



# Fast Facts

## About Supporting Adolescents Five Years After COVID

In 2020, COVID disrupted nearly every aspect of education, work, and social connections. Students who were in the earliest years of their education when schools first closed due to the pandemic are now in middle school—they are in early adolescence, at a pivotal stage in development for shaping mental health and positive outcomes, even after earlier adversity.

**Many members of this new cohort of middle school students faced significant challenges during the pandemic, which often reflected existing inequities across groups and communities:**

- From March to May 2020, [55.1 million students](#) were out of their classrooms. Black and Hispanic students and students in high-poverty schools were more likely to experience longer periods of remote instruction.
- Nationally, [hundreds of thousands more children lost a parent between 2020 and 2021](#) compared to the average in previous years. Indigenous youth and Hispanic Black youth saw the biggest increases in bereavement during COVID.
- Mental health challenges increased for many young people during the pandemic, with [sharp increases between 2020 and 2022](#) among Black, Hispanic, and Asian girls. These rates have dropped since the peak of the pandemic, but remain higher for young people than they were a decade ago.
- Academically, [student engagement](#) and [the number of students who are able to read at grade level has decreased](#), while [student and teacher absenteeism](#) and [student misbehavior](#) have increased.

**Yet research tells us that these middle school years offer a critical opportunity to shape positive outcomes for young people after the adversities posed by the pandemic:**

- During adolescence, our brains [form, strengthen, and streamline connections in response to our experiences](#) more rapidly than at any other period in our lives after early childhood, making this a window when our environments and relationships can have a profound impact on our long-term success and well-being.
- Mental health issues may appear for the first time in early adolescence, but often [peak in later adolescence](#), meaning that [the middle school years are an important window](#) for identifying problems and building positive mental health.
- Changes in our brains and social contexts as we transition to middle school increase our sensitivity to belonging and earning respect from those around us. Middle school policies that support belonging and connectedness by prioritizing connections with peers and teachers can increase academic engagement and [student psychological well-being](#).
- [Developmental relationships](#) with caring adults have proven to support [middle schoolers' academic motivation, feelings of belonging, and grades](#), making them a powerful strategy to support positive outcomes for youth.