

The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth
Lay-Friendly Key Messages

Lay Friendly Report Overview/Introduction to the Report:

Over the past several decades, research has fundamentally changed our understanding of how adolescents—young people ages 10 to 25—develop, grow, and learn. Changes in brain structure and function (such as the strengthening of connections within and between brain regions and the pruning away of unused connections) that occur during adolescence affords young people a remarkable capacity to learn, adapt to changes, and explore their own creativity. Adolescent brains are *specially tailored* to meet the needs of this stage of life, allowing them to explore new environments and build new relationships with the world and people around them.

But what does our new understanding mean for society? How can we create the kinds of settings and supports that allow adolescents to thrive and make meaningful contributions to the world around them?

A positive pathway into a thriving adulthood is not forged by adolescents alone. Instead, it requires alignment between the strengths of adolescents, like their increased independence, flexible problem solving skills, and openness to new experiences, with resources available in their environments, including where one lives, what one eats, and one's social interactions and relationships with peers and adults.

There is an urgent need to reimagine and redesign the systems and settings that adolescents most frequently encounter, including the education, health, justice, and child welfare systems. By embracing a collective responsibility to build systems—like education and health care—that account for the new knowledge we have acquired, we can ensure that millions of young people flourish and can impact society for the better.

Key Messages

1. Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty (around age 10) and ends during the mid-20s (age 25). Unique changes in brain structure (such as the strengthening of connections within and between brain regions) and function (such as the limbic system region's increased sensitivity to rewards, threats, novelty, and peers), make adolescence an exciting and important time for growth, learning, and discovery.
2. Adolescence is a time for development and learning and provides opportunities for life-long impact. Adolescent brains are specially tailored to meet the needs of this stage of life and to prepare young people to meet exciting new challenges, like building new relationships and exploring new environments, such as joining a club or entering college. By exploring new environments and developing new social relationships with peers and adults outside the family, adolescents build skills and relationships that are central to a successful adulthood.

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3. During adolescence, young people learn how to make decisions and take responsibility for shaping one's life. While parents and other responsible adults must respect the emerging autonomy and agency of adolescents, they must also provide guidance and support to make this growth possible.
 4. Forming personal identity and a sense of self is a hallmark of adolescence. As young people grow, they often ask themselves, "Who am I? What do I care about?" Adolescents' race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, and more shape their answers to these questions.. To help young people feel comfortable with themselves, youth-serving systems and organizations must be culturally sensitive and attuned to the diverse needs of the young people they serve, especially given the increasing diversity of U.S. adolescents.
 5. Supportive relationships with adults (such as teachers, parents, and mentors) are critical for fostering positive outcomes for adolescents. Supportive and nurturing adult relationships, including those outside the traditional family unit, are just as important for adolescents as they are for young children.
 6. The adolescent brain has an exceptional capacity for resilience, meaning adolescents have the opportunity to develop neurobiological adaptations and behaviors that leave them better equipped to handle adversities. Because of this capacity for resilience, adolescence presents a pivotal opportunity to address the harmful effects of negative early life experiences such as economic hardship and housing and food insecurity. By intervening during adolescence, we can improve young people's overall well-being and help them lead meaningful, healthy, and successful lives.
 7. Disparities in family and neighborhood resources and supports, biased and discriminatory interactions with important social systems, and resulting inequalities in opportunity and access severely curtail the promise of adolescence for many youth. For example, some young people have access to high-quality education and supportive social networks while others have neither. Some young people face discrimination while others do not. These differences can significantly hinder an adolescent's ability to thrive. Our collective prosperity depends on equal opportunity for all young people.
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Overview of Part II:

Given our new understanding of how adolescents develop and learn, Americans must rethink and modernize the systems in which adolescents most often interact: Education, health, child welfare, and justice systems.

8. The U.S. education system was largely designed for an earlier era. Schools must broaden their missions to meet the needs of modern adolescents. This will require schools to become

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more culturally competent (meaning understanding differences in background and building on adolescents' varying strengths), to emphasize non-academic skill building (like developing strong interpersonal skills), and to help young people navigate numerous educational and career opportunities.

9. Access to appropriate health care services is important for adolescents, both to ensure their well-being today, as they experience the bumps and stresses of adolescent life, and to ensure their well-being for a lifetime by addressing behaviors that affect their long-term health. The U.S. health care system can better support adolescents by helping them navigate the health care system independently and by providing services that are culturally-informed and attentive to their needs. Significant work is needed to develop a health care workforce that can help adolescents feel safe and welcomed.
10. Relative to young children, adolescents have advanced decision-making skills and can more effectively seek solutions that are right for them. Therefore, adolescents in the child welfare systems need services and supports that differ from young children and that allow them to be partners in decisions that affect their housing, health, mental health, and education.
11. Because adolescent brains are still developing, the juvenile and criminal justice systems need to enact policies and practices that reflect our understanding of brain development and adolescents' potential responsiveness to preventive interventions.
12. The new knowledge we have gained through research on adolescent development presents an unprecedented opportunity for our society to reimagine and redesign the systems and policies that support adolescents.
13. Adolescence is a period of great opportunity to promote learning and discovery and to address the harmful effects of past negative experiences. Our society has a collective responsibility to build systems and enact policies that help adolescents thrive and take advantage of the great promise of this stage of life. These systems should account for the new knowledge we have acquired through research. By embracing this collective responsibility, we can ensure that millions of young people flourish and impact society for the better.