**ICEEPSY 2024**
**15th International Conference on Education & Educational Psychology**

# THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ADOLESCENCE IN THE DIMENSION OF SOCIAL WORK

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## Abstract

To ensure more qualitative social services for youth, the offerings should meet the demand based not only on statistical data but also on the characteristics of youth itself, from the perspective of classical developmental psychology theory. As a result, social services will become more relevant and personally meaningful. Based on the transition from childhood to adult life in adolescence, the characterization of developmental psychology identifies the quality of social services provided to young people in one of the European Union countries. The structure of the article is based on answers to 2 research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of adolescence from the perspective of developmental psychology? (2) What defines the quality of social services for young people in one of the European Union countries? Empirical research on regulatory acts governing social services aimed at youth and their quality and organise an expert interview. Trends in socialization, various ideological currents, and the rapid digitalization processes significantly influence the classical characterization of adolescent developmental psychology. The lack of a unified approach to defining and evaluating the quality of social services for young people results in the episodic nature of the services offered. Moreover, the lack of inter-institutional collaboration impacts the prevention aspect of social work.

*Keywords:* Adolescence, developmental psychology, youth, social services, social work.

## 1. Characteristics of Adolescence and Youth in the Dimension of Cognitive Development Psychology

The definition of youth varies across different cultures, most referred to as adolescence, which is the stage between childhood and adulthood. There are also various classifications of the youth age group, as outlined in the prepared analytical review "Defining Youth in Contemporary National Legal and Policy Frameworks Across Europe" is mentioned that among the European Union member states, the majority (49%) define the youth age group in legislation and policy planning documents as individuals aged 15 to 29 years (Perovic, 2016). A similar age range is also defined in the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (European Union, 2018). Therefore, the authors of the article define the youth age group as the period of life from 15 to 29 years.

In a conditional manner, the youth age group can be marked as the transition from childhood to adulthood. This is a period in a young person's life where they move from dependence on parents to independence, autonomy, and maturity. The youth begin to transition from the family group, which is their primary social system, to becoming part of a peer group. This is a significant time of physical, social, and emotional changes, accompanied by developments in cognitive and language skills (Ciccia et al., 2018). The youth become self-sufficient, economically independent, strives to escape dependency on others, and takes responsibility for themselves and others. The emphasis is not so much on chronological age as on biological, social, and psychological age and corresponding behaviour (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). In this context, the youth's activity becomes relevant, manifesting as adequate self-awareness abilities of their "Ego" identity, to be able to realize themselves in three main areas of life: work, friendship, and marriage (Lantz & Ray, 2022).

To more accurately describe the cognitive development of the youth age group in response to the research question, it is necessary to distinguish age gradation. Therefore, the authors of the publication further divide the youth age group into adolescence (ages 13 to 18) and early adulthood (ages 18 to 25), during which individuals reach the peak of psychophysiological development and complete biological development (Kalvāns, 2018).

The cognitive development of adolescents is characterized by:

i. Identity development, the need for belonging, leadership, interest in the meaning of their activities, and attempts to answer questions of personal interest (Šteinberga, 2013).

ii. Communication problems with family and confrontation with the social environment, contradictions with adults, and a tendency to imitate the negative traits of adults. Disciplinary issues and hormonal changes affect brain function, influencing behaviour (Valtneris, 2001).

iii. Difficulties in controlling emotions, characteristic development of abstract thinking. Initially dependent on tangible stimuli, adolescents become capable of mentally manipulating abstract thoughts and ideas. They can act logically and systematically to solve problems and develop an independent understanding of moral and ethical issues (Sebre & Miltuze, 2022).

iv. Unstable sense of humour, tendency to take unnecessary risks, and self-centeredness. They experience significant disappointment, quickly lose motivation, and feel rejected. They have difficulty perceiving others' emotions and often misinterpret others' reactions (Montgomerija, 2023).

v. Stage of intellectual ability development, destructive behaviour patterns based on self-created realities and unrealistic fantasies about a better world. They are confident and persistent. Manifestations of neurosis, anxiety, and arrogance occur if the surrounding environment does not offer opportunities for self-realization (Svence, 1999).

vi. Attempts to understand what happens in the mind between stimulus and response, how the mind processes information, while behaviour control becomes internal (Geidžs & Berliners, 1999).

vii. Emphasizing their uniqueness, difference, the tendency to follow (copy) their authorities, typical conformism (Hernandez-Puga, 2022).

