# 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.

We believe that a science-based understanding of adolescent development—particularly as it 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 contribute to an understanding of the impacts of structural racism and the most effective ways to reduce the barriers it creates for Black youth.

Structural racism goes beyond personal biases or prejudices, describing the social norms, policies, and institutions that create and maintain racial inequality for people of color. We can use an understanding of developmental science to create or redesign policies, programs, and larger social systems in ways that promote success among Black adolescents and other youth of color.

In an **earlier brief**, we examined how principles of developmental science could play a part in creating more equity in outcomes for all adolescents. In this paper, we look specifically at how developmental science can support solutions that address the race-based injustices and challenges faced by Black adolescents.

There is, of course, great diversity in the experiences of adolescents who identify with the pan-racial/ethnic label of "Black." Black youth are not a monolithic group. However, we believe it is important to address how race-based inequities specifically impact Black adolescents in ways that can be seen at the group level despite diversity in individual experiences.

## Structural racism and disparities in outcomes for adolescents

This brief is based on research summarized in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM)'s 2019 report *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*. The report explains three of the most serious areas of inequalities that have led to widespread disparities in adolescent outcomes today: (1) family wealth and resource inequality, (2) differences in the way institutions respond to adolescents from different backgrounds, and (3) prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes or behavior by adults or peers who interact with adolescents.

These inequalities and discriminatory practices result in fewer resources and less support for positive development within schools and other institutions that serve Black adolescents. Racial bias creates additional barriers for Black youth to take full advantage of this key window for learning and development. For Black youth, these areas of inequality are symptoms of a larger issue within our society of **anti-Blackness**, which includes overt racism as well as structural racism that work together to systematically marginalize Black people. The consequence is that adolescents of color often face more negative outcomes in health, education, economic success, and general well-being compared to their White peers.

To undo these longstanding inequitable policies and practices, we need more resources and attention dedicated to providing developmentally appropriate opportunities and learning environments for Black youth.

## Key aspects of adolescent development

To overcome race-based inequities, reduce barriers resulting from structural racism, and promote well-being and positive development among Black adolescents, we must support the following key features of adolescent development.

➤ **Exploration and healthy risk taking**

➤ **Respect and social status**

➤ **Personal and group identity**

➤ **Family involvement**

➤ **Physical and mental health**

➤ **Education and opportunity**

➤ **Resilience**

Each of these key features of adolescent development has long-term impacts on health and well-being; thus, each offers a specific opportunity to positively intervene in the lives of Black adolescents. Currently, the social systems in place to support adolescents are not always effectively configured to ensure positive learning experiences. Segregated regions of poverty, unequal allocation of resources, and structural racism present barriers to successful development. These barriers are exacerbated by bias, discrimination, and threats to personal safety that Black youth experience regularly. Understanding key aspects of adolescent development can highlight ways to eliminate these obstacles from the policies, programs, and institutions that serve Black adolescents. They can also reveal pathways to success despite these obstacles and ensure that Black youth can thrive, even in the face of historical and ongoing disadvantages.

Following, we discuss key features of adolescent development and unique challenges faced by Black youth. We then provide specific recommendations, based on the NASEM report's recommendations, that align with these key aspects of adolescent development and promote the promise of adolescence for all youth.

## Exploration and healthy risk taking

During adolescence, young people need resources and opportunities to explore and discover the world around them. They need support to seek out new experiences and experiment with extracurricular interests, civic engagement, and social interactions. Novel experiences and healthy risk taking, such as filling a leadership role at school, taking a new class, trying out for a team, or joining a social club, are essential to learning and positive development.

Black adolescents often have fewer safe opportunities to explore the world compared to their White peers. A history of unequal funding and discriminatory housing policies in this country have left Black youth disproportionately more likely to attend underfunded schools and live in neighborhoods with fewer resources. In addition, due to racism, bias, and discrimination, including the phenomenon of adultification in which Black youth are perceived as less innocent and more adult-like than their same-aged White peers, the same experimentation or mistakes that might be labeled "learning experiences" when made by White adolescents are more likely to result in school suspension, expulsion, arrest, or incarceration when made by Black youth. **We need to ensure that Black youth have the resources, opportunities, and support to explore the world and take positive risks.** (See NASEM recommendations 6-2, 6-3, and 9-1.)

➤ *Schools and communities must provide flexible and diverse opportunities to try new, challenging activities as well as support to learn from missteps and mistakes as they experiment and explore.*

➤ *Schools should provide opportunities to youth both within classrooms and within the larger school context to regularly make impactful decisions.*

➤ *School systems should implement evidence-based programs to reduce racial disparities and student referrals to the justice system.*

## 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. Like all adolescents, Black youth seek out supportive peer groups and take on roles within their community where they feel respected and can earn some measure of prestige within their social group.

