

# Supporting Adolescent Health and Development: What Decision Makers Need to Know

Research has fundamentally changed our understanding of how adolescents—young people ages 10 to 25—develop, grow, and learn. Changes in the brain occur throughout adolescence, affording young people a remarkable capacity to learn and create, adapt to changes, form relationships with peers and adults, and explore their own environments. Investments in programs and interventions that capitalize on the brain’s capacity to change during adolescence can promote beneficial shifts in young people’s life trajectories, helping them achieve their full potential in adulthood.

Two recent reports by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examine healthy adolescent development and recommend actions for promoting it:

- *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (2019)
- *Promoting Positive Adolescent Health Behaviors and Outcomes: Thriving in the 21st Century* (2020)

Both reports identify opportunities for policy makers to promote positive adolescent development, optimize adolescent outcomes, and address the needs of this increasingly diverse population.

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## THE PROMISE OF ADOLESCENCE: REALIZING OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL YOUTH



Adolescent brains are uniquely fit to prepare young people to meet new life challenges. During adolescence, connections between brain regions become stronger and more efficient, and unused connections are pruned away. Such heightened neuroplasticity during adolescence provides opportunities for resilient responses to trauma and stress, and for remediating maladaptation in

brain structure and behavior that accumulated from earlier developmental periods. This report outlines how the systems and settings that adolescents most frequently encounter can be redesigned and reimagined to promote well-being and resilience and to address inequalities.

The report identifies several cross-cutting principles informed by developmental science to guide policy and practice across systems.

**1) Adolescence is a sensitive period for development and learning, providing opportunities for life-long impact.** Policies and practices should

create incentives for discovery and innovation rather than focusing narrowly on containing risks. In adolescence developmental changes heighten reward sensitivity, a willingness to take risks, and the salience of social status, necessary propensities for exploring new environments and building non-familial relationships. By exploring and taking risks, adolescents build cognitive, social, and emotional skills necessary for productive contributions in adulthood.

**2) Learning how to make decisions and to take responsibility for shaping one’s own life are key developmental tasks of adolescence.** Youth-serving systems should ensure that adolescents are viewed as respected partners in decision making. Adolescents’ developing competencies in flexible problem solving, their awareness of and concern with others, and their openness to exploration and novelty make this an opportune time to support agency and leadership and promote engagement.

**3) Forming personal identity is a key task of adolescence.** The increasing diversity of U.S. adolescents and the nation as a whole requires youth-serving systems to be culturally sensitive and to be attuned to the integrated needs of each adolescent. Young people become increasingly aware of and attuned to their social status during adolescences,

and institutions, policies, and practices may reinforce status hierarchies and stereotypes about members of groups that are nondominant or stigmatized in society.

- 4) **Supportive familial, caregiver, and adult relationships play a role in fostering positive outcomes for adolescents.** The least advantaged parents need resources through social assistance to effectively support adolescents, so investing in youth also requires investing in the adult caregivers who support them. Such investments must be multilevel and multisectoral; interventions to change parenting behavior are limited if systems themselves are not attuned to parents' most pressing needs.
- 5) **Investments in programs and interventions that capitalize on brain plasticity during adolescence can promote beneficial changes in developmental trajectories for youth who may have faced adverse experiences earlier in life or are facing them now and prevent future challenges and risks.** Adolescents' heightened sensitivity and responsiveness to environmental influences implies resilience, meaning adolescence provides an opportunity for healing and repair leaving them better equipped to handle future adversities. Redirection, recovery, and resilience are possible.
- 6) **Disparities in family and neighborhood resources and supports, biased and discriminatory interactions with important social systems,**

**and resulting inequalities in opportunity and access curtail the promise of adolescence for many youth.** An effective strategy to reduce inequities needs to address the main sources of these disparities. Greater coordination is needed across the systems responsible for adolescents. Disadvantaged youth will likely require disproportionate funding to reduce or eliminate disparities.

