



THE PROMISE OF ADOLESCENCE: REALIZING OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL YOUTH

A consensus study
report from

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Study Sponsors

The Funders for Adolescent Science Translation (FAST)

- Annie E. Casey Foundation
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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.

Inequity and Adolescence

- How do we ensure that *all* adolescents have opportunities to flourish and succeed?
- Inequalities in opportunity and access severely curtail the promise of adolescence for many youth
- Potent structural inequities and societal determinants shape adolescents' life-course trajectories in multiple ways.

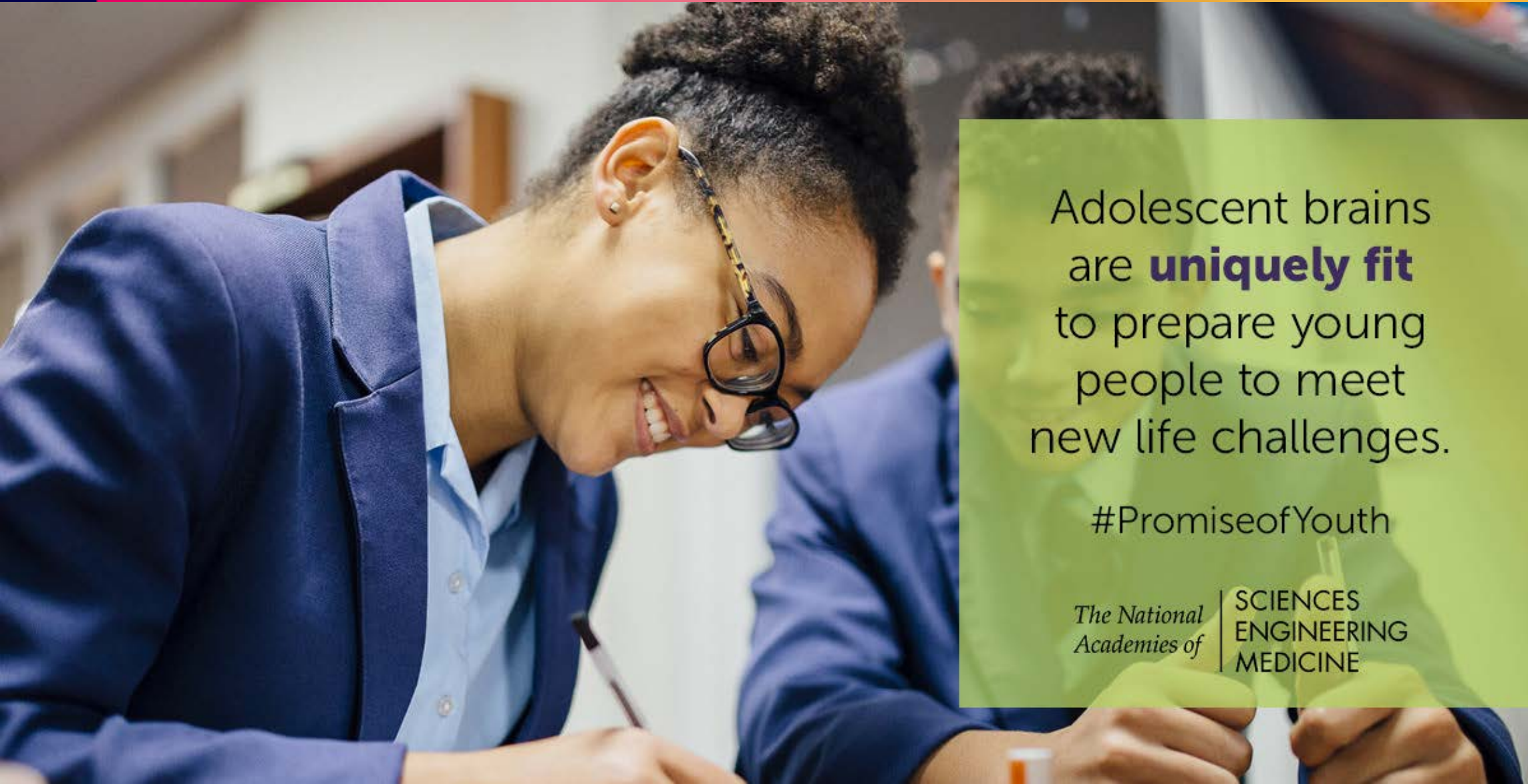
Main Messages

Adolescence is a period of *extraordinary opportunity* for learning and exploration and for *laying a strong foundation* for a successful life.

Our nation needs to commit itself to a sustained plan for *reversing the worsening inequities* of childhood disadvantage, thereby *enabling all adolescents to flourish*.

Why Adolescence?