However, race-based bias and discrimination from adults too often mean that Black adolescents are not treated with respect. Segregation between and within schools and neighborhoods and an accompanying lack of resources for extracurricular and afterschool programs limit opportunities to earn status and prestige in positive ways.

Key aspects of positive development, including academic success and physical health, can be significantly bolstered when attention is paid to supporting adolescents' need to matter. **Thus, 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.** (See NASEM recommendations 6-5 and 8-3.)

➤ *State and federal agencies, school districts, and schools should foster culturally sensitive learning environments through training on implicit bias and cultural sensitivity as well as adolescent development.*

➤ *Schools and districts should establish and utilize disciplinary policies and practices that are developmentally appropriate and applied equitably and fairly.*

➤ *Case managers and courts in the child welfare system should ensure that adolescents are viewed as respected partners in decision making regarding their placements, education, and support services.*

## Personal and group identity

During adolescence, youth develop a more robust view of themselves and their roles within their larger communities. Through diverse experiences, increasing independence, and more complex social interactions, adolescents develop their personal identity (i.e., understanding who they are and how they are viewed by others) and group identity (i.e., which groups they want and choose to belong to and which groups others perceive them to be a part of). Healthy development in adolescence supports these identity processes and promotes development of a positive sense of self and group belonging.

Black adolescents must contend with widespread stereotypes and implicit bias based on overlapping experiences of race, age, and gender—the concept of intersectionality—at the same time they are forming a sense of personal and group identity. **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.** (See NASEM report recommendation 6-5.)

➤ *State and federal agencies, school districts, and schools should foster culturally sensitive learning environments through training on implicit bias and cultural sensitivity, implementing curricula that are culturally inclusive, providing culturally relevant content, and affirming the value of the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented among students, both in content and learning styles.*

> ➤ *Schools and districts should establish and utilize disciplinary policies and practices that are developmentally appropriate and applied equitably and fairly.*

## Family involvement

Supportive relationships with parents and other caring adults are still extremely important as youth leave childhood and move into adulthood. Close, supportive family and caregiver relationships can act as a buffer against negative outcomes from stressors such as socioeconomic disadvantage or discrimination. When parents and adult caregivers are warm and respectful, and set firm, rational expectations, adolescents are more likely to display resilience and self-regulation, even in the face of structural, race-based inequities.

Structural racism has created unique challenges for Black families supporting their adolescent children. Families must overcome opportunity gaps related to education, employment, and community resources, frequent and relentless discrimination, and even overt threats to adolescents' safety. In addition, Black parents also face race-based inequities and discrimination in their own lives that increase their daily stress and negatively impact their health in ways that can have downstream effects on their children's well-being.

Parents' experience of bias and discrimination related to race, socioeconomic status, or family structure also influence the values, norms, and behaviors they pass on. Families are a primary source of racial and ethnic socialization for young people, as adults seek ways to prepare youth for discrimination they may face and to instill a sense of group and personal pride.

**Policies that address the unique challenges faced by Black families (not just Black adolescents) are essential to ensure the well-being of Black youth.** (See NASEM recommendations 6-6, 8-3, and 9-2.)

> ➤ *Policymakers should support adolescents and families to navigate the educational, health, welfare, and justice systems.*

> ➤ *Child welfare and juvenile justice systems should implement policies and practices that help youth maintain supportive relationships with family members or other caring adults.*

> ➤ *Probationary programs should connect parents and caregivers with community and educational resources that can teach them how to help their child succeed and avoid future interactions with the justice system.*

## 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. Experiencing discrimination negatively affects adolescent physical and mental health by increasing daily stress and anxiety and disrupting sleep. Daily stress and chronic anxiety caused by ongoing experiences with discrimination increase the level of cortisol, a stress hormone, in the body. This in turn can directly affect physical health over time and distract adolescents from positive academic and social activities. Discrimination also affects sleep quality, making it particularly harmful during adolescence when sleep is crucial to learning, attention, academic success, and physical and mental health.

In addition to daily experiences with discrimination that many Black youth encounter, Black adolescents who experience residential segregation and concentrated disadvantage are disproportionately exposed to direct and indirect violence in their neighborhoods and at school. This ongoing threat of violence can serve as an additional source of stress and anxiety, and directly experiencing violence can impact physical health and safety. **Policies, programs, and training for those who support adolescents**

**must be established to counteract these indirect and overt threats to well-being so Black youth can thrive.** (See NASEM recommendations 6-4 and 7-3.)