Early adulthood marks the beginning of the adult stage, starting at the age of 18 and continuing until 65. This is the longest developmental stage in a person's life, during which it is challenging to find specific guidelines for organizing various life processes. This stage is characterized by five features: (1) Ongoing search for identity; (2) Feeling of being in-between; (3) Instability; (4) Self-focus; (5) Various possibilities and optimism (Sebre & Miltuze, 2022).

The youth age group is viewed as a period of rapid change, characterized not only by swift physical changes but also by cognitive, social, emotional, and personal transformations (Spano, 2004). The identity of a young person, like that of any individual, is shaped by developmental processes that span from infancy to old age. This development can be divided into three main areas: physical development (changes in the body and organ systems), cognitive development (changes in cognitive processes), and socio-emotional development (changes in interpersonal aspects) (Miltuze, 2022).

In studying various developmental theories and characteristics, certain authors stand out. L. Vygotsky examines the periodization of age-related crises; Z. Freud considers the unconscious, saturated with sexual energy, as the main source of human behaviour; E. Erikson views personality development as the development of the human "self" or "EGO." Personality development theories vary, but each theory addresses specific patterns and developmental issues encountered during the youth age group.

L. Vygotsky, as the founder of sociocultural theory, believes that human development depends on social interaction (Veraksa & Sherida, 2018). Vygotsky developed several theories on how children develop and grow under the influence of cultural environments. One of these theories, which characterizes age stages, is the theory of crises. According to Vygotsky, personality development consists of several age stages, each involving various changes, and based on the dynamics of these changes, crisis periods are distinguished (Rieber, 1998). One such crisis is the 17-year-old crisis, where the causes of the crisis include future planning, career choice, and identity formation. Manifestations of this crisis include emotional tension, fear of mistakes, neurotic reactions, exacerbation of chronic illnesses, and maximalism (Kalvāns, 2018).

According to Z. Freud, the primary source of human behaviour is the subconscious, which is saturated with sexual energy. Consequently, the development of personality aspects in this theory is determined by sexual development. This development is driven by libido energy, which is the main feature of behavioural motives (Rennison, 2015). The most crucial aspect at this stage is the search for one's "self," and thus the main characteristics that may develop during this stage are identity or low self-esteem, and a sceptical attitude towards social norms (Kalvāns, 2018).

In his research, E. Erikson developed the theory of "Ego" psychology and, unlike other mentioned authors, was the first to indicate that personality development occurs throughout the entire lifespan (Reņģe,

2000). According to E. Erikson, comprehensive personality development progresses through specific psychosocial development stages, each marked by a particular crisis. Early adulthood is the stage where intimacy or isolation forms. Intimacy is the positive direction of this stage, characterized by the ability for genuine closeness, positive relationships with others, and a readiness to take on responsibility. In contrast, isolation and feelings of loneliness are observed when there is an inability to establish contacts with others, inferiority complexes, and self-restriction. Erikson explains this as an unresolved identity issue and an unclear sense of "self," which hinders the formation of close relationships with others and promotes the underdevelopment of moral consciousness (Kalvāns, 2018; Reņģe, 2000).