- Recent advances in neurobiology and neuroimaging have demonstrated the dramatic extent of brain maturation during adolescence.
- Adolescence is a sensitive period of neurodevelopment that is especially affected by the environment. Deeply rooted, and growing, structural inequalities curtail the promise of this developmental period.
- The adaptability, plasticity, and heterogeneity of adolescence creates accompanying opportunities—and obligations—for society to help all adolescents flourish.



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

#PromiseofYouth

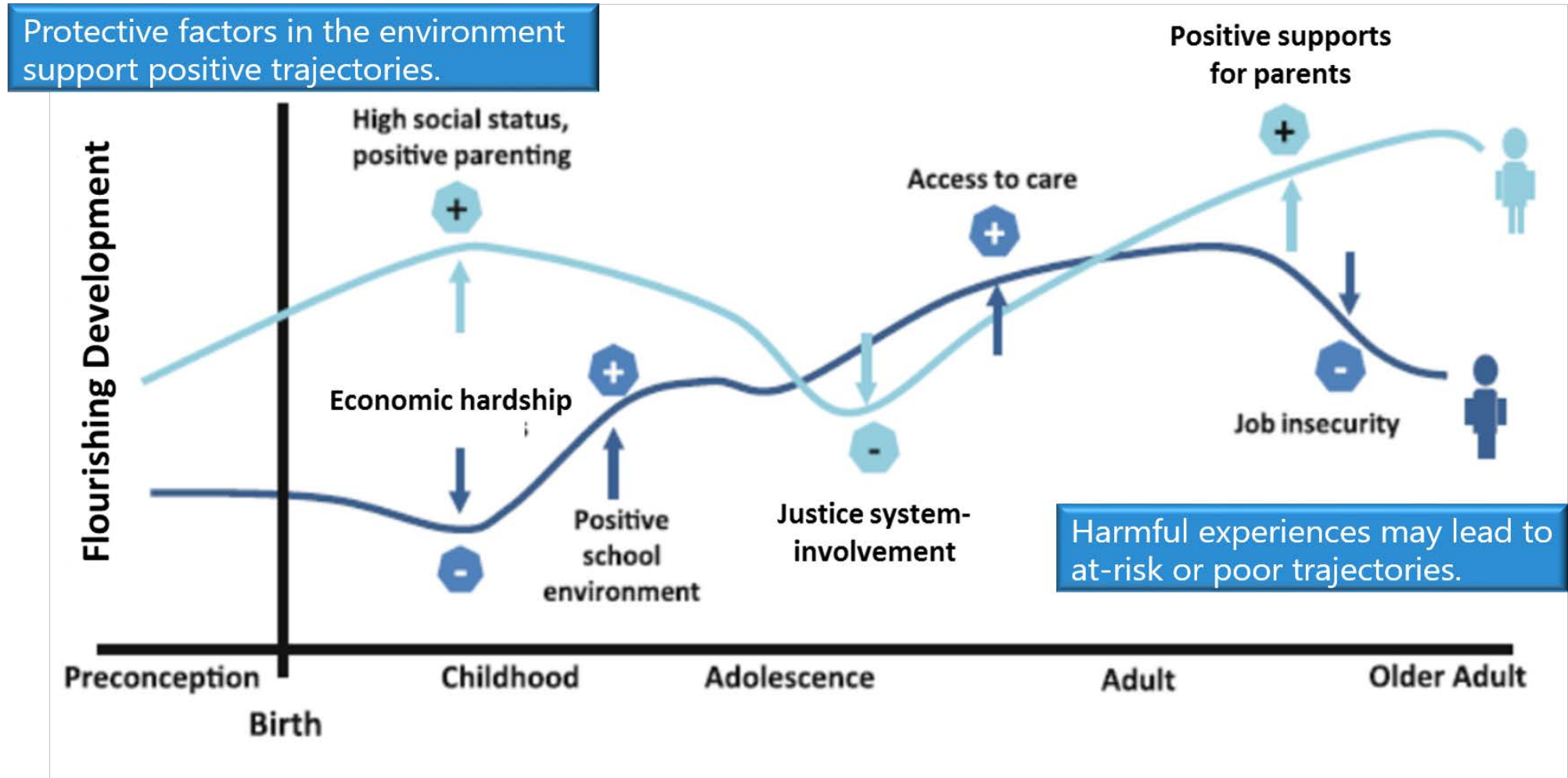