Based on these principles, the committee makes recommendations for the health, education, child welfare, and justice systems. Taken together, these recommendations constitute a blueprint for developmentally informed systems change. For the health sector specifically, the committee made the following recommendations:

- Strengthen the financing of health care services for adolescents, including insurance coverage for uninsured or underinsured populations.
- Improve access to comprehensive, integrated, coordinated health services for adolescents.
- Increase access to behavioral health care and treatment services.
- Improve the training and distribution and increase the number of adolescent health care providers.
- Improve federal and state data collection on adolescent health and well-being, and conduct adolescent-specific health services research and disseminate the findings.

## PROMOTING POSITIVE ADOLESCENT HEALTH BEHAVIORS AND OUTCOMES: THRIVING IN THE 21ST CENTURY



This report expands on The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth by delving deeper into adolescent health programs and health policy. In the report, the committee reviewed research to identify core components of programs that can improve adolescent health outcomes and developed evidence-based recommendations for implementing

federal programming initiatives focused on adolescent health.

**Risk taking in adolescence.** Adolescents must explore their environments to build the cognitive, social, and emotional skills necessary for adulthood. The skills gained during adolescence also provide the capacity for other aspects of psychological development, such as identity formation and the capacity for self-direction.

- Risk-taking activities are normal and necessary during adolescence.
- *Healthy* risk behaviors are constructive and are risky due to the uncertainty of their potential outcomes. Examples of health risk taking may include enrolling

in a challenging course, reaching out for help, or asking someone on a date. Healthy risk taking allows adolescents to learn, grow, and thrive.

- Adolescents are also more likely than members of other age groups to participate in unhealthy risk behaviors, such as unprotected sexual activity, binge drinking, and tobacco use. These behaviors can lead to negative health outcomes.
- “Discontinuation of risk” is applicable only to those unhealthy risk behaviors (e.g., unprotected sexual activity, substance abuse) that can lead to negative health outcomes (e.g., diseases, unintended pregnancy, STIs).

*Healthy* risk taking can be supported by providing guidance in decision making and encouraging adolescents to engage in less dangerous risks.

**Core components.** Core components research identifies the “active ingredients” of evidence-based programs which can be used to create shorter and more effective programs that are also more accessible to diverse populations. The committee found:

- Evidence of effectiveness of specific core components was inconsistent because current research is not designed to identify which components of programs are more effective than others.
- Programs incorporating social-emotional learning and positive youth development help equip children and adolescents with the foundational skills they need to make healthy decisions in a variety of situations.

The committee made the following recommendations for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

- Fund additional research aimed at identifying, measuring, and evaluating the effectiveness of specific core components of programs focused on promoting positive health behaviors and outcomes among adolescents.
- Fund universal, holistic, multi-component programs that meet all of the following criteria:
  - > promote and improve the health and well-being of the whole person, laying the foundation for specific, developmentally appropriate behavioral skills development;

- > begin in early childhood and are offered during critical developmental windows, from childhood throughout adolescence;
- > consider adolescent decision making, exploration, and risk taking as normative;
- > engage diverse communities, public policy makers, and societal leaders to improve modifiable social and environmental determinants of health and well-being that disadvantage and stress young people and their families; and
- > are theory-driven and evidence-based.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should
  - > update and expand the Youth Risk Behavior Survey to include:
    - + out-of-school youth, (e.g., homeless, incarcerated, dropped out), and
    - + survey items that reflect a more comprehensive set of sexual risk behaviors with specific definitions; and
  - > further research on the ideal setting and mode for administering the YRBS with today’s adolescents.

The committee also suggested two promising approaches that deserve more meaningful attention in research, program, and policy development:

- Implementing and evaluating practices and policies that promote inclusiveness and equity; and
- including youth from diverse age groups, racial/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, rurality/urbanity, sexual orientations, sexes/genders, and disability/ability status in all decision making processes.

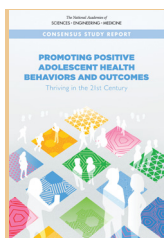
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***The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth (2019)***

Available:

<http://nationalacademies.org/adolescentdevelopment>



***Promoting Positive Adolescent Health Behaviors and Outcomes: Thriving in the 21st Century (2020)***

Available:

<http://nationalacademies.org/adolescent-health>

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