In early adulthood, an individual reaches the peak of their psychological and physical development. During this stage, the young person begins to perceive themselves as an independent and now fully grown individual, with a solidified identity and value system. This period can also be defined as early maturity, where ongoing changes are reflected in personality, social, and cultural aspects (Svence, 2003). G. Svence characterizes this age group as a period of continued psychosocial development, with pronounced needs for friendship and love, and a tendency for self-fulfilment in social environments, such as career and family (Svence, 1999). However, L. Pulkkinen believes that the main tasks of early adulthood include achieving autonomy from parents, choosing a career, forming relationships, independent work, and stability (Pulkkinen, 2017). L. Hendry and M. Kloep offer a different perspective, describing this period as a time of opportunities, where the young person has the whole world open to them and, without parental guardianship, can freely choose their path, experiment, and even postpone commitments (Hendry & Kloep, 2012). During this stage, young people typically exhibit increased intellectual activity, which manifests in academic work and professional orientation, and their character continues to stabilize (Kalvāns, 2018). Maximalism and critical attitudes, as well as a negative tendency towards the opinions of older people, are still characteristic (Šteinberga, 2013). The young person may also lack confidence in their identity (Specht, 2017). However, this period is also a time for making responsible decisions, choosing a lifestyle, and increasingly having to make independent choices, take responsibility, and solve problems (Svence, 2003). Such situations can cause stress and insecurity in young people, creating a need for support that helps them find their social identity, profession, career path, and life goals. These needs also indicate the necessity of youth work to ensure these needs are met.

## 2. Characterization of the Quality of Youth Social Services in European Union Member States (Examples from Latvia and Lithuania)

The quality of social services for young people in European Union (EU) countries is defined by a variety of factors. These services aim to promote well-being, social inclusion, and personal development. Key aspects that contribute to their quality include legal and policy framework, i.e., adherence to EU regulations (European Commission, 2022). Services must comply with EU regulations and directives that set standards for youth rights, social inclusion, and quality of life. National youth strategies i.e. each EU country usually has national youth policies aligned with EU frameworks, which ensure consistency in service delivery. These factors combine to shape the overall quality of social services for young people in the EU, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of youth populations:

i. *Accessibility of social services*: geographic accessibility: services should be easily reachable for all young people, including those in rural or remote areas; affordability: services should be free or affordable to ensure that socioeconomic status does not hinder access; inclusivity: services must be inclusive, ensuring equal access for all young people, regardless of gender, race, disability, or socio-economic background (Palm et al., 2021).

ii. *Relevance of social services to youth needs*. Social services must be tailored to address the specific needs of young people, such as: mental health support because youth mental health is a priority, so services like counselling and therapy should be readily available; education and employment what are services that help young people transition from school to work, including vocational training, internships, and employment counselling; housing and homelessness support because some youth may need support with housing or face homelessness, making this a critical aspect; and youth participation which means that services should promote youth participation in decisions that affect their lives, fostering empowerment and social inclusion (Nortvedt et al., 2022).

iii. *Quality of social services of youth*: services should be delivered by trained and competent professionals, such as social workers, counsellors, and educators who are equipped to meet the needs of young people; effective services are holistic, addressing multiple dimensions of a young person's life, including health, education, social, and emotional well-being; services should be grounded in research and best practices, ensuring they are effective in promoting youth development (Jørgensen et al., 2023; Saia et al., 2020; Swerts et al., 2023). It is also related to monitoring and evaluation quality of social services for young people, i.e. performance monitoring: regular assessment of service outcomes and quality through surveys, feedback mechanisms, and audits helps ensure continuous improvement. Feedback systems: youth should have mechanisms to provide feedback and report on their experiences with services, which can be used to adjust and improve offerings (Coulton, 1986).

iv. *Coordination between social services for youth*: collaboration between different service providers (education, healthcare, employment agencies) ensures that young people can receive comprehensive and integrated support (inter-agency cooperation); partnerships between public, private, and non-profit sectors enhance service delivery and offer a broader range of opportunities for young people (cross-sectoral partnerships) (Mack et al., 2017).

v. *Social services for youth empowerment and participation*: youth should be actively involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services. Empowering youth participation increases the relevance of services and promotes accountability. Providing avenues for youth to engage in decision-making, policy development, and community action strengthens their role in society – civic engagement opportunities (Franzen et al., 2009).

vi. *Sustainability and funding of social services for young people*: reliable, long-term funding is essential for maintaining high-quality services (stable funding) and innovative funding models: public-private partnerships and EU-funded initiatives can provide additional resources for youth services (Oinonen & Paloniemi, 2023).

