# Responding to the Challenges of Transitioning Into Adulthood

## Introduction

In this document, we turn our attention to providing young people with the support they need for responding well to challenges of transitioning into adulthood. To get you in the right mindset for reviewing the twelve sets of practices presented in this section, this Introduction takes a bit of your time to help you better understand why getting through transition challenges can be so difficult.

There is a lot going on with some young people and their struggles! It goes back to development, as discussed in the document *Understanding the Transition to Adulthood*. However, here is a little bit more you need to know about those developmental stages and the astounding process that is underway during this transition stage.

This process is difficult because *what it makes possible* is enormous – **becoming an adult**. Therefore, as nature's plan would have it, one has to fight for it. High struggle. High reward. Let us see what the struggle and reward are exactly.

## Why Some Young People May Have Difficult Struggles Transitioning Into Adulthood

Trust. Autonomy. Initiative. Industry. As the diagram on the left illustrates, these four are the foundation for the big fifth one, which is identity. What you are seeing in a young person's struggle is actually about something positive, which is the **culmination of all prior developmental stages in order to support the huge task of forming a positive identity**.

That is, all the previous learning from all the previous developmental tasks and all the executive skills learned and used are now integrating for the heavy lift of forming an identity, which is the centerpiece of adulthood and ongoing adult development.[1]

This requires a completely new set of bigger developmental tasks, called developmental meta-tasks, which will be discussed later.

Prior to the transition period, all development has been preparation for the pivotal developmental event - becoming the person one will be in this world. This developmental task requires "good mental health," which we now know means possessing trust, autonomy, initiative, and

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[1] James E. Marcia, "Identity and Psychosocial Development in Adulthood," *International Journal of Theory and Research,* Vol. 2, No. 1, 2009

industry, which are components of mental health. When all has gone fairly well, this is an enormously difficult task. It is all the more difficult when the young person has not had the kinds of experiences needed for forming trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry.

To be clear, the developmental pressure the young person is under is enormous, and for some it is overwhelming. For the first time in their life, the multiple intelligences (behavioral, emotional-social, logical-rational, and intuitive) must "sync" or work together. Not to mention the fact that the last intelligence (intuitive) only starting forming around age thirteen or fourteen and will not complete "coming fully online" until around age thirty.

The reason it takes this long is that the corresponding major brain systems (survival, emotional, thinking, and executive) are trying to "sync" and working together. So remember this when that young person looks at you with a blank stare after you offer services and then shrugs and says, "How is that supposed to help me?" **(see Appendix:  Brain System and Intelligences)**

If you read the Appendix and took a look at the brain systems, you can appreciate what's going on by thinking about how your smartphone has certain apps that need to sync with other apps.



You know those little notifications in which the new app "requests permission to access your contacts" and so forth? Well that's about synchronizing and working in unison for a higher level of functioning than if they worked separately. However, what if permission is denied?

Similarly, regarding a young person, what if guilt rather than initiative was formed? Then the syncing process is thrown a bit off track – meaning they would not be able to function optimally in dealing with challenges. That is what you are seeing at times in a young person's struggles. How do we deal with this? We will get there soon when we look at three broad approaches YES! utilizes to deal with this struggle. First, there is one more thing you need to know about why some young people struggle with transitioning into adulthood.

## Human Development Itself is Struggling to Keep Up

Some of those apps on your smartphone keep getting updates. Right? Sometimes an update actually corrects something that was not working or syncing properly, or it needs to sync up with a change in other apps or popular new apps.

Well, sometimes trust or autonomy needs an update. Trusting an employer is far different than trusting a parent. If this is the young person's first "real job," they need to learn all over again how to trust employers - that is just continuous growth. There is no such thing as perfect and finished development. We all have areas where more growth (or an "update") is needed.

Some areas need more growth than others. We all need to grow in various ways at various times. Some young people will need to do so in "small" ways and will have less difficult struggles. Others will need to do so in "big" ways and will have difficult and prolonged struggles. However, this does not mean the former young person "really has it together" while the latter "can't seem to their act together."