➤ *School districts should enact policies and practices that promote supportive school climates, consider the importance of sleep as they plan schedules and homework policies, ensure safety for all students, and provide increased access to mental health services for students.*

➤ *Federal, state, and local policy makers should develop and implement behavioral health programs for prevention, screening, and treatment that better meet the needs of all adolescents, with particular attention to vulnerable groups. Adolescents should actively participate in program development and implementation.*

➤ *All states should ensure that youth who have experienced foster care are eligible for Medicaid until age 26.*

## Educational opportunity

Adolescents have been described as "super learners," and the educational opportunities available during these years can establish life-long positive trajectories. For many Black adolescents, generations of societal racism, discrimination, and wealth inequality have led to reduced educational resources, school funding, options for extracurricular involvement, specialized learning, and technology use compared to White adolescents. These historic inequalities have also resulted in Black families being more likely to live in neighborhoods with underfunded schools, little or no vocational or technical training opportunities, and limited access to technology. As digital technology becomes more widespread, unequal access can create even more opportunity gaps with regard to peer interaction, participation in social clubs and organizations, and the ability to participate in remote or distance learning.

**Increased funding for education as well as widespread training for school staff, teachers, and students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds are 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.** (See NASEM recommendations 6-1, 6-2, and 9-1.)

➤ *All states should take steps to eliminate resource disparities across districts and schools.*

➤ *School districts should facilitate diverse and flexible pathways and postsecondary plans for adolescents. Local businesses, states, and localities should provide funding, relationships, and programs that prepare youth for meaningful 21st century jobs and careers and identify internships and apprenticeships to facilitate the training youth need to transition to the job market.*

➤ *Educators should introduce positive approaches to and uses of technology in early adolescence, rather than trying to reverse negative usage in mid- to late-adolescence.*

➤ *School systems should leverage available federal, state, and local funding to implement evidence-based programs to improve social and structural conditions to reduce racial disparities and student referrals to the justice system.*

## Resilience

The adolescent years are a period of remarkable resilience, the ability to recover and even thrive after setbacks, stress, adversity, or trauma. When faced with inequities and challenges, adolescents can still thrive if they have support and resources that identify and promote their resilience and strength.

The protective factors that promote adolescent resilience in the face of adversity are well established and highly consistent across race and cultures. For example, supportive influences, including familial and peer attachment, education, community connections, motivation, and self-efficacy, are known to be universally protective and to consistently improve outcomes and success among youth. Programs aimed at bolstering these supports among Black young people—such as the **Strong African American Families Program** (SAAF) or the **EMBRace intervention**—are likely to promote success, regardless of the specific barriers faced within these challenging contexts. 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. (See NASEM recommendations 6-1 and 6-6.)

➤ *All states should take steps to eliminate resource disparities across districts and schools and implement policies within the juvenile justice system to create significant opportunities for both academic and non-academic development.*

➤ *Policymakers should support adolescents and families to navigate the educational, health, welfare, and justice systems.*

## Conclusion

Adolescence is a critical window of opportunity to shape positive trajectories. However, systemic racism, wealth and resource inequality, and everyday discrimination undermine support for key developmental milestones for many Black adolescents.

Current events have highlighted the inequities faced by Black youth and their families. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black communities, threatening physical health and further limiting academic, extracurricular, and social opportunities for Black adolescents. Widespread Black Lives Matter protests have brought longstanding institutional racism to the forefront of national awareness.

Research tells us that adolescents can thrive when we support these key developmental needs: exploration and healthy risk taking, respect and social status, positive personal and group identity, family involvement, physical and mental health, educational opportunity, and resilience in the face of challenging circumstances. When adolescents thrive, they become healthy, connected, purposeful adults who benefit their communities and society as a whole.

Eliminating systemic racism, bias, and discrimination is not a simple task. We believe that a science-based understanding of adolescent development can play an important role in determining where to focus such support in order to remove the barriers to health and well-being that Black youth have faced for far too long. Redesigning policies, programs, and practices serving adolescents can support Black adolescents as they approach the key developmental milestones essential for positive growth and long-term success and ultimately create more equitable outcomes.

## Additional Resources

For more information, we recommend the following resources:

➤ *Addressing Inequities in Education: Considerations for Black Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19* (2020), by Noni Gaylord-Harden, Valerie Adams-Bass, Erin Bogan, Lori Francis, Judith Scott, Eleanor Seaton, and Joanna Williams, from the Addressing Inequities in Education volume by the Society for Research in Child Development

➤ *EMBRace: Developing a Racial Socialization Intervention to Reduce Racial Stress and Enhance Racial Coping among Black Parents and Adolescents* (2019), by Raina Anderson, Monique McKenny, and Howard Stevenson

- *Fulfilling the Promise of Adolescence: Applying Developmental Knowledge to Create Systems Change* (2020), by Dara Shefska and Emily Backes, in the Journal of Youth Development

- *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (2019), by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

- *Returning to School with Equity in Mind* webinar series by **Youth-Nex**

- The **Strong African American Families Program** (SAAF) from the Center for Family Research, University of Georgia

- *Studying Belonging in Education* and other resources from the **Mindset Scholars Network**

- *Why Black Adolescents are Vulnerable at School and How Schools Can Provide Opportunities to Belong to Fix It* (2020), by DeLeon Gray, Elan Hope, and Christy Byrd