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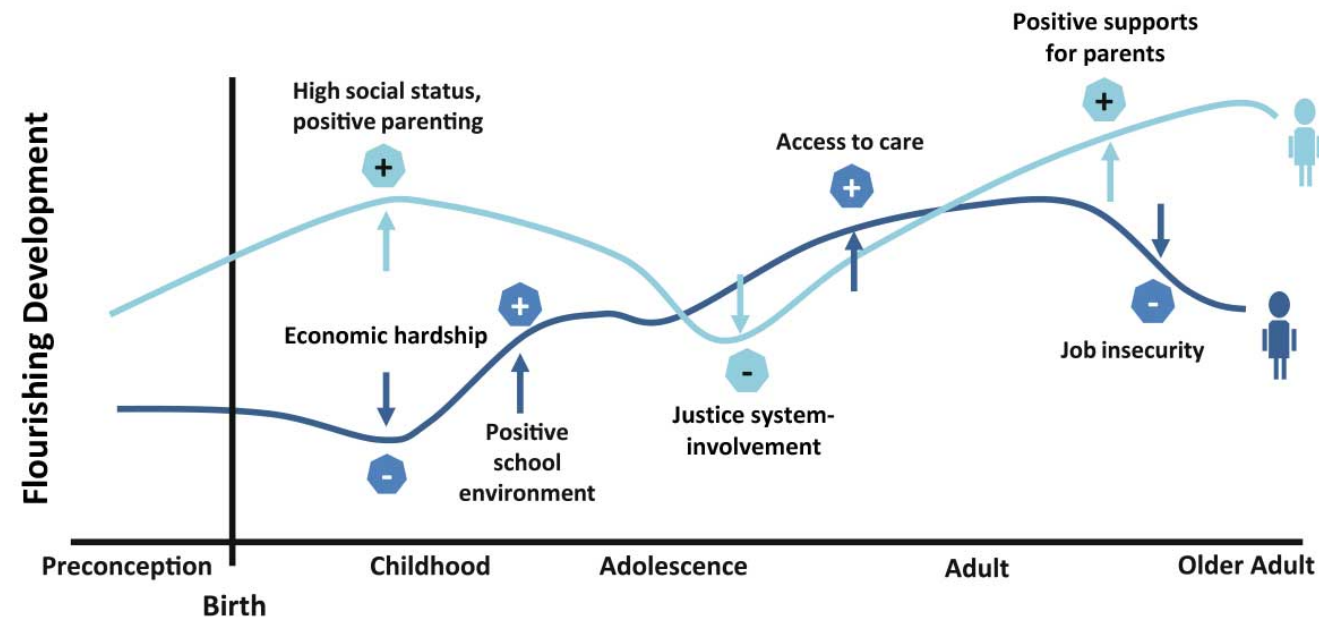
- Policies and practices that capitalize on the promise of adolescence and create incentives for discovery and innovation are needed, rather than those that are preoccupied with vulnerability and shielding adolescents from harm.
- The challenge is to take advantage of the developmental opportunities afforded by adolescence.
- The adaptability, plasticity, and heterogeneity of adolescence creates accompanying opportunities—and obligations—for society to help all adolescents flourish.