Determining the quality of social services is a complex process based on knowledge and practices that have been validated in practice. Currently, the evaluation of service quality in Latvia, based on the

Ministry of Welfare's report "Self-Assessment Methodology for Social Service Providers" (Labklājības Ministrija, 2022), is episodic in nature, lacking established and implemented quality assessment systems. This process is, of course, time-consuming and resource-intensive. Service quality is often perceived as client satisfaction with the service, but when evaluating the quality of social services, it is important to note that the main client groups include – adults with mental and behavioural disorders; individuals with visual impairments; orphans and children without parental care, as well as children with mental and behavioural disorders. These recipients of social services are clients (individuals) with their own cultural environment, financial security, education, traditions, and health status. They are among the most sensitive social groups in society. Additionally, it should be noted that there is a lack of a unified national monitoring system to evaluate social services intended for youth.

## 2.1. Result of Empirical Research

The empirical study aims to gain insights into the experience of the Republic of Lithuania in providing social services to youth. Description of the data collection phase: Interviews were conducted from August 10, 2024, to August 30, 2024. Sampling: The study employed purposive sampling of respondents relevant to the research question.

Research method: Semi-structured interview. The sample size for this method is limited. The chosen method was used to provide additional insight and enrich the information on the research problem. Sample size: Four respondents from the Republic of Lithuania: a social worker working with youth, the head of the Social Work Department at a Lithuanian university, an associate professor at a Lithuanian university, and the director of a Youth Support Center.

The analysis of the obtained data was carried out based on the respondents' knowledge, the analysis of the meanings of their statements, and their experience regarding the research question.

The research questions aimed to obtain answers to the following:

i. What social services are available to youth in Lithuania?
ii. What determines the offered social services for youth, or what is the basis of the offer?
iii. To what extent are social services for youth in demand?
iv. How do the youth themselves evaluate the offered services?
v. What characterizes the quality of youth social services in Lithuania?

During the data analysis, the experts' opinions are presented anonymously and in a summarized form, highlighting the most relevant aspects. The research data show a unified understanding and perspective on the research question from both social work educators and social work professionals in providing social services to youth.

Summarizing the responses to the interview questions, the key insights are as follows:

i. The following services are available to youth: information on social services for youth, consultations (for youth and their family members if needed), mobile and street work with youth, day centres, open youth centres, specialized social care homes, and group apartments for youth. In crisis situations, services are provided immediately. Social services are funded by both the state and municipalities, and service provision is carried out by the state, municipalities, and non-governmental organizations.

ii. The offered social services for youth are determined by the needs of the youth; social services for youth and youth with limited opportunities are determined by the order of the Minister of Social Security and Labor of the Republic of Lithuania "On the Approval of the Social Services Catalogue" (2006) and the 2013 regulation "On the Approval of Youth Workers' Activities" (2013).

iii. The following insights are highlighted in the responses to the third and fourth questions: (a) Social services for youth are in demand; (b) Youth highly value the activities of social workers, such as establishing and maintaining contact, identifying and assessing needs, non-judgmental attitudes, and providing individualized services according to the service plan tailored to the youth's individual needs; (c) Research conducted by students of the university's social work centre confirms the effectiveness and necessity of social services for youth, emphasizing the need for services in the following cases: solving problems arising in the immediate environment of the youth; problems in the educational environment; addiction problems; employment problems, etc.

iv. Summarizing the responses to the fifth interview question - What characterizes the quality of youth social services in Lithuania? - we can conclude that they are primarily defined by the requirements included in regulatory acts. The quality of social services in the Republic of Lithuania is characterized by the European Quality in Social Services (EQUASS) system and the Social Services Standard of non-governmental organizations (NOKAS), which further confirms the cooperation between the state, municipalities, and non-governmental organizations in providing social services to youth. The respondents' emphasis on the services included in the Social Services Catalogue for youth, which compiles social services for youth, is positively evaluated.

## 3. Conclusions

The adolescent stage is defined in various ways, but since the 20th century, scientific research has analysed it as a time of physical, emotional, and social changes, which play a crucial role in the development of an individual's personality. Human development occurs throughout the entire lifespan, but it is during adolescence that the most important personality traits and behavioural norms are formed and stabilized. The foundation of every individual's development lies in their needs, and the satisfaction of these needs directly influences the process of personality development. While there are needs common to all stages of human life, adolescence is characterized by specific needs that must be considered when working with youth, thereby promoting the most successful development of the adolescent's personality.

