention with this developmental stage, however, this focus expands to include the growth of social, emotional, cognitive, and substance refusal skills as well. Enhancing communication skills, establishing boundaries, and setting limits are three of the main goals of prevention for this group².

Youth in this stage need guidance from positive role models to achieve their best performance.

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (TYPICALLY AGES 9-11)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: GRADES 3-5

Curiosity is a large characteristic of this stage of development. Youth may continuously ask “why” or broach more serious conversation about substances.

- Do not answer all their questions right away, encourage the individual to think and come up with their own answer to “why.” They will learn by finding some answers on their own. In a classroom, encourage a few students to find answers and report to the group.
- If they ask about substances, answer questions about alcohol and drug use truthfully, or direct them to trustworthy sites to find information on their own. It is appropriate for this age group to know the basics.

- Allow youth to show independence by asking for their input in decision making. Rather than only assigning one task, give the option of which of two tasks they would like to do first.
- Individualized attention and the opportunity to participate in classroom decision-making grows commitment to school, and this opportunity for prosocial involvement is a large protective factor.

As independence grows, youth may express discomfort at following all directions. Disobedience, back-talk, and rebelliousness are common characteristics of this age.

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

EARLY ADOLESCENCE (TYPICALLY AGES 12-14)

MIDDLE SCHOOL: GRADES 6-8

As youth at this age are experiencing a dramatic shift in their bodies and development, they can be sensitive to criticism, are self-conscious, and more vulnerable to bouts of low-esteem.

- Concentrate on developing a youth's individual skills, rather than comparing them to peers. Youth may need varied opportunities to achieve and to have their competence recognized by others.
- Promote the development of a more secure sense of self by allowing youth to plan activities and develop leadership skills. Help them evaluate the outcome, and let youth have responsibility for group activities.

Gaining skills in social relations with peers and adults is a continuing process.

- Peer pressure may frequently be a topic of conversation. Explain how this can have both positive and negative effects. Use the group to influence non-participation in unhealthy risk taking behaviors. For example, present information about substance use with a positive norming lens: "65.1% of youth in Missoula County DON'T use marijuana, according to the 2020 Missoula County Prevention Needs Assessment."
- Provide activities that would foster social interaction, and provide learning experiences outside of their typical comfort zone.

At this stage of development it is common for a student to have already been exposed to substances, whether it be from discussion with their peers, or seeing neighbors and family use. They may form attitudes about drug use from what they see at home, among their friends and in the media. As such, it is important to learn what they already know. Encourage them to ask questions, and clear up any misconceptions. It is important for adults to clearly explain to children what drugs are, their functions and potential harms³.

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

EARLY ADOLESCENCE (TYPICALLY AGES 12-14)

MIDDLE SCHOOL: GRADES 6-8

Youth at this stage of development are more likely to question the authority and values of adults in their lives.

- Be willing to spend time discussing values, morals, and ethics. Rather than just saying something and expecting the young individual to take it as fact, explain how the conclusion was made and why that decision works best. If they have false information, gently give them the correct information. Explain that they may come across more wrong information, but they can check everything with you.
 - Rather than “good” or “bad” choices, frame discussions about substance use in “healthy” or “unhealthy” terms. Be sure to sandwich this information with discussions of how they can and already do make healthy choices.
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- Look at the science of why substances affect the body negatively, rather than just discussing the negative effects. Direct youth to credible sources like SAMHSA or the CDC to find information on their own as well.
 - Mention the increased risk of developing a Substance Use Disorder if initiation of use starts before age 18. Be cognizant of placing blame or unintentionally shaming individuals who use.
 - Emphasize that though some substances are legal for adults it does not necessarily make them safe, and they are still illegal for youth.

Conversations about substance use

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE (TYPICALLY AGES 15-18)

HIGH SCHOOL: GRADES 9-12

Youth in this stage of development typically are motivated by social needs and a desire for status within their peer groups.

- Utilize a discussion-based structure or group projects that inspire youth to seek information on their own, and provide access to adult guidance when necessary.
- In conversations with youth place more emphasis on personal development. Establish an environment where youth feel encouraged to take on leadership roles and set examples for other peers or surrounding youth.

Individuality and personal morals will grow rapidly, sometimes deviating from those of the adults in their life.

- Create scenarios that mimic real life problem-solving situations. Allow the youth to fully discover ideas, make decisions, and evaluate the outcomes on their own, providing feedback and corrections when needed.
- Allow time for youth to explore and express these values as they develop. Use activities that strengthen the development of a community consciousness or interest in world problems (i.e.: involvement in civic projects).

In this time of transition youths' social roles are changing rapidly and some social safety net supports may weaken. As a result of these forces, young adulthood is typically associated with increases in substance use, misuse, and misuse-related consequences². As such, it is crucial to prepare adolescents for making tough life decisions by teaching them the skills needed to assess information and make health-minded choices on their own. Providing information about the detriments of substance use, as well as how to find accurate information from reputable sources on their own is a large part of prevention for this age group.

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE (TYPICALLY AGES 15-18)

HIGH SCHOOL: GRADES 9-12

As youths' areas of interest become more defined, focus on how the impacts of substance use are more far-reaching than just physical health.

