



Overview: How Developmental Science Can Help Address Structural Anti-Black Racism During Adolescence

Adolescence—beginning at the onset of puberty (around 10 years old) and ending in our mid-20s—is a key window of opportunity to shape life-long positive trajectories. But for many Black adolescents, racial bias within institutions, wealth and resource inequality, and daily experiences of racism and discrimination create barriers to realizing this opportunity. A science-based understanding of adolescent development, particularly as it uniquely plays out for Black adolescents, can be an important addition to the knowledge and experiences of inequities that Black communities have brought to the forefront of public awareness over years of advocacy. Insights from developmental science can play an important role in understanding the impact of structural racism and the most effective ways to reduce the barriers it creates for Black youth.

The following key features of adolescent development must be considered in efforts to overcome race-based inequities, reduce barriers resulting from structural racism, and promote well-being and positive development among Black adolescents.

Exploration and healthy risk taking

During adolescence, young people need resources and opportunities to explore and discover the world around them. We need to ensure that Black youth have the resources, opportunities, and support to explore the world and take positive risks.

Respect and social status

Sensitivity to social status as well as the need to earn respect from adults and peers increase during adolescence and support healthy development. It is essential that we provide Black adolescents with ample positive pathways to gain prestige and positive social standing within their communities and to earn respect from the adults and peers around them.

Personal and group identity

During adolescence, youth develop a more robust view of themselves and their roles within their larger communities. Ensuring that Black youth have the culturally sensitive support they need to build a healthy personal and ethnic-racial identity, as well as opportunities to positively identify with social groups that increase their sense of belonging, is vital to overall positive development.

Family involvement

Supportive relationships with parents and other caring adults are still extremely important as youth leave childhood and move into adulthood. Policies that address the unique challenges faced by Black families (not just Black adolescents) are essential to ensure the well-being of Black youth.

Physical and mental health

Adolescence is a time of rapid physical growth, learning, and emotional development that lays the foundations of health for a lifetime. Policies, programs, and training for those who support adolescents must be established to counteract indirect and overt threats to health and well-being so Black youth can thrive.

Educational opportunity

Adolescents have been described as “super learners,” and the educational opportunities available during these years can establish life-long positive trajectories. Increased funding for education as well as widespread training for school staff, teachers, and students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds is needed to increase awareness of these disparities. In addition, state and local governments and school districts should provide culturally sensitive diverse curricula,

technological access, and robust extracurricular options in order to ensure educational opportunity for all Black adolescents.

Resilience

The adolescent years are a period of remarkable resilience, the ability to recover and even thrive after setbacks, stress, adversity, or trauma. As we work to eradicate racism and build a more equitable society, we must also support programs and policies that promote adolescents' existing resilience and other protective factors in the face of these long-standing adversities for Black youth.