

# The Adolescent Learner

## *Key Questions About Adolescents and Win-Win Teacher Responses*

*I know my subject and how it informs and enhances our lives. I want to teach students to appreciate these things as much as I do!*

**A**s you begin your teaching career, you bring the strengths of your subject matter knowledge and enthusiasm for wanting to share that knowledge with students. What else do you need to know and do to teach your subject effectively? Will your students be interested in what you teach? Will seemingly less interested students make it difficult for you to teach others? We invite you to consider the unique possibilities and challenges involved in engaging and instructing middle and high school students. This chapter highlights some patterns of adolescent students' behavior, their learning strengths and needs, and overarching strategies for fostering success.

## **WHY DO ADOLESCENTS GET SO MOODY, WILD, OR DRAMATIC?**

### **Adolescent Learners May Exhibit Intense, Emotional, and Complex Energies in Response to a Multitude of Factors.**

Do you remember your transition from elementary school to life on a middle or high school campus? Your students are now in an environment filled with two to five times the number of students that attended their former schools. They are expected to learn new ideas from several different teachers, each with a different style of teaching and set of expectations. As they gain greater independence from their parents, adolescents find themselves more actively redefining who they are in relation to others. *Peer pressure* from friends and acquaintances in school, neighborhoods, or the community at large can influence their opinions and choices of clothing, music, and what to do in their free time. Approaching young adulthood, some students work part-time or help to care for younger siblings. Some students may be coping with or helping to mediate challenging situations in their homes or neighborhoods. Many students also feel pressure to maintain exceptionally high grade point averages to raise their chances of admission to a selective four-year university.

Add these outside pressures to those happening inside their bodies! At the onset of and continuing throughout puberty, significant changes in certain types and levels of hormones trigger increases in adolescents' height and the development of their reproductive system. Barring any negative effects from thrill-seeking or other hormone-driven behaviors, major changes in the structure and function of the brain continue to occur throughout adolescence. The developmental changes that take place during adolescence dramatically act to increase the brain's efficiency and capacity for critical thinking, monitoring behavior, and making choices.

What other factors are at play? Most of today's adolescents have had access to the Internet since their preschool or early elementary school years. Many consider television, movies, music, and the Web as pivotal sources for receiving information. Current technologies provide access to global news and a wide range in music, art, languages, and images. Many students use their personal computers to instantaneously retrieve and respond to the latest information about social and cultural icons, and the day's political foes and heroes. Whether gossiping via text messages, cell phone conversations, or social networking online, more and more students are capable of connecting to one another and family members before, during, and long after school.

Imagine all these factors combined with their characteristic excitability, moodiness, sexual curiosity, impulsiveness, and the effects of occasional sleep deprivation. Your students will vary greatly in how willing they are to express or mask the influence on their thinking triggered by an incredible array of influences. Individual styles, peer influences, sociocultural backgrounds, and students' social and academic language proficiencies may also influence their responsiveness to instruction. Can't figure out why your students run so hot

and cold? Chances are that they can't either! In a nutshell, the academic concepts you present, and to which you expect students to respond, exist amid their complex emotions, impulses, and input from the world.

### **How Can I Channel Their High-Intensity, All-About-Me Energies Toward Productive Schoolwork?**

- **Introduce academic concepts by making meaningful connections to students' lives.** Whenever possible, introduce new concepts through a variety of prompts, resources, and activities that connect lesson topics and skills with students' multifaceted lives. All students have some personal knowledge to relate to what is being taught. It is your creative challenge to continually discover, or preassess, for meaningful connections between pivotal subject matter concepts, related topics, and the experiences students *bring* to your classroom. These connections create springboards for learning.
- **Use movement and peer interactions.** Increase each individual student's focus on learning with a variety of interactions. Consider what you're observing about trends in student engagement and your students' preferred learning styles. For how many students is simply hearing information sufficient? On average, do students seem more engaged when ideas are also represented visually or when they're involved in more kinesthetic or tactile, hands-on learning? How might your lessons incorporate some sociocultural styles of engagement and communication, like storytelling, cooperative group activities, rhythmic call-and-response dialogues, debates, or presentations?

