



Overview: How Developmental Science Can Help Us Address Inequities During Adolescence

Adolescence—beginning at the onset of puberty and ending in our mid-20s—is a key window of opportunity to shape life-long positive trajectories. But issues including racism, bias, and discrimination and the unequal distribution of resources create barriers to realizing this opportunity for too many young people. We believe that a research-based understanding of development can be an important addition to efforts to remove barriers to adolescent health and well-being.

The following key features of adolescent development should be considered in any reimagining of the systems, policies, and programs that serve adolescents to ensure equitable treatment and outcomes for all young people:

Adolescent brain development

Adolescent brains are building and strengthening connections that can last a lifetime, making adolescence a key period for growth and learning. All adolescents need supportive social environments, stimulating learning experiences, and diverse out-of-school activities to thrive.

Exploration and healthy risk taking

During adolescence, we are uniquely motivated toward new and intense experiences. All adolescents need opportunities to explore and pursue the novel experiences that help support healthy development.

Respect and status

Sensitivity to social status and respect increases during adolescence in ways that can amplify the effects of racist, discriminatory, or other unfair treatment including policies and practices that reinforce stereotypes or stigmatize certain groups. All adolescents need empathy, support, and positive, attainable ways to earn prestige and status among the peers and adults in their lives.

Contribution

Opportunities to provide ideas, resources, and help that impact their social worlds support adolescents to build autonomy, identity, and intimacy, while providing real benefits to society. All adolescents need opportunities to make meaningful contributions to their families, peers, schools, and wider communities.

Family involvement

Supportive relationships with parents and other caring adults are still extremely important in adolescence, even as peer relationships become a more central focus. Policies and programs that support the whole family are essential to the well-being of all adolescents, particularly those facing adverse experiences.

Sleep

Insufficient sleep is a public health issue for adolescents, influencing mood, attention, learning, and academic success as well as mental and physical health. It is also a racial equity issue—research shows that experiencing discrimination can have negative effects on sleep quality. Policies that increase sleep duration for adolescents, such as later school start times, are an important way to equitably support adolescent health.

Technology use

The rapid growth of digital technology and the changes it has created in adolescents' social experiences may be amplifying existing opportunities and vulnerabilities of adolescence. We need to close the “digital divide” between higher- and lower-income adolescents—in both access to tech and support for its positive use.

Adolescent brain development

Adolescent brains are actively forming new connections and eliminating those that are not needed. Brain connections that are frequently used become stronger and faster—so strong that they can last for a lifetime. This makes adolescence a key window for learning, particularly for positive social learning and learning from lived experiences. Yet the lack of resources in many educational settings combined with limited access to healthy out-of-school activities leave many young people at a disadvantage. To maximize the opportunities of this important period for learning, all adolescents need supportive social environments, stimulating learning experiences, and diverse out-of-school activities to thrive.