



THE PROMISE OF ADOLESCENCE: REALIZING OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL YOUTH

A consensus study report from *The National Academies of* SCIENCES
ENGINEERING
MEDICINE

The Child Welfare System

nationalacademies.org/AdolescentDevelopment

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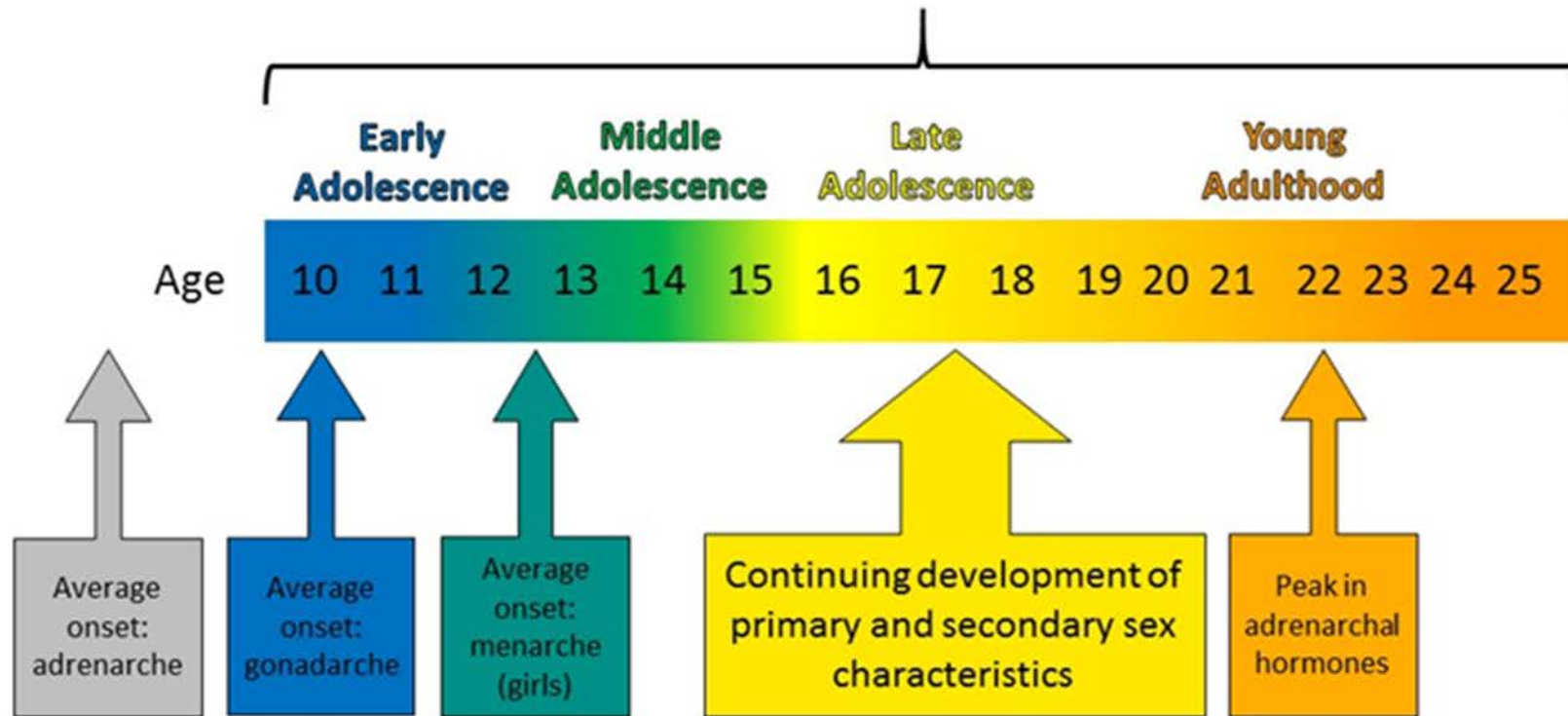
Statement of Task

The study sponsors asked the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to provide an evidence-based report that:

- Examines the neurobiological and socio-behavioral science of adolescent development, and
- Explores how this knowledge can be applied to institutions and systems so that adolescent well-being, resilience, and development are promoted and that systems address structural barriers and inequalities in opportunity and access.