Increase focus by having students work in pairs or triads to quickly brainstorm what they know about a subject related picture, three-dimensional model, or a pivotal phrase displayed on your SMART Board, PowerPoint slide, overhead transparency, or whiteboard. As a variation, you might ask all students to stand and pair up with someone from another part of the room to discuss one homework question they've answered or problem they've solved. Draw out and affirm students' prior knowledge through these two- to five-minute stand-up meetings at any point in the lesson.

In starting a new unit, have two or three of your more vocal students take center stage as you prompt them to *think aloud* about a unit-related concept. Engage these students in a five-minute debate about a hot-topic controversy, or ask them to describe in detail what they see in a photo or three-dimensional model. Ask how, step-by-step, they would go about answering a featured *question of the day*. Encourage their dramatic side even more by asking these learners to model a skill, demonstrate a concept, or dramatically read aloud from a pivotal text excerpt. As part of building on their prior knowledge, prompt your other students to write what is said by their peers and decide whether they agree or disagree with what they say. Eventually, more students will be willing to take a more active role in front of their peers.

- **Flex and reflect.** As you establish your procedures and expectations, it's periodically okay to share with students your own efforts to get it right. You are their instructional leader and their partner in learning. Stating your intention to support and advance their skills as learners *as well as* teach them new concepts is usually (albeit quietly) welcomed.

## WHY DO THEY QUESTION THE PURPOSE OF WHAT I WANT TO TEACH?

### **Adolescent Learners Want to Know That What They Learn Has Value or Purpose. They Also Want to Be Taken Seriously as Students.**

Students will eventually ask about the purpose or value of information presented in your class. Don't take it personally as something negative—some view it as their inherent right to question you. Soon enough you will hear, "Why do we have to learn this?" If students are less than tactful at posing this question, it may not necessarily be about defying you or about showing off in front of their peers. They are actively defining their perspectives on a range of topics. As metacognitive skills develop more rapidly during this phase, whether they'll admit to it or not, they are assessing what they know and don't know about information presented to them. Students want to know that what they are being asked to learn has some meaning, usefulness, or potential value to their lives.

All students hope you respect them as learners, including students who haven't had consistent academic success, don't appear to be working to their potential, or perceive themselves as generally disrespected in the school community. Students hope that each teacher will handle their mistakes and successes with an even and predictable hand. Ultimately, they hope that respect is consistently promoted and modeled by the adult(s) in charge.

### **How Can I Promote the Value of What I Teach, Including Essential Concepts That Are Difficult to Understand as Described in Grade-Level Texts? How Can I Support Struggling Readers?**

- **Take time to identify and then articulate to students the "whys"** for learning each of the major concepts and skills you will need to teach. Despite the emphasis on standards and high-stakes testing, most adolescents (and many teachers) are not genuinely impressed by hearing that students are required to learn certain things. It is your responsibility to help students understand how smaller bits of information connect to larger, enduring subject matter concepts, essential questions and applications, and (better yet) how this information is connected to students' lives!
- **Model expert reading skills and help students make connections to concepts they'll encounter in text.** Despite the importance of demonstrations, visuals, and projects that engage students in learning

