

## **A New Way to Understand Teens and Twenty-somethings**

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The Asynchronous (Uneven) Development Model is the foundation of our services. It informs my philosophy and my approach to helping youth. The main idea is that human development is sporadic and individual. Each person develops at their own rate in several developmental areas.

Most of us have been influenced by the great thinkers and researchers on the subject of human development, Freud, Erickson, Piaget, Kohlberg, to name a few superstars. They all have one thing in common; they see human development as unfolding in stages and define what is normal or typical for each stage. Positive results are determined by the level of conformity to these “normal” checkpoints or milestones.

This approach is sometimes referred to as the “nature” view because of the “natural” stages and less emphasis on environmental, so-called “nurture” influences. While stages and milestones are helpful in comparing people to each other; they are limited when we try to examine the uniqueness and actual needs of individuals. If we adhere too strictly we focus on what’s normal instead of what’s normal for this person at this time. We concern ourselves with the benchmarks that may tell us how far they need to go but not what they need to overcome or how much time they need to get there.

On the other hand if we emphasize the effects of the environment influences too much we ignore a key part of individual development. We might call it the internal environment; pressures from within that drive ideas and behavior. Understanding the asynchronous aspect of human development is a step in shifting the focus onto the individual and understanding the pressures they feel as well as the resulting behaviors.

As mentioned earlier, this concept of “Asynchrony” means that people grow up at different rates. Some are ahead of their peers or classmates in some ways; and they may be behind in other ways. Of course some are about average.

Focusing on eight different developmental areas aids us to see how students or other youth view themselves and each other. These areas are:

Physical

Emotional

Cognitive

Academic

Social/Relational

Sexual

Moral/Ethical

Career

One could argue that others areas should be included but these can be addressed separately. These eight main areas (domains) and how to assess them will be discussed and amplified later but, for now let's look at a few obvious examples of asynchrony.

Some students are more physically developed and mature earlier. Others mature later and look younger even though they are the same age. These differences matter because they can affect the experiences of youth. Research on early-maturing girls shows they are more likely to associate with older boys and thus are exposed to alcohol, sex, etc. at a younger age. They may get into more situations they aren't ready for. Late maturing boys and girls may be victims of teasing or bullying or may become bullies to compensate or "prove" something.

Youth still often engage in what Festinger called "social comparison" way back in the 1950's. For example, some students may be way ahead of their peers academically, but may be behind socially. They may try to catch up with social strategies that don't work and may worsen the situation. Sometimes being too far ahead of peers academically creates problems. How many students just don't fit in or "dummy down" and underperform academically to avoid standing out amongst their less gifted peers?

Asynchrony, (or being out of balance), doesn't just apply when we compare ourselves to others, it can also mean we can be asynchronous within ourselves. Again, we can be ahead of ourselves in some ways and behind ourselves in other ways. This can be a factor in how youth put pressure on themselves to accelerate or slow down their progress. The mechanism for this is the "ego ideal" or, in other words, a different or better self we think we should be. This adds to the pressures and how we react to these pressures will determine whether we make good decisions or bad decisions.

Teaching youth these ideas; that human development is asynchronous, that they engage in social comparison, and they aspire to an ego ideal are the keys to self-understanding which leads to making better choices.

To do effective prevention work or any intervention/counseling work we need to start where the client or student is and that varies from individual to individual. I once met with a mother and daughter after the mother called and expressed concern about her daughter failing her classes. During the interview the daughter said at least three times she had been having thoughts about hurting herself. The mother ignored (or just wasn't ready to hear) the comments. At that point I asked the student to leave the room and I posed this question to the mother, "Don't you think it would be a good idea for your daughter to decide she wants to live before we concern ourselves with her GPA?"

This student was depressed but mostly due to her situation. Looking at this distressed student through a developmental lens, she was not emotionally ready for the stress of college even though she had the cognitive and academic ability. We can assume there are other students who have similar profiles and if they understood why they have difficulty coping, they could address this as a problem to be solved and skills to be learned as opposed to an external overwhelming force or personal failure.

Every student probably has some asynchrony and though it may not be as serious as the example above, it is possible to see each person as an individual. From a developmental perspective we can assess the issues(s) that each student is struggling with when we have a way to understand their unique profile.

The Asynchrony Model does this well and minimizes resistance because the model doesn't diagnose pathology or judge people. We set the tone by telling youth that asynchrony is normal and everyone shows it at some point in their lives. Practically speaking, we can do this as a part of individual therapy or in groups. This model can be deployed as psycho-education also. Ultimately, our goal is to persuade high schools and colleges to embed developmental education across their entire curriculum. On my ideal campus, every class or course could examine developmental concepts from a different perspective.