



When Adolescents Contribute to Others it Supports Their Well-Being and Their Communities

Adolescence is an important time for contributing to others. During the developmental period between childhood and adulthood, we forge our sense of who we are and how we want to contribute to the world. Throughout our adolescent years, our physical, cognitive, and emotional capabilities mature in ways that allow us to contribute to our friends, family, schools, and broader community in deeper, more meaningful ways than when we were younger.

Opportunities to not only contribute, but to reflect on the meaning of our contributions and to have our contributions recognized, build our autonomy, agency, and identity and can support our sense of purpose—the forward-looking [feeling that our lives are directed and significant](#).³ All of these are important to positive development during adolescence, helping us navigate adversity and achieve goals throughout adulthood.

Research on adolescent development helps explain how opportunities to contribute to others support well-being.

→ **Brain development during adolescence supports our ability and motivation to contribute to others.**

The network of areas in our brain that activates in social interactions matures rapidly during our adolescent years, deepening our understanding of the complex feelings, perspectives, and needs of other people. We become better able to determine who needs our help and what kind of help they might need. In addition, brain regions associated with our sensitivity to rewards become more reactive during and after puberty, increasing the positive feelings we get from novel experiences as well as [kind and helpful behaviors](#), such as contributing to others.⁴ Connections between these regions also improve during adolescence.

→ **Our social environments—including families and peers—can motivate us to contribute to others.** Socially, we become more motivated to find a valued place and role among our peers. Contributing is one way to feel valued: [studies](#) have shown that students who are helpful, cooperative, and sharing tend to be more appreciated and

Upfront Insights

Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity and growth. In the years between ages 10 and 25, changes in our brains and social environments increase both our ability to [contribute to others](#) and the positive feelings we get from [kind and helpful behaviors](#) toward others.^{1,2}

- ▶ Programs that give us a chance to make meaningful contributions during adolescence can have positive effects on our mental and physical health, support our academic success, and give us opportunities to explore ways we can be a force for good in our society, now and in the future.
- ▶ Contributing to others during adolescence can help us earn the respect and appreciation of peers—and it fosters a sense of meaning and purpose that can help us become successful, resilient, and contributing adults.
- ▶ Adults can support healthy outcomes for young people and communities by ensuring that youth have various opportunities to make meaningful contributions within families, at school, and in the community, and to have their contributions recognized.

When policies and programs support adolescents to find ways to contribute and cultivate their sense of purpose, it leads to healthier, more connected communities.

liked than those who use fear or intimidation to gain status.⁵ Young people from families and [communities](#) where contributing is a particular value [seem to feel](#) more of a sense of reward when helping.^{6,7}

→ **The right support can help young people who have been marginalized.** Being marginalized as a result of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion can also [motivate adolescents toward a sense of purpose](#) to help others in their families, schools, or communities through activism or civic engagement.⁸ Family engagement, adult role models, connections through religious or other community groups, and support to process our experiences can all help young people cultivate a positive sense of purpose.

Learn more about the cultivation of meaning and purpose during adolescence in NSCA Report 3: [Cultivating Purpose in Adolescence](#).

→ **Contributing to others provides adolescents the experiences they need to succeed as adults.** Supporting friends and family builds the intimacy we need to form positive, long-lasting relationships in adulthood. Seeing that our actions can have a positive effect on the world can help us build a sense of autonomy, agency, and identity. Contributing to others also supports a sense of meaning and purpose, which are associated with greater [emotional well-being](#), [academic success](#), and [resilience](#), all of which can be powerful assets as we navigate adversity and achieve goals throughout adulthood.^{10,11,12}

→ **The opportunity to reflect on the experience of volunteering might be essential to ensuring positive developmental impacts from the activity.**¹³ [Reflecting on service](#) we perform during our adolescent years—which can take place through journaling, art, essay writing, or group discussion—can help us consider the broader impacts of our contribution and attach meaning to the experience.

Policy and Program Insights

Provide opportunities for young people to make meaningful contributions to their social groups and communities. Programs that support youth to contribute can have positive effects on their mental and physical health, support their academic success, and give them opportunities to explore ways they can be a force for good in our society, now and in the future.

Policies and programs should address inequities in adolescents' opportunities to make meaningful contributions in their everyday lives by **ensuring that all young people have a range of options to contribute and to have their contributions recognized.**

Families are typically the first context where youth can contribute to others through common household chores such as cooking or taking care of siblings. Youth from many lower-income, ethnic-minority, and immigrant families play significant instrumental roles in their families, and the value of these contributions and the skills they require should be recognized by colleges and employers.

While helping family is a type of contribution that can benefit youth, time-intensive caregiving can sometimes be a source of stress that negatively impacts mental health. Schools can **support caregiving youth** by offering flexibility in course schedules, awarding community service hours for their caregiving, and educating teachers and counselors about the experience of these youth.

▶ Learn more about how to support caregiving youth [here](#).¹⁴

Involving middle and high school students in **decision making around classroom and school policies** like seating arrangements, learning activities, or grading practices has been shown to increase students' [motivation and connection](#) to the school community.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

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