new content, there is no way around the fact that skillful, independent reading is still the most efficient means by which one can acquire considerable amounts of advanced-level information. Chapter 9 describes several ideas for developing students' content-literacy skills as a part of subject matter instruction. Achievement data confirm that even students with average, grade-level reading skills struggle to persist when reading to understand dense, detailed text that describes advanced subject-specific concepts. Consider this general principle: Students benefit from making connections between challenging, text-based information and larger concepts that are more interesting or meaningful to them. Support your students to make these connections by demonstrating the skills you use to think and read like a scientist, historian, mathematician, literary critic, artist, or expert of other career paths. One thing you can do is to think aloud about images that come to mind as you read a key excerpt, description, or a set of directions and procedures. Enhance reading think alouds by simultaneously displaying an enlarged version of the excerpt on an overhead transparency or SMART Board. As you encounter challenging or confusing phrases, articulate the questions that come to mind, the process for clarifying the meaning of a pivotal word, or personal experiences triggered by those phrases. As you are reading and intermittently thinking aloud, write what you are saying between the lines of text or in the margins. Ask students to write what you are writing on Post-its they can place in the margin next to the passage in the textbook. Or they can write directly onto copies of an article or excerpt from the textbook provided to them for a think aloud activity designed to develop their subject-specific reading skills.

- **Offer strong anticipatory (i.e., introductory) activities** that clearly connect new ideas to examples, resources, references, or contexts that are socioculturally relevant or familiar to your students. Enhance students' interaction with new concepts by using this language-development strategy: Provide students with graphic organizers (e.g., main idea maps or Cornell notes format) to help them quickly identify main ideas and their relationship to examples and supporting details. In leveraging these tools, you are more likely to foster initial student interest quickly, build background knowledge, and sustain engagement.
- **Show respect for students.** Affirm students' progress in learning academic concepts, successes in reaching certain goals, and improvement in behaviors that benefit them as learners. At all cost, avoid put-downs and sarcasm in your feedback to students (even if this type of back-and-forth is prevalent among some students) and use neutral, direct language to coach them toward ways to improve.
- **Respond and/or give corrective feedback** to student work as soon as possible. Make their work count. Provide and carefully walk through components of rubrics and expectations linked to major assignments, and perhaps even expectations for behavior and productive participation. Engage students in assessing their current strengths and learning needs related to these productive behaviors.

## WHY DO SOME STUDENTS SEEM TO CARE ONLY ABOUT THE OPINIONS OF THEIR PEERS?

### Adolescents Are Known for Their Susceptibility to Peer Pressure.

As part of gaining their independence from adults, teenagers and preteens are compelled toward peer interactions. Intense peer-group associations often act as a type of security blanket or serve as a preferred second home away from home. Generally speaking, conformity to peer-group norms regarding styles of clothing, manner of speech, and attitudes toward adults in authority can play a bigger role in the behavior of adolescents as compared to younger students. Peer-group influences can reinforce productive school behaviors and sometimes influence nonproductive ones, such as cutting or being late for class, not doing homework, or provoking conflicts with other students.

Of course, not all students are susceptible to peer pressure, or at least not to the same degree. For example, many first- and second-generation immigrant students are often fascinated by but reluctant to fully adopt the ways of more predominant student groups they view as American or *Americanized*. Many of these students tend to hold family traditions and cultural perspectives as familiar touchstones, and they consider their shared family responsibilities as priorities, at least for a while.

We caution you—although certain patterns of student behavior can be predicted, keep an open mind when you encounter some negative behaviors that may appear to have been prompted by peer-group influences. Remember that many complex factors are at play in the lives of individual students. Associating or predicting negative behaviors based *strictly* on what appears to be peer-group or sociocultural norms can result in counterproductive interactions between you and a student.

### How Do I Promote More Constructive, Positive Responses and Attitudes Among Students Drawn to Negative, Peer-Pressured Behaviors?

- **Invest time in knowing who your students are and what they bring.** Each of your students brings multidimensional strengths (learning style preferences, multiple intelligences, cultural and linguistic perspectives, and individual life experiences), as well as instructional needs. Learning about these dimensions may seem daunting given the number of students you teach. The importance of considering these other types of student data is being recognized more and more by secondary educators. You may be teaching in a school organized into *smaller learning communities*, grade-level advisories, and/or student-selected *career pathway academies*. These school structures are intended to help secondary teachers collaboratively learn about the multiple dimensions of their students and use that information to plan instruction and programs that

increase motivation and engagement. As an individual teacher, you can do something as simple as routinely ask students about their experiences linked to a concept you are about to teach. This signals that you value their perspectives and potential contributions. Your instruction can create another kind of draw for students when aspects about their lives are respectfully and appropriately woven into a few strategic lessons.