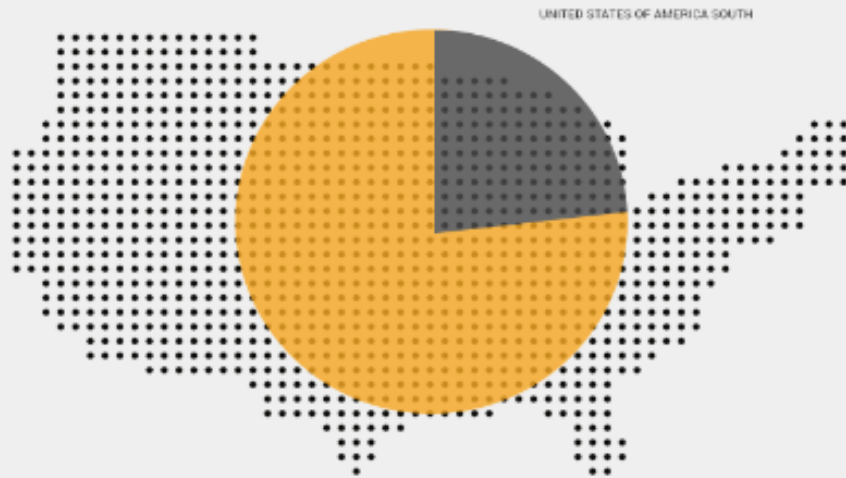


Developmental Periods of Adolescence



2017

There were approximately 73.5 million adolescents ages 10 to 25 in 2017, representing 22.6 percent of the U.S. population.



2020

The adolescent population is expected to become majority-minority by 2020.



Relative to young children, adolescents have **advanced decision-making skills** and can better seek solutions that are **right for them.**

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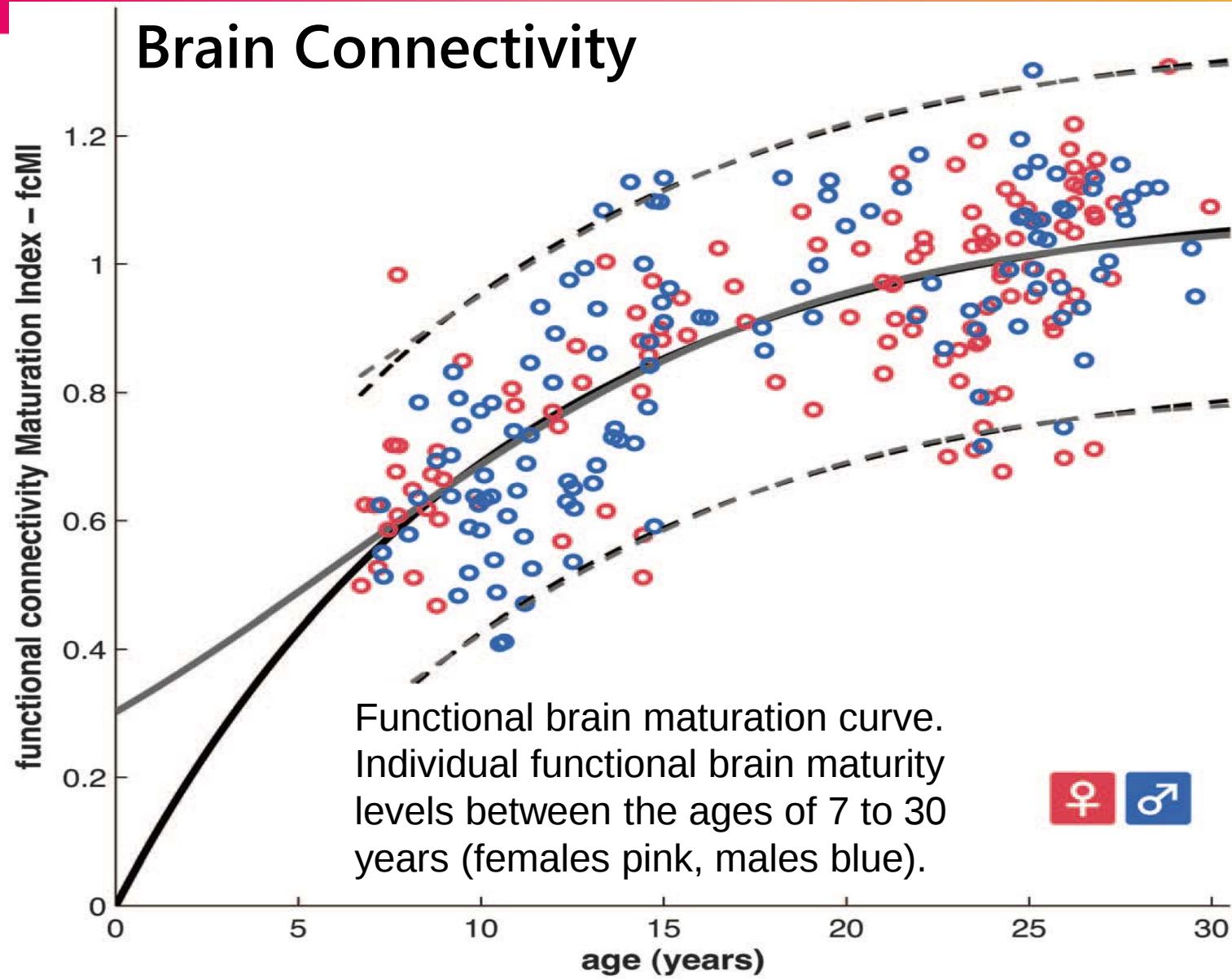
Adolescent Development: Socio-Behavioral Context