Adolescence and youth are significant periods in a person's life, marked by a relatively short transition from childhood to adulthood. With the onset of puberty, adolescents and their families often encounter age-specific issues, which most commonly manifest as behavioural or emotional disorders, substance use, rule-breaking, or aggression.

Understanding the stages of youth development (cognitive and metacognitive processes determine the level of personality maturity and readiness for independent and adult life) is essential for promoting their integration into society. This understanding can help create appropriate forms of social support and

resource provision to ensure the involvement and development of all youth according to their individual needs.

All stages of adolescence are characterized by the search for and stabilization of identity. However, the age group of 13-15 years is more characterized by the need for belonging, the age group of 16-18 years by the need for self-determination, and the age group of 19-25 years by the need for social identity and stability. The needs characteristic of adolescents overlaps across age groups, as human development is directly influenced by the circumstances in which they find themselves. The upbringing, education, and surrounding society significantly influence the peculiarities and personality development of a young person. Therefore, the way youth work is conducted will determine the future society and environment.

As young people grow, they encounter many changes, both physically and emotionally. During this period, it is important for them to have a support person who can help them when needed. The helper must consider and utilize this. For example, by evaluating past achievements, they can provide feedback and highlight completed tasks and successes, as well as offer new directions through practice or training that would bring joy and satisfaction to the young person, helping them out of a crisis. Social workers and other professionals working with youth must remember that young people experience various crises and emotions very similar to adults. However, they have their own understanding and experience these emotions differently, often more intensely than adults.

In resolving crisis situations, it is crucial to gain the trust and confidence of young people in the helper. Young people need to feel that the helper cares about their fate and is genuine in their intentions. A crisis can create insecurity and a lack of confidence in their abilities, so the helper must strive to restore and ensure young people's belief in their own strengths and self-confidence to overcome problems. A very important aspect of resolving crisis situations is motivating young people not to remain in the current problematic environment but to look for new opportunities and move forward. This can also be achieved through encouragement, such as expressing recognition and praise when applicable, for example, in the workplace. Expressing gratitude and recognition stimulates young people not to remain in a crisis.

In the field of social services, service quality is characterized by a system of complex and interacting indicators, which include a focus on the client, staff collaboration within institutions providing social services, and the cooperation of these institutions. It also involves the clarity and autonomy of the goals of the institutions' management and staff, a results-oriented approach, an analytical approach to data and facts, and accountability to society.

In Latvia, access to social services is limited, as they are mainly intended for separate (individual) groups, i.e., persons with special needs or those at risk of social exclusion. Institutions providing social services in Latvia need to implement quality management systems to improve the organization of the institution's work, the quality of life of clients, and enhance the professionals' ability to systematically organize and evaluate processes within the institution by studying, analysing, and documenting ongoing activities

The quality of social services in the Republics of Lithuania and Latvia is determined by both European Union and national-level legislation, which stipulates the requirements for social service providers and defines the competencies and responsibilities of the parties involved in the provision of social services (state, municipalities, and non-governmental organizations). However, there has been no inter-institutional audit of functions and the compliance of the offered services with the prerequisites for the

cognitive development of youth. Consequently, given the broad age range of youth, there is a possibility that some young people do not utilize or have access to the offered social services.

The provision of social services for youth, based on the characteristics, needs, and interests typical of their age group, can reduce the risks of social exclusion and mitigate socio-economic problems. This would help various young people integrate more successfully into society, becoming economically active citizens who contribute individually to the country's future growth.

The analysis of Lithuania's experience confirms that social services for youth are in high demand, resulting in the development of a catalogue (*basket*) of social services that describes specific social services based on the needs of youth. However, in both Latvia and Lithuania, social services for youth are fragmented due to a pronounced lack of funding. In other words, the demand exceeds the available supply.

## Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request.

## Declaration of Conflicts Interests

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

## Ethical Statement

Our institution does not require ethics approval for reporting individual cases or case series.

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