- **View your classroom as a place to establish a different community of peers.** Your enthusiasm, team-building efforts, meaningful questions, and even what you display on your classroom walls can help foster students' interaction with subject matter content and one another, as well as with you. Consider how your lessons and the resources you use encourage all of your students in some way to view themselves as historians, readers and writers of literature, scientists, mathematicians, artists, athletes, or tech-savvy seekers of information. Uplifting or thought-provoking pictures on your walls depicting people from the same sociocultural backgrounds as your students help to make them feel connected to the learning environment. In addition to your students' work, filling your walls with subject-related articles and visuals depicting compelling contexts, topics, and career possibilities tends to foster a level of comfort and willingness to participate.

Involve students in reflecting about some schoolwide rules, plus your own classroom rules and expectations. Plan an occasional, extended activity to foster student reflection about rules and expectations. Guiding students in reflective activities will help to raise the quality and level of response to the school's and/or your own class rules. For example, if students have been complaining about the fairness of prohibiting or limiting cell phone use during class time, it may warrant a facilitated discussion to surface the pros and cons as well as the rationale behind the rule. If they passionately argue the right to free speech in response to a reminder about expectations for using respectful language in the classroom, pause and stay neutral as you prompt students to take a few minutes to write about what might happen if free speech were taken to its outer limits. On the flip side, remember to validate students' productive, appropriate behaviors. Avoid a possible tendency even during times when students are not consistently meeting expectations to focus on only negative behaviors. (See Chapter 3 for more ideas about preassessing students' strengths, establishing a respectful environment, and setting rules.)

## **WHY ARE SO MANY STUDENTS LATE WITH HOMEWORK AND DEADLINES?**

### **Adolescent Learners Tend to Be Challenged by the Concept of Time Management.**

Teenagers lead busy lives. From time to time, afterschool activities, clubs, athletics, family responsibilities, part-time work, personal interests, hanging out with friends, social events, technology-driven pastimes (video games,

television, Internet, text messaging), and other diversions keep them occupied and otherwise distracted from schoolwork. Most adolescents find it difficult to avoid time-management challenges. All students need some level of help to gain the know-how involved in getting things done: organizing assignments, prioritizing tasks, getting the resources or information needed to complete tasks, managing, and then spending the time needed to study. This is especially true for middle school students and high school freshmen. Even older students who seem to have it under control say they appreciate teachers who are clear (namely, those who don't assume that students automatically know) about expectations for homework, class participation, deadlines, or the length and content of an assigned paper or project.

### **How Do I Support Students to Become Organized and Use Their Time Wisely, Especially Related to Homework Assignments?**

- **Never assume.** New secondary teachers often assume that because their students are now in their eighth or tenth year of school, they are skilled at time management. Providing students with clear expectations for short- and long-term assignments is crucial. During the first two to three weeks of school, assign students one or two of the same types of daily homework assignments until they get the routine and understand your expectations about the work. Vary the types of homework, length, and/or complexity appropriately over time. Explaining the assignment, providing students with expectations and requirements in writing, and then checking for students' understanding about each assignment are essential elements. When you assign something, convey that it counts. Build in time to each day for students to review some part of the homework assignment, and/or time for you to check that homework that was due has indeed been done (see Chapter 3, Rules, Routines, and Procedures).
- **Provide assignment calendars, a detailed syllabus, or sample projects.** Refer students to published calendars and your class syllabus at least once per week. For independent, long-term assignments, a routine check-in a couple of times per week to surface key ideas, possible problems, questions, or confusions they might have is also helpful. Given that you probably won't have examples of projects to show your students yet, consider investing time in creating one yourself. It should feature at least the titles or components of what you require for the project; the possible layout of these components; plus a separate sheet describing your expectations, types of resources to reference, and the length of written components.
- **Speak to individual students** when you notice patterns of inattention, absences, tardiness, or other evidence that a student may be performing *below* (his or her) *potential*. You may have observed that in the past the student has shown more interest in lesson topics, sharing thoughtful insights through written assignments or participating in group discussions or problem solving. Start by speaking to the student privately. Share what you've noticed about his or her past participation