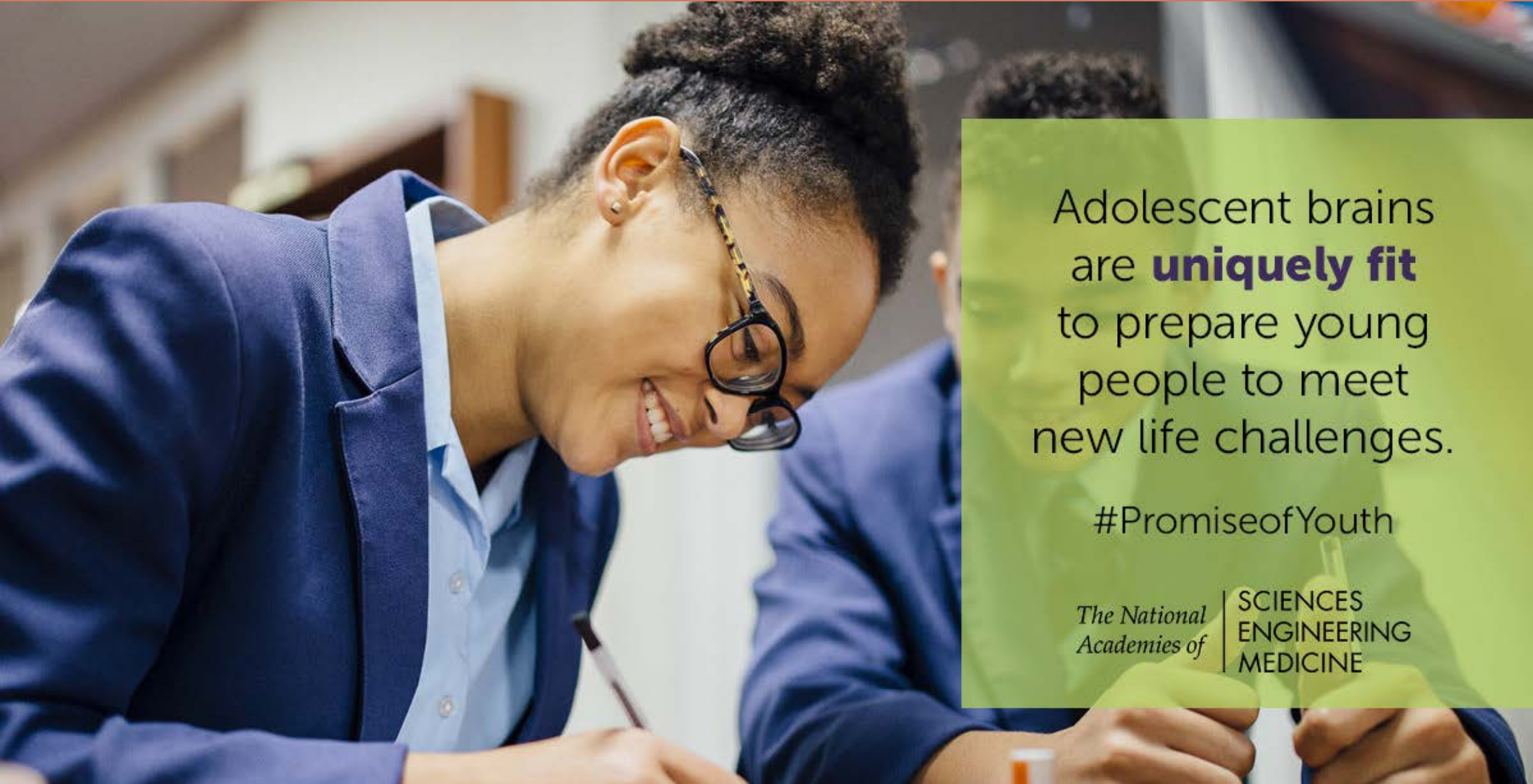
- Identity development
- Developing new social relationships with peers and adults outside the family
- Attunement to one's social status
- Growing capacity for self-direction