Not only that – and this is critically important – society is changing so rapidly now, especially the workplace and job market, that it's **difficult for human development itself to keep up with societal changes!**

In other words, the kind of initiative,[2] for example, that was sufficient in 1970 is now less capable of handling the transition challenges of 2020.[3] This means that getting help and additional supports is a smart thing to do.
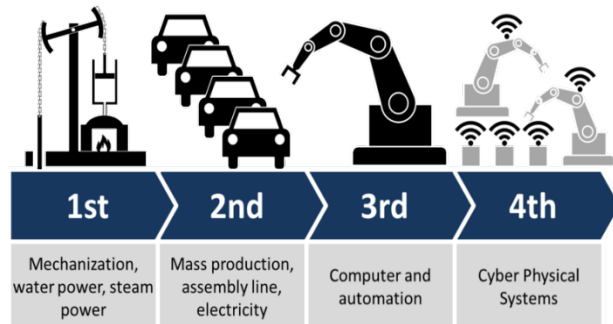


In this regard, work in the behavioral health field to lessen the stigma of mental health difficulties has been and continues to be important work. Likewise, the widely recognized importance of the role of peer supports in working with this population is quite timely. Which takes us to the approaches used by YES! to account for this normal developmental turbulence that is underway and do so in a manner that honors rather than stigmatizes the young person.
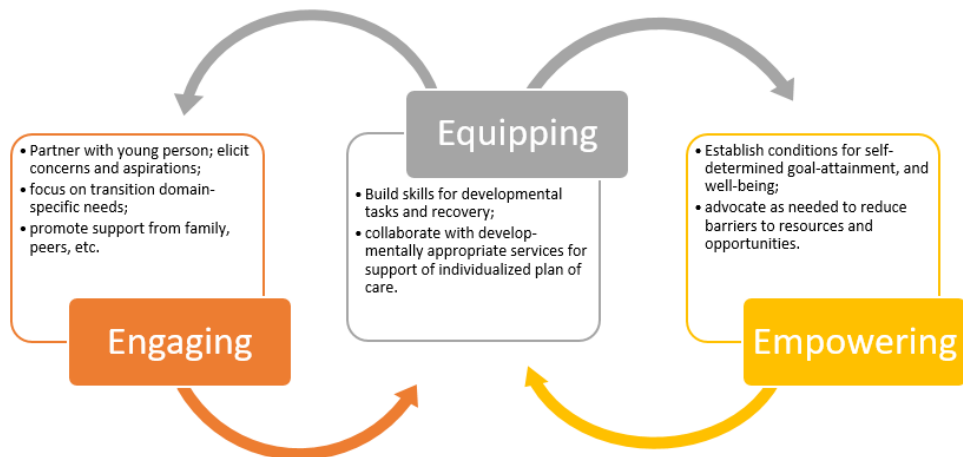
## YES! Approaches to Working with Young People: Engage, Equip & Empower

The YES! response to challenges is to Engage, Equip and Empower the young person. This process is used throughout the time that young people stay involved with YES!. Early discussions of crises/challenges almost always start with great emotionality, little capacity to break things down into manageable parts and even less hope. Engage, equip and empower does not focus simply on the detail of the challenge as the young person identifies it initially. Rather, YES! staff uses the "three Es" to:

- identify strategies to support the young person,
- figure out together what the next steps might be and
- identify what the young person is already "doing right."

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[2] Reed W. Larson, "Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development," *American Psychologist,* Vol. 55, No. 1, 2000

[3] Patricia K. Leebens & Edwin D. Willamson, "Developmental Psychopathology: Risk and Resilience in the Transition to Young Adulthood," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clin N Am,* Vol. 26, 2017; Jeffrey J. Arnett et al., "The New Life Stage of Emerging Adulthood at Ages 18-29 Years: Implications for Mental Health," *Lancet Psychiatry,* Vol. 1, 2014; J. E. Cote, "Emerging Adulthood as an Institutionalized Moratorium: Risks and Benefits to Identity Formation," in J. J. Arnett & J. L. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century,* 2006

- **Engaging**
  - Partner with young person; elicit concerns and aspirations;
  - focus on transition domain-specific needs;
  - promote support from family, peers, etc.

- **Equipping**
  - Build skills for developmental tasks and recovery;
  - collaborate with developmentally appropriate services for support of individualized plan of care.

- **Empowering**
  - Establish conditions for self-determined goal-attainment, and well-being;
  - advocate as needed to reduce barriers to resources and opportunities.

As shown in the diagram, a short description of each approach is given. Embedded in the descriptions are competencies known to be highly effective in working with young people.[4]

The approaches are shown in a linear progression strictly for simplicity of presentation. In real life, work with a human being is anything but linear and sequential. In other words, learning about the approaches is a linear process, while doing them is akin to a spiral in which the approaches are used repeatedly with increasing thoroughness and interaction as the duration of work with a young person increases.

For example, the partnering aspect of engagement becomes stronger and stronger, if the young person wishes to continue receiving support. There is no one size that fits all.

Obviously, the approaches are not to be viewed as a rigid set of "procedures." Rather, think of them as three "pouches," if you will, on your tool belt in which a variety of tools are put and "pulled out" to be used as needed based on the young person. And because they aren't fixed procedures, more and more tools can go in each bucket, or more and more ways to partner young people as part of engaging them, for example.