or previous work that is positive as well as your concerns about patterns that appear to be hindering his or her academic progress. Respectfully ask if there are ways you and/or other staff members might be able to help with certain assignments (e.g., additional bilingual or reading support, afterschool homework assistance, or access to a computer center) or other things that might be distracting the student from schoolwork. If after meeting with the student you notice that not much has changed after a while, you may want to speak to the student again, and suggest that perhaps meeting with a parent or guardian is your next step.

## WHY DO SOME STUDENTS SEEM PERSISTENTLY UNMOTIVATED?

### **Adolescent Learners Are Generally Motivated by What They Believe Is Meaningful, Fun, and Active; Involves Choice; or Connects to Their Teacher's Passion About a Subject.**

Accustomed to multiple types of input and stimuli found *outside* of class, most adolescents tend to grow restless in class when attempting to passively concentrate for long periods. Hormone-charged bodies and thoughts that drift to the life that awaits them after school sometimes make it challenging to stay focused on academic tasks. Eventually, you will inevitably hear them groan, "This is boring."

### **How Can I Help My Students Stay on Task? With so Much to Cover, Do I Dare Allow Time to Be Flexible and Include What They Consider Fun?**

- **Divide instruction delivered through lecture, reading, or silent individual tasks into shorter segments.** Use an agenda that clearly spells out the lesson's activities. Encourage pacing with verbal cues ("Three minutes left to finish"). You need to change focus periodically to keep students' interest level high. You can always revisit concepts at another time or through various activities. Among other things, adolescents respond to teachers whom they perceive as organized. Engaging students in lessons with tasks and activities that are explained clearly and are well paced conveys this sense of organization.
- **Monitor pacing, input, and types of learning.** Post your agenda noting the main concept or objective of the day, a warm-up activity, and three or four other components of the day's lesson. Begin with a five- to eight-minute warm-up activity to get students interested in the content. Get students accustomed to answering a couple of math or science problems or responding to an interesting question, quote, word, or visual at the start of every class.

*Note: This allows you to take attendance and perhaps make contact with a couple of students.*

Structure lessons so that they allow students to engage in a combination of activities including the following:

- **Begin lessons with warm-ups that connect lesson concepts to students' prior knowledge. Follow warm-ups with . . .**
  - Listening and responding in multiple ways to expert input or modeling (teacher or student demonstrations, lecture, video, text read aloud)
  - Collaborating with other students in a variety of activities to examine the meaning of key vocabulary and concepts, or develop new representations (e.g., posters, completed graphic organizers, responses to key questions) linked to what they've read, solved, or experienced
  - Individually solving problems and/or reading and responding to text
  - A brief closing activity that supports students to assess or summarize what they've learned
- **Facilitate a few short, project-based assignments.** When equipped with sufficient background knowledge and the interest you've generated about a concept, students' interest can be increased even more through project-based learning. Short individual or small-group projects and presentations can be completed in two to four traditional class periods or block periods assuming students have access to the information and materials they will need to complete the task. Students can also work on these projects for homework. (Long-term or culminating projects can be worked on for a few minutes at the start of each class.) Short, in-class projects assigned at the start of a semester give you the opportunity to inform and guide students about the process, check for understanding, and raise the possibility of early and ongoing student success. In-class projects could feature their viewpoint on high-interest topics or the real-life application of an academic concept. Once projects are underway, it usually takes only a few minutes at the start of class to check for understanding about project expectations or provide additional information before turning students loose on these projects. It's still a good idea to check in with the whole group from time to time during a class period to ask some clarifying questions or offer suggestions to address confusions voiced by students. Encourage students to respectfully suggest how their peers might improve the quality of the visuals, layout, and information they plan to present to others.
- **Use quick demonstrations and multiple types of visual and auditory resources.** Using graphics, three-dimensional models, music, art, school-appropriate videos, or Web-based resources can enhance students' experience in learning a lesson's key concept. Try using various types of materials or student demonstrations to illustrate an academic concept in a nonlinguistic way (e.g., having students form a human pyramid to physically represent *hierarchy*, or ask students to line up, assigning each a negative or positive number on a number line as the basis for considering number values that are greater than or less than).