Adolescent Development: Neurobiological Context

- Adolescent brain development and brain connectivity
- Heightened curiosity and reward sensitivity
- Increased cognitive abilities, logical thinking, problem-solving
- The interface of neurobiological development and the social context are critical

Brain Connectivity





Adolescent brains
are **uniquely fit**
to prepare young
people to meet
new life challenges.

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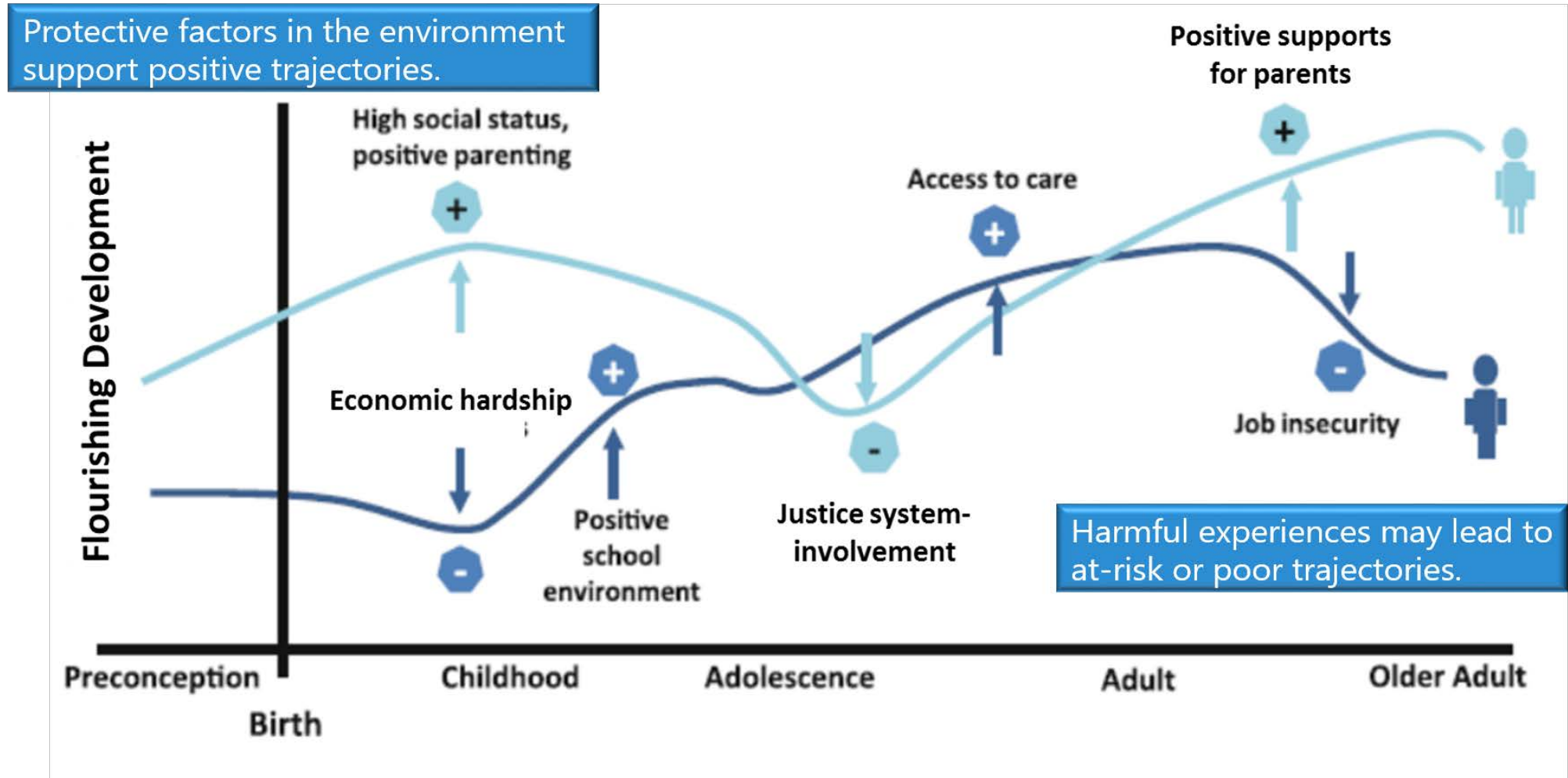
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Epigenetics: Environmental Influences that Shape Adolescent Development





**Adolescence is a period
of great opportunity**
to promote learning and
discovery and to address
the harmful effects of past
negative experiences.