## How the Approaches Support Positive Development

The table below shows the approaches with their brief descriptions from the diagram above. But there's more! The previous section discussed developmental tasks. Well, when it comes to forming identity, the game gets more complex. Now **developmental meta-tasks** are necessary, which basically means the tasks necessary for directing one's own development and regulating one's own mental health. Just as the developmental tasks discussed in the previous section

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[4] Eileen Brennan et al., *Direct Service Core Competencies,"* Pathways Transition Training Collaborative, 2010; Claudia Sellmaier et al., "Development and Psychometric Testing of the Transition Service Provider Competency Scale," *Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research,* 2018

involved certain executive skills, so too the developmental meta-tasks require and **developmental meta-skills**. The twelve sets of practices presented later will include pointers on how they support these meta-tasks and meta-skills.

| Broad Approaches for Supporting Young People | Executive Meta-Skills Fostered and Supported |
|---|---|
| **Engage:**<br><br>▪ Partner with young person; elicit concerns and aspirations; focus on transition domain-specific needs; promote support from family, peers, etc.<br>▪ Supports developmental meta-tasks of self-exploration and self-discovery. | **Executive Attention:**<br><br>Ability to choose what one pays attention to and what one ignores; ability to concentrate. Important for awareness of self, setting goals, maintaining focus on goals. |
| **Equip:**<br><br>▪ Build skills for developmental tasks and recovery; collaborate with develop-mentally appropriate services for support of individualized plan of care.<br>▪ Supports developmental meta-task of self-efficacy (i.e., belief in ability to succeed and initiating action to do so). | **Planning and Task Setting:**<br><br>Ability to create a plan or roadmap to reach goals..<br><br>**Behavior Activation:**<br><br>Initiating new behaviors or higher level of existing behaviors.<br><br>**Behavior Control:**<br><br>Controlling reactions or responses not aligned with desired behaviors. |
| **Empower:**<br><br>▪ Establish conditions for self-determined goal-attainment, and well-being; advocate as needed to reduce barriers to resources and opportunities.<br>▪ Supports developmental meta-task of self-realization (i.e., steady progress toward becoming one's ideal self). | **Behavior Maintenance:**<br><br>Monitoring one's performance and making necessary adjustments and corrections. |

## Appendix: Brain System and Intelligences

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods during which neural development is concentrated in the prefrontal cortex or executive brain (see diagram below).
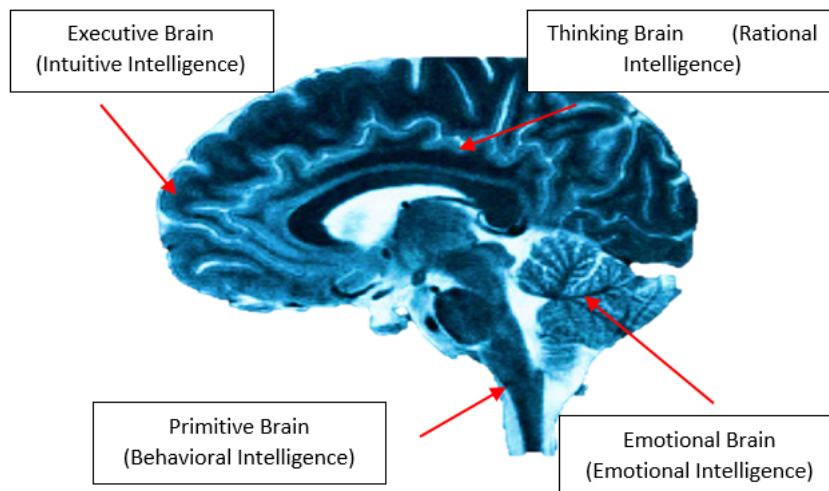


It is during this time that this neural system "comes online," so to speak, bringing with it extraordinary executive function powers to support equally extraordinary levels of human functioning, such as our higher intuitions and inspirations- artistic, philosophical or scientific, ethical imperatives and urges to humanitarian and heroic action (Assagioli, 1965).

Joseph Pearce (2009) explained that this neural system provides the neural pathways for our capacities of higher human virtue, compassion, love, understanding, empathy, as well as higher forms of creativity.

**Clearly, the Executive Brain with its powerful capacity for high levels of self-regulation through executive functions is perfectly suited for the three big developmental tasks discussed above!**

The distinctive feature of the Executive Brain (prefrontal cortex) neural system is its capacity to envision the future, set goals regarding it, and regulate behavior in pursuit and attainment of goals. These capacities are called executive functions of which forming identity, developing meaning and purpose, and defining one's career/work are three higher achievements.

In this regard, it is the last neural system to develop for a reason. That reason is that in order to carry out these high level executive functions, it has to rely on all the neural pathways and lower intelligences and knowledge of the other three neural systems.