- **Recognize that active learning and choice sustains attention** for learning content that students might initially view as boring or uninteresting. In addition to discussions and responding to information presented through a variety of resources and modalities, support students to consider how they might teach this information to other audiences, including younger students, community members, or leaders. Give students assignments that involve developing their own short story, role-play activity, or questions for a game of Jeopardy. Ask students to develop a lesson for younger students, a lab experiment, or a quiz linked to a subject matter concept or skill. These tasks not only offer students with choices, but they also foster their sense of competence and connection to others.
- **Share your passion for your subject matter.** Your own dedication and passion for the content you present is a key engagement strategy. Combined with your efforts to engage and respect them as learners, your own authentic interest and curiosity about subject matter concepts are difficult for students to ignore. “Why is Mr. or Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ so excited about this topic?” Students with no prior interest in a subject will be intrigued, at the very least, by your enthusiasm and daily rediscovery of essential concepts and questions.

## **WHY DO SOME STUDENTS APPEAR SO CONFIDENT, EVEN WHEN THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW?**

### **Underneath It All, Adolescents Have Insecurities and, in Addition to High-Quality Instruction, Would Benefit From Receiving Additional Guidance to Increase Their Success as Students.**

Despite their need to distinguish themselves from adults, most adolescents also need and want adults to guide them in the learning process, perhaps more than ever. As described earlier in this chapter, their miscalculations about things such as appropriate behavior or the time and effort needed to complete work are part of being inexperienced with a school world that has many more variables, complexities, responsibilities, and consequences for not meeting those responsibilities.

A significant number of students are often hesitant to ask for help in a direct and constructive manner. Conveying their boredom or seeming to *know it all* could mean something quite the opposite. Some students operate behind a level of social bravado meant to mask aspects of learning that are challenging to them. Students currently in the process of learning English as their second language may be reluctant to express their needs or questions in English in front of their peers. Some adolescents who have in the past felt alienated or experienced disrespect in other school communities may seem to have given up on any hope that adults will genuinely care about their success. Others may appear detached

as a way of coping with rejection from potential peer-group friends, insufficient content literacy, differences in learning needs, or factors linked to at-risk situations present in their home or neighborhood. With these challenges on their mind, students may not express their needs or concerns directly, if at all.

### **How Do I Provide All My Students With the Guidance They Need? How Can I Promote Success?**

- **Set clear consistent and reasonable limits.** Expectations about homework, due dates, appropriate language in class, and respect for materials are things that older students need and expect adults to determine. Older students perceive teachers who are lax about these things as being disorganized, “too loose,” or “not like a real teacher.” In these cases, students often lose respect for otherwise very knowledgeable instructors.
- **Model, model, model.** Make no assumptions about students’ understanding of your expectations for work and behavior. Model the promptness, thoroughness, and respect you expect from them. Discuss study habits. Show them how an assignment should be done. Plan tasks that allow for early successes. Check for understanding regularly about your expectations. Continue to build the degree of difficulty of work and expectations over time. If you have been clear about your expectations, you can involve students in assessing their own progress and the quality of their work and overall effort. This is important when supporting them to be independent learners. Don’t forget to acknowledge successes along the way.
- **Be accessible.** Talk about the value of making mistakes and reflecting on them. Selectively share some of your own mistakes. Be available for individual conferences to discuss these matters and describe other available resources (e.g., primary language instruction, tutoring, bilingual materials, simplified texts, or support from school counselors and/or teaching assistants).