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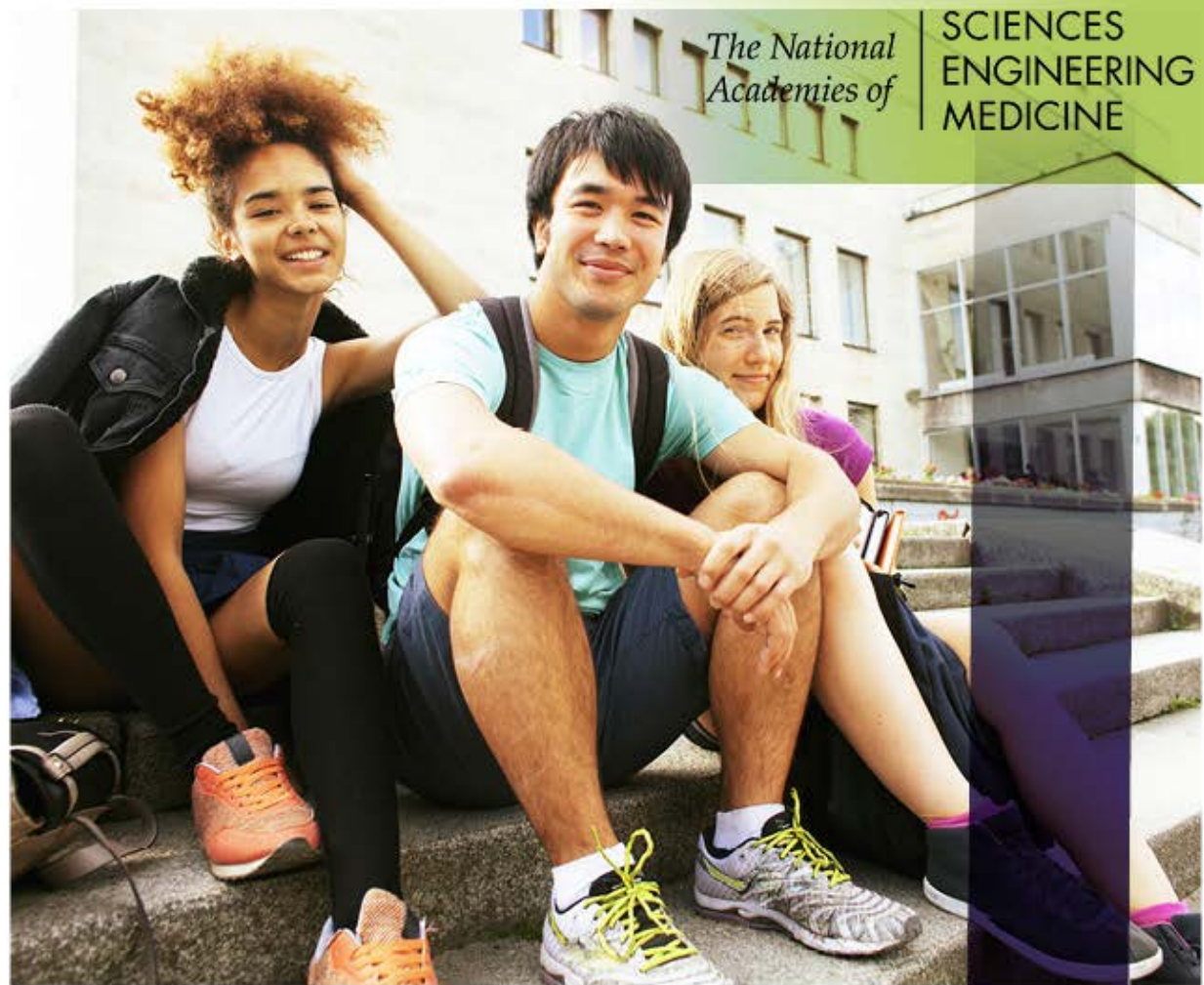
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It's time to **reimagine and redesign the systems** and settings that adolescents most frequently encounter.