Epigenetics: Environmental Influences that Shape Adolescent Development



Interplay between Biology and Environment

- Genes and environment interact: The way heredity is expressed in behavior depends significantly on influences in a person's environment.
- The trajectory of an individual's life may be changed, negatively or positively, at each life stage.
- Protective factors in the environment – such as supportive relationships with family and caretakers, and access to resources – support positive trajectories, while harmful experiences may lead to at-risk or poor trajectories.



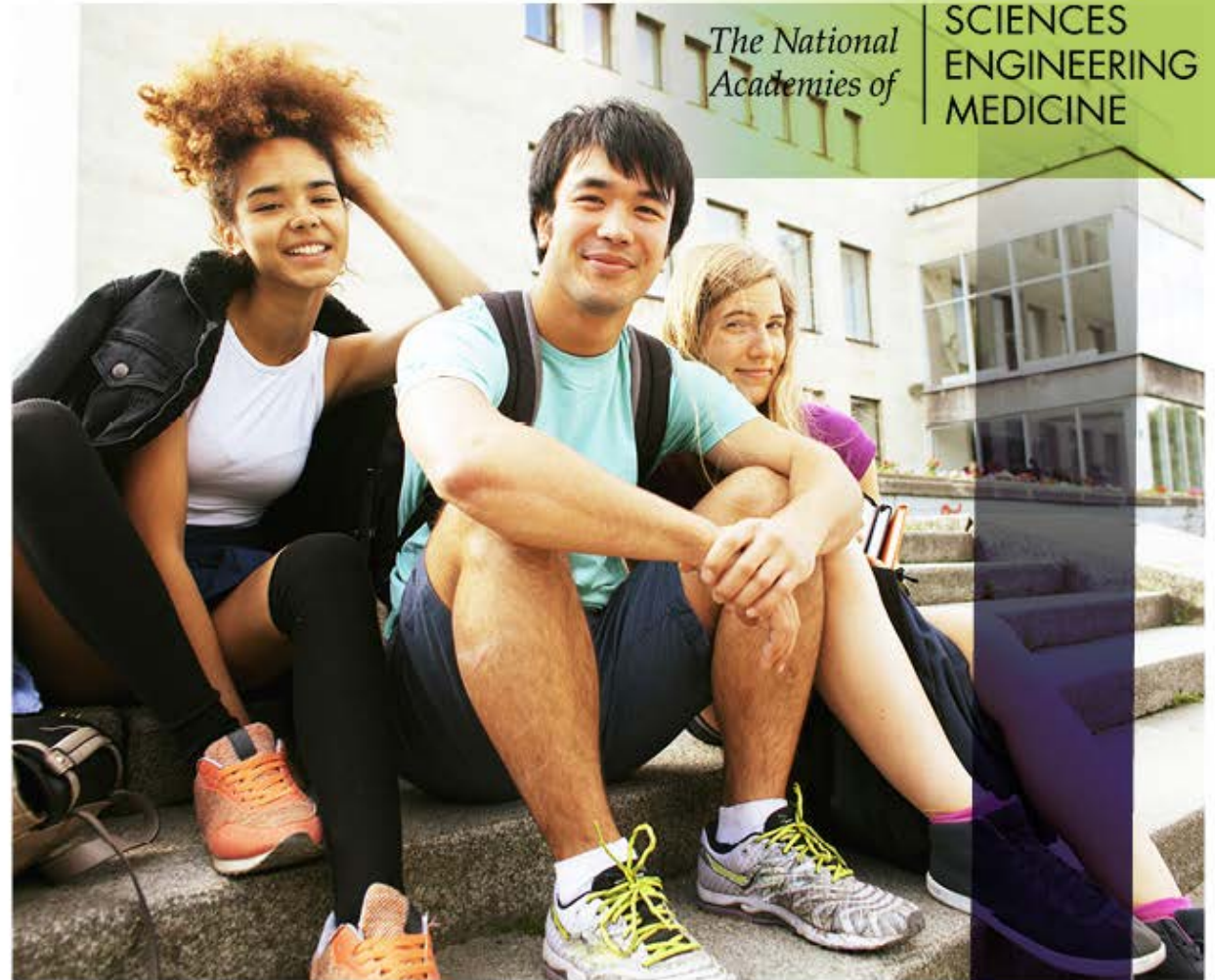
Adolescent Development: Neurobiological Context

- Adolescent brain development and brain connectivity - Increased cognitive abilities, logical thinking, problem-solving
- Heightened curiosity and reward sensitivity
- The interface of neurobiological development and the social context are critical
- Investments in programs that capitalize on adolescent brain plasticity can promote beneficial changes in developmental trajectories for youth who may have faced adverse experiences earlier in life.

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.

#PromiseofYouth



Opportunities

Education

The school system of the future must offer:

- Differentiated and responsive academic opportunities – including individualized instruction, tutoring, and credentialing; and
- Incorporate the teaching of non-academic skills, such as decision-making, practical knowledge, and adaptability in their mission.

Health System Opportunities

- Access to appropriate health care services is important to ensure adolescents' well-being today and for a lifetime, particularly as they develop habits that will affect their long-term health.
- Limited access to health care is associated with financial barriers, but adolescents also face additional challenges:
 - inexperienced in navigating the health care system,
 - concerned that their health needs remain confidential, and
 - more likely than adults to engage in risk-taking behaviors that could have both short- and long-term effects on their health.

Opportunities

Health

- Developmentally appropriate changes to provider practices and innovative care delivery systems can help adolescents become more engaged with their care and achieve better outcomes.

Health systems should offer:

- Integrated, comprehensive health services that prepare youth for the distinct physical, cognitive, and social changes that take place during adolescence,
- Opportunities to prepare adolescents to navigate the health system independently, and
- Provide services that are culturally informed and attentive to the needs of all youth.

Opportunities

Child Welfare

- Congress has gradually enacted statutory changes (over the past 20 years) that better align the child welfare system with the developmental assets and challenges adolescents face, including family reunification, prioritizing placement with relatives over strangers, and providing services for adolescents aging out of foster care.
- Additional efforts are needed – particularly broader uptake at the state level of the optional components of recent federal laws –to ensure that all adolescents involved with the child welfare system have the opportunity to flourish.

Opportunities

Justice

- Areas of opportunity for reform within the juvenile justice system include: increased family engagement and greater attention to procedural fairness, such as interactions with police, legal representation for youth, and reduced use of juvenile fines and fees.
- Similar reform efforts recognizing the developmental needs of older adolescents and young adults are emerging within the criminal justice system, including reducing automatic transfers of juveniles to criminal courts based only on the charged offense, and creating developmentally informed correctional programs for young offenders.

Conclusion

- Society has a collective responsibility to build systems that support and promote positive adolescent development.
- Systems (health, education, justice, and child welfare) 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.



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**ADOLESCENCE IS A CRITICAL
PERIOD OF DEVELOPMENT.**

As a society, we must harness
the promise of adolescence
so that all youth can thrive.