

ANNEX B: MATURATION AND YOUNG ADULTS

QUICK REFERENCE: YOUNG ADULTS' NEUROLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

- There is an irrefutable body of evidence from behavioural neuroscience that young adults (males in particular) are still developing neurologically up to the age of 25 and probably beyond.
- The control centre of the brain (prefrontal cortex) which governs prosocial behaviour and successful goal planning and achievement only reaches full biological maturity at 25 years or older. The last region of the brain to develop is that responsible for executive function.
- As a result, young adults may not have fully developed the cognitive abilities which are necessary for prosocial behaviour, successful goal planning and achievement. They are likely to have less developed cognitive abilities, including poor impulse control (thinking before acting) and challenges in evaluating risks, dealing with unanticipated events, and adapting to changing circumstances.
- This, coupled with increased motivation to achieve rewards which develops in adolescence and young adulthood, exacerbates underlying mechanisms contributing to poor problem solving, inadequate information processing, inferior decision-making and risk-taking behaviours. This impacts adversely on the understanding of complex social situations.
- These features also relate to criminal behaviour and have implications for the appropriate treatment of young adults in the criminal justice system as they are more challenging to manage, are harder to engage, and tend to provide poorer outcomes.
- In this period of development, the brain continues to 'prune' unnecessary synaptic connections and continues to rewire itself. This plasticity means that it is a particularly good time to promote the development of positive neural connections through providing opportunities for learning, personal growth and the development of pro-social identity.
- Interventions that do not adequately recognise young adults' levels of maturity can slow desistance and extend the period of involvement in the system. Dealing effectively with young adults while the brain is still developing is crucial in making successful transitions to a crime-free adulthood. Getting it right can result in reduced violence in custody and lower crime in the community after release.
- Typical maturation processes may be hindered or compromised by several factors including traumatic brain injury, alcohol and substance use, psychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These are outlined in this section and at Annex G.

- Rates of learning disability, communication impairment and problems relating to the autistic spectrum disorder are ten times as high as they are among young people in the general population. There is also a high level of acquired brain injury [see Annex G]. According to estimates by the Centre for Mental Health, this increases the likelihood of committing crime by 50%. Atypical brain development can significantly hinder or delay maturity.

This summary shows how the maturation process and neurological development are intimately connected.

“Natural” or normal developmental maturation is always a factor to be considered when assessing the abilities, thinking, attitudes, personalities and behaviour of young people. Because of their ages, children and young adults’ maturity depends directly on the development of neurological processes and cognitive abilities.

However, some experiences, impairments and injuries arising in childhood and young adulthood can harm or limit expected modes of development. Adverse childhood experiences and neurological disabilities (including innate cognitive impairments and acquired brain injuries) have a direct adverse effect on development and hence the maturation process. [Annex G features information about brain injury.] This can lead to displays of antisocial and criminal behaviour.

On the other hand, because children and young adults are at an age when brain processes are still changing and emerging, it is possible at this stage to repair some limitations from previous developmental impediments and traumas.

Maturity

Low psychosocial maturity is a feature of youth criminality, while developed psychosocial maturity is associated with desistance from crime. Maturity is the ability to properly manage oneself and relationships with other people. Its three aspects are:

- temperance - the ability to hold back, to temper one’s impulses and emotions: thinking before acting and being able to control feelings and behaviour through impulse control and suppression of aggression
- responsibility - the ability to take responsibility for one’s actions and one’s future: having a sense of identity and independence and resisting peer influence
- perspective - the ability to take into account the bigger picture when making decisions: being able to consider situations from different viewpoints and in a wider context of future orientation with consideration for others.

Processes of maturation depend on interactions between physical, intellectual, neurological, emotional and social development. Although most physical development is generally completed during adolescence, for many people emotional and social maturation continues through the early to mid-twenties in harness with neurological changes. Young adults differ greatly from one another in psychosocial maturity and this shows as variation in the ways they manage the multiple facets of the transition.

Brain differences make young adults a distinct group. Young adult offenders typically have less self-control, empathy for pain, perspective taking, and emotional management. They can be more tempted by reward and less concerned about punishment, can be attracted to risk taking and thrill seeking, and can be poorer at recognising emotions in other people.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

As well as neurological and other physiological developments (with or without innate impairments and brain traumas), rate and level of maturity is influenced by life experiences and other individual characteristics. Some life occurrences can be positive and experienced as constructive while others can be negative in the short- or long-term.

In particular, maturation can be harmed or hindered by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Given the complexity of child and adolescent development, significant incidents or periods of abuse and neglect or other traumatic experiences can impact the brain's functioning with concomitant damage to identity, reasoning, emotional and other psychological processes.

The Centre for Disease Control & Prevention conducted a large-scale study into ACEs which demonstrated the consequences for subsequent violence, victimisation, and deficiencies in lifelong health and opportunities.¹

The most common ACEs can be characterised as verbal, physical or sexual abuse and as emotional or physical neglect. None of these categories need be mutually exclusive. Adverse experiences can also be compounded or triggered by parental separation, mental illness, domestic abuse, and drug and alcohol abuse in the home. Incarceration for a child or young adult can be classed an ACE.

A survey of Welsh prisoners showed over eight out of ten individuals had suffered at least one ACE and half had experienced four or more. Of the latter group, men were four times more likely to have served sentences in YOIs when compared to those with no previous ACEs.²

Children with histories of trauma and ACEs may find it more difficult to form attachments to others, including those trying to assist them. What has happened to them may be reflected over a sustained period in their behaviour and how they function generally in life.