Together, we can ensure that millions of young people can impact society for the better.

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Child Welfare System

- Historically, the U.S. child welfare system has focused on young children. This approach is ill-suited to help adolescents in the child welfare system flourish, given their more advanced decision-making skills and their need for a balance of autonomy and healthy relationships, compared to younger children.

Child Welfare System

- Over the past two decades, Congress has gradually enacted statutory changes that better align the child welfare system with the developmental assets and challenges adolescents face, including focusing attention on family reunification, prioritizing placement with relatives over strangers, and providing services for adolescents aging out of foster care.

Child Welfare System

- These are significant advances, but additional efforts – particularly broader uptake at the state level of the optional components of recent federal laws – are needed to ensure that all adolescents involved with the child welfare system have the opportunity to flourish.

Youth Perspectives – Permanency Planning

Key Issues

- “Meetings were scheduled without our consideration.”
- “There were a lot of meetings, and we sometimes had to miss school to attend.”
- “The meeting’s purpose wasn’t always clearly explained to us.”
- “No prep from our team before the meetings, so we couldn’t meaningfully participate.”
- “Transportation wasn’t reliable or available for us to get to the meetings.”
- “The meeting outcomes didn’t reflect what we want or need.”
- “We did not know who would attend, and this affected our willingness to participate.”

Youth Perspectives – Supportive Adults

Key Issues

- “We lost connections with supportive adults who were in our lives before care.”
- “Constantly moving placements caused us to lose contact or limited our ability to build lasting relationships.”
- “We struggled to build and maintain connections with supportive adults due to mistrusting others because of our experiences.”
- “We didn’t get the emotional or logistical support to connect to supportive adults.”
- “We didn’t always know who the supportive adults were in our lives or how they could help us. ”
- “We aged out of care without any supportive adult connections.”
- “When we had help building and maintaining connections with supportive adults, it helped us grow and created opportunities for us.”

Child Welfare Policy in Action

- The federal Fostering Connections Act of 2008 gave states the option to extend the age limit of foster care to 21 years old
- Study of 21,964 California youths in care after age 17 (Okpych et al., 2019)
- **What they found:**
 - For child-welfare-supervised youth, enrollment rates by 21st birthday increased by 4 percentage points after care was extended to age 21
 - But – no improvement in staying enrolled or # semesters completed
- **What does this mean?**
 - Beneficial in terms of enrollment in college, but once enrolled, foster youth may find themselves academically unprepared to complete college or may run into other obstacles
 - This calls for redoubled efforts to prepare and support foster youth both before and after they make it into postsecondary education

Recommendations for the Child Welfare System

Recommendation 8-1: Reduce racial and ethnic disparities in child welfare system involvement.

Recommendations for the Child Welfare System

Recommendation 8-2: Promote broad uptake by the states of federal programs that promote resilience and positive outcomes for adolescents involved in the child welfare system.

Recommendations for the Child Welfare System

Recommendation 8-3: Provide services to adolescents and their families in the child welfare system that are developmentally informed at the individual, program, and system levels.

Recommendations for the Child Welfare System

Recommendation 8-4: Conduct research that reflects the full range of adolescents in the child welfare system.

Recommendations for the Child Welfare System

Recommendation 8-5: Foster greater collaboration between the child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and health systems.

Recommendations for the Child Welfare System

Recommendation 8-6: Provide developmentally appropriate services for adolescents who engage in noncriminal misconduct without justice-system involvement.

Conclusion

- Society has a collective responsibility to build systems that support and promote positive adolescent development.
- Systems should reflect a rich understanding of the developmental needs of adolescents and recognition of adolescence as a time of great opportunity to promote learning and discovery and to remediate past developmental challenges.
- Until society embraces this responsibility, the promise of adolescence will remain unfulfilled for millions of youth.
- To fail to build systems that support all youth is to waste human capital, reducing economic growth and exacerbating rising income inequality.
- Creating positive impact through opportunities not only improves trajectories, but also can provide high-impact, cost effective interventions to counteract the effects of childhood stresses and deprivations and prevent negative outcomes in adulthood.

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**RESEARCH HAS FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED
OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOW YOUNG PEOPLE
DEVELOP, GROW, AND LEARN.**

Society must embrace this new knowledge in order to
reimagine systems so that all young people can thrive.



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