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Early childhood education and care, social and emotional competence

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AARE blog, Early childhood, identity, Macquarie University, Marg Rogers, Margaret Sims, University of New England

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# Toddlers and teens: the news educators and parents need right now

By [Marg Rogers](#) and [Margaret Sims](#)

Among educators and parents, the most often complained about age groups are toddlers and teens. Physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively there are many similarities in these developmental ages. Understanding these similarities can reduce frustrations and help us better connect with them.

In this two-part series, we explore the physical, social and emotional similarities. In the second article (published tomorrow), we will explore the cognitive similarities, share tips on building positive relationships, and provide ways to address their mental health and wellbeing.

## What are the similarities?

### Physical

This is a time of [rapid physical growth](#) for both age groups. Brains are struggling to keep up, causing what might seem like clumsiness and frequent accidents as they learn how to move and

be in their rapidly changing bodies. They might not know their own strength and accidentally break something or hurt someone as they test shifting limits. It is important to avoid overreacting and attaching a purpose behind these actions as there may be none. Letting them know you are upset and that you do not want them doing that again is okay, but try to leave it there.

This rapid growth means both toddlers and teenagers need [loads of sleep](#). This can be tricky for teenagers who like to [stay up late](#), then struggle with morning routines and learning activities. Additionally, gaming, streaming and social media means there is more to occupy them in the evenings. Parents are often unpopular if they take devices off children at bedtime, but it might mean a big difference enabling them to get the physical rest they need.

### ***Emotional***

Both ages are times of opposites. One minute children seem to be clingy and wanting attention and support, then the next they are pushing you away, [expressing their opinions](#), and saying 'No! I can do it', snarling or grunting. They are still very needy at all times, [despite the bravado](#).

Learning to step back and allowing them some freedom is important, but letting them know you are there whenever they need you is vital. The saying 'Children need your love when they least deserve it' is very true. Teach them that if they want to do something themselves, or have time to themselves that it is okay, but that they need to express this wish in a way that is not hurtful. Providing example sentences can help them choose appropriate words.

### ***Social***

Socially, children are still learning what is acceptable, what will elicit a response, and how to navigate relationships. Emotionally, they are more likely to find rejection heartbreaking because they are forging their identity. Feeling rejected for toddlers might look like someone not sharing their toys, or pushing them over. For teens it is far more complex, and involves feeling liked and belonging within [friendship or sub cultural groups](#).

To be mentally healthy all humans need to feel a sense of belonging. We need an identity that locates us safely in groups of others. For toddlers those groups include the family and possibly the educators and peer group in their early childhood setting. For teenagers the importance of the family group declines (but doesn't disappear) as they seek their place in a range of different peer groups in both the face-to-face and virtual worlds they inhabit. Learning who we are in these groups is often a function of how the group reacts to us, and children need a [secure base](#) of caring relationships. This supports them to manage the turbulent emotions that come with learning that not everyone in the world will like them or want to be with them.

## Regarding identity

In regards to identity, toddlers are realising they are separate to their primary caregiver, and teenagers are forging their identity as a young person separate from their parents. At both ages, egos are very fragile, so it is important parents provide a place where they can feel safe and secure within their own home, away from the hurdy gurdy of friendships. Ideally, the family environment creates a safe basis from which children can reach out into the world and develop their own identities within their own groups. If there is not a safe environment at home, other spaces might help provide some support, such as libraries, extra-curricular groups and clubs.

Teenagers are now old enough to realise what people say and what they mean can be different. This new skill means they often believe people are thinking the worst of them, despite the reality that people are not thinking about them at all. It is important to point out to teenagers that it is a time where they are more likely to be self-conscious, but the reality is most people are not thinking about anything but themselves or the task at hand.

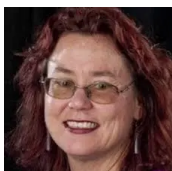
For both age groups, having time alone at home is important as this time gives them the space to process their experiences and reinforce for themselves just who they are. For teens, this means times where they are not on social media. They might complain, but it is good for them to relax and not always be socially available. Time in the family unit is also important as it reinforces the relationships that make home a safe place.

## Looking after yourself

Overall, it is challenging educating and parenting these age groups, so finding another trusted and experienced educator or parent to chat to is vital for your own wellbeing. It is normal for educators and [parents of toddlers](#) and [teenagers](#) to feel exhausted, challenged and exasperated at times. It is essential to recognise your own limits. It is not selfish to desire time alone to recharge batteries to enable you to cope with the next challenge thrown your way. Nor is it selfish to reach out for help when those difficulties feel overwhelming. Looking after yourself is vital for the long haul.



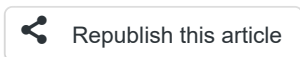
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