¹ [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/cebs/)

² <https://phw.nhs.wales/files/aces/the-prisoner-ace-survey/>

There is an increased focus on making custodial environments more trauma-informed with increased acknowledgement in assessments and interventions of the impact of ACEs.

Maturity and offending

In terms of offending, not only does this age-group demonstrate high levels of recidivism but it is also at a stage when many individuals naturally stop offending. Late teenage years are the peak age for offending, but also the time when a young adult is most likely to desist from crime. Young adulthood is a crucial opportunity for criminal justice agencies to apply the right interventions.

As part of a national strategy recommended by HM Inspectorate of Prisons³, young adults' needs and maturity should be assessed on entering custody and this cohort should have access to education, skills and work provision. YOIs holding young adults should focus on building positive, trusting relationships between staff and young adults to improve behaviour management. HM Inspectorate also recommended that outcomes for young adult offenders from BAME backgrounds should be monitored and action taken to prevent discrimination.

Young adults may have developed skills and capacities associated with maturity in some areas of their lives more readily than in others. By understanding how level of maturity has affected a young adult's offending behaviour, services can respond more appropriately in helping to deal with the detrimental impact of life experiences or ACEs and can support the development of resilient personal and social resource. To do so effectively, the design and delivery of services must be tailored to the individual and must engage the young adult in order to help reduce misconduct, breach and reconviction rates.

Annex H of this guidance sets assessment and interventions with young adults firmly in the context of maturation and highlights approaches which have been developed to screen for and respond to individuals in this cohort where maturity is a key factor.

Points for consideration

The following themes, which bear on maturation, are relevant to the success of the support and interventions provided to young adults.

They are also issues that panels might bear in mind when making assessments and when conducting hearings, especially for children and young adults.

³ [A short thematic report by HM Inspectorate of Prisons: Outcomes for young adults in custody: A thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons January 2021 \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/short-report-young-adults-custody/)

Thinking and behaviour

How does the young adult tend to respond to situations? Is this typically in a controlled manner or characterised by impulsivity, deficient temper control, inadequate problem solving or poor consequential thinking?

Are there patterns of thinking and behaviour which suggest consistency or inconsistency, and which show evidence of thinking and less impulsivity on some but not other types of occasion?

For individuals at the higher end of the age range, are patterns of thinking and behaviour due to a lack of maturity or have they become habits that have become embedded because of earlier trauma, context or reinforcement? Has this young adult become used to behaving in particular ways, perhaps despite developing higher levels of maturity?

Have types of support or intervention been provided which help the young adult understand their own identity and to form expectations about the sort of identity they want as an adult?

Attitudes

What sort of attitudes does this young adult hold? Are they prosocial or pro-criminal and negative in terms of the community? What is the history of compliance with rules, requirements and regulations?

Are presenting attitudes evidence of previous trauma or of a lack of maturity? Are they rooted in an underdeveloped and pro-criminal social context or is poor compliance suggestive of impulsivity?

Have there been times when this individual has complied or responded positively to services provided? Are positive attitudes expressed concerning specific people or agencies? Do these suggest aspects of a developing maturity?

Lifestyle and associates

Has significant time been spent with pro-criminal individuals or social groupings? Was impulsivity evident in responses to the influence of other people, including antisocial associates?

Is impulsivity evidenced through engagement in thrill-seeking or risk-taking activities? If so, does this indicate immaturity of judgement or is it due to social context and the influence of people the young adult spends time with?

Does the young adult tend to play a leading role in the social group? Is there evidence of planned and purposeful offending which (though antisocial) may suggest increasingly mature functioning?

Emotions and identity

Does this young adult display poor emotional self-management and negative self-identity? Do feelings and thinking appear to be in conflict? Do they describe themselves in positive or negative terms?

Is poor emotional management and a failure to successfully integrate emotional and cognitive functioning indicative of immaturity, earlier trauma, or neurological disability and injury? How does maturity affect attitude to self and vice versa?

In responding to challenging situations in life, has the young adult shown an ability to recognise, stop and think about and then manage difficult feelings? How effectively have they fallen back on coping strategies in difficult emotional situations?

In what circumstances has the individual demonstrated capacity to resist the impulse to react negatively and to show control? Is this an indication of developing maturity that could be supported and developed further through training or supervision?

Finances

How has this person managed finances? Is lack of maturity evidenced by having accrued large debts or demonstrated by impulsivity in money management (spending income as soon as it is obtained)?

Relationships

Has this individual been subjected to damaging or poor relationships? Have intimate relationships changed regularly? Are they dealing with any additional difficulties?

Have relationships been affected by poor emotional regulation and impulse control? If so, are harmful relationships indicative of lack of maturity? Is it the other way round and difficulties in relationships are impacting the young adult's opportunities to develop maturity?

Has this person had opportunity to successfully establish a stable and healthy personal relationship? Have difficulties been experienced in previous relationships but are now successfully dealt with them, indicating increasing maturity?

Education

What kind of decisions is the young adult making about education and training? Has there been engagement in education or the world of work? Has inconsistent engagement affected this young adult's outlook, identity and development?

Has there been disengagement from education, training or employment for a significant period of time? If so, does this suggest lack of planning or emotional and impulsive decision-making about training and employment which suggests immaturity?

Is this person engaging in planned approaches in order to access training or employment? Does the young adult have *any degree* of learning difficulty which must be separated from considerations about maturity in judgement and decision-making?

Does failure to engage in planned approaches to finding and maintaining employment indicate lack of maturity or some fundamental impairment?