- In conversations about substance use, broaden the discussion to address lifelong outcomes. Allow students to speculate and remark on their own life goals and how these could potentially be affected.

- Be clear about the school's expectations and policies in terms of substance use, as well as addressing what the community's laws and ordinances are. Consider reviewing the Student Handbook's policy guidelines.
- Express understanding and do not cast judgment when speaking with students about drug-related issues (such as drunk driving), but also be sure to talk about the real risks of drug use both for the individual and for the community as a whole. For example, explain that driving under the influence is illegal (i.e.: a person who gets a DUI may go to jail), but also that someone driving under the influence could end up killing or severely injuring a pedestrian, a passenger, another road user or themselves.

**Conversations about
substance use**

HART'S LADDER OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

In 1992, Roger Hart developed a model of participatory evaluation to be used in schools and youth activities groups. This model, now known as Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation, has been used throughout the nation, and is touted as one of the great theories of youth engagement, according to the Chicago Public Schools District. Hart's Ladder, in its basic form, is an eight-tiered system of assessment and reflection that can be used to see where an organization, school, or classroom stands on youth engagement levels, and can then help shape future goals.

Each of these eight tiers, or "rungs" of the ladder, indicate increasing degrees of student participation. The three "lowest" on the ladder are considered non-participatory, and the subsequent five steps are varying degrees of participation. The theory behind these steps is that as one moves up the rungs, the capacity for meaningful youth-adult partnerships grows.

Cornell University has a synthesized explanation of Hart's Ladder [here](#), as well as a [toolkit](#) from their Garden-Based Learning Program that provides examples and includes tips on using Hart's Ladder with ages 3-18, overly enthusiastic adults and well-formed programs.

In addition to Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation, Chicago Public School's Department of Social Science and Civic Engagement has released a variety of impactful toolkits for schools to utilize, including:

- [Say Their Names: Conversations on Race and Civil Disobedience Toolkit](#)
- [The Day After...A Classroom Discourse Guide for Timely Responses to Difficult or Controversial Events](#)

On the following page is a graphic depicting the eight tiers of Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation, as well as some examples of how this methodology may be seen in a school or classroom setting.

Hart's Ladder

Key Questions

Which level of Hart's Ladder is our project on?

Which level of Hart's Ladder should our project be on?

What do we need to do to move to the right level on the ladder for our project?

NON-PARTICIPATION

It is important to remember that tokenism, decoration and manipulation are not examples of youth participation. You do have the choice to move away from these methods towards more meaningful participation.

QUALITY OF PARTICIPATION

Young people and adults share decision-making

Young people lead and initiate action

Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

Young people are consulted and informed

Young people assigned but informed

Tokenism

Decoration

Manipulation

EXAMPLES

Young people have the ideas, set up the project and invite adults to join them in making decisions throughout the project. They are equal partners.

Young people decide they need a one-stop shop in their community. They partner with adults in different youth organisations and together lobby the government for resources.

Young people have the initial idea and decide how the project is to be carried out. Adults are available and trust in the leadership of young people.

A group of students get permission from their principal to run an environmental day. The students make the decisions, and the school provides support.

Adults have the initial idea, and young people are involved in making decisions, planning and implementing the project.

A community co-ordinator asks young people for event ideas for Youth Week. The young people suggest having a skating event. The co-ordinator and young people work together to make decisions and apply for funding.

Adults design and facilitate the project, and young people's opinions are given weight in decision-making. Young people receive feedback about their opinions.

A local council runs several consultations to get young people's input about a recreation park. Young people tell the council about features in the park they want changed. The council provides feedback to the young people about how their views affected decision-making.

Adults decide on the project and young people volunteer for it. Young people understand the project and adults respect their views.

A conference creates positions for two young people on a panel of speakers. Young people decide how to select their representatives and work with adults to understand their role.

Young people are given a limited voice and little choice about what they can say and how they can communicate.

A young person is asked by adults to be on a panel and represent 'youth'. The young person is not given the opportunity to consult with peers or understand the role.

Young people take part in an event in a very limited capacity and have no role in decision-making.

A group of young people are given a script by adults about 'youth problems' to present to adults attending a youth conference.

Adults have complete and unchallenged authority and abuse their power. They use young people's ideas and voices for their own gain.

A publication uses young people's cartoons; however, the publication is written by adults.

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Conclusion

Tailored prevention interventions that fit the developmental level of students not only are more effective, but also allow teachers to better connect with the youth. This can be enhanced through the use of Hart's Ladder and actively encouraging youth to become more involved.

Action Items

- **ADAPT** lessons to fit the needs of the students.
- **ENGAGE** your students in the classroom decision-making process.
- **ASK** students to lead class activities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Keeping Youth Engaged in School](#)
- [11 Ways to Get Your Teen Talking](#)
- [Playbook for Parents of Pre-Teens](#)
- [Playbook for Parents of Teens](#)

1: [Levings & Query, 2006](#)

2: [US Department of Health & Human Services, 2016](#)

3: [Department of Health, State Government of Victoria, Australia, 2022](#)

4: [Greenwood, 2008](#)

