

SCIENCE SPOTLIGHT

Research Insights to Support Adolescents Post-Pandemic

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 for the pandemic are now entering adolescence. Fortunately, adolescence is a period of opportunity, when the investments we make can help chart positive trajectories, even for the young people who experienced the biggest challenges during the pandemic. This makes the next few years an important window for supporting this new cohort of middle schoolers.

Combining our understanding of what young people experienced during the pandemic with research-based knowledge about adolescent brain and social development can help us support youth to build positive mental health along with other skills and capacities they need to thrive.

The pandemic disrupted our communities, and today's adolescents felt impacts during those years ranging from mental health challenges to academic setbacks.

Although not everyone experienced hardship during the pandemic, many young people experienced significant challenges, which differed depending on their age during the pandemic,¹ race, location, socioeconomic status, and the types of jobs their parents held. The biggest challenges often reflected existing inequities across groups and communities. Some of these adverse experiences included:

- 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.²
- Nationally, hundreds of thousands more children lost a parent between 2020 and 2021³ compared to the average in previous years. This rise varied by community, from an estimated 15 percent increase in bereavement for non-Hispanic white youth, to a more than 72 percent increase for Hispanic Black youth compared to the previous year.
- In addition to specific negative experiences young people faced during the pandemic, overall uncertainty can itself be a form of adversity.⁴

MENTAL HEALTH

Research indicates increases in mental health challenges during the pandemic, especially depression and anxiety, for many youth.⁵ Suicide rates also rose for young people and certain populations were more at risk, including Black and Indigenous youth, young men, and older adolescents (ages 18 to 24).⁶ These rates have dropped since their peak in the pandemic, but remain higher for young people than they were a decade ago.⁷ As students who were in preschool or kindergarten at the pandemic's onset enter adolescence, mental health issues may appear for the first time, particularly for young people who faced significant adversity.⁸

Dive Deeper

The following UCLA CDA & NSCA resources offer more detailed information on supporting youth mental health and addressing early adversity:

- **Four Key Insights to Promote Positive Mental Health During Adolescence**
- **Early Adolescence: A Window of Opportunity for Educators to Support Positive Mental Health**
- **When Adolescents Contribute to Others it Supports Their Well-Being and Their Communities**
- **Young People Who Have Experienced Earlier Adversity Can Thrive with the Right Supports in Place During Adolescence**

Find these resources and more at developingadolescent.org/resources.

Developmental relationships can connect adolescents to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive as they transition to adulthood.

During adolescence, developmental relationships can be an effective avenue to positive development. “Developmental relationships” consist of five elements:

- 1 Expressing care through words and actions
- 2 Providing support to help youth complete tasks and achieve goals
- 3 Challenging growth by encouraging young people to go further and helping them to learn from their mistakes
- 4 Sharing power by collaborating with youth in decisions and solutions that affect them and creating opportunities for them to lead
- 5 Expanding possibilities by connecting young people with relationships and experiences that broaden their world

These kinds of relationships during adolescence have been shown to boost academic motivation,⁹ well-being,¹⁰ resilience¹¹ and economic mobility.¹² For example, one recent meta-analysis found that, on average, receiving mentorship during adolescence increases lifetime income by 25 percent.¹³

Learn more about developmental relationships at the [Search Institute’s website](#).

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Remote instruction was challenging for many students, but posed particular hurdles for families without access to technology or to reliable WiFi.¹⁴ Young students with learning disabilities, whose caregivers were not fluent in English, or whose caregivers were single parents required to work outside of the home during the pandemic experienced greater negative effects from remote learning.¹⁵ These students were more likely to come from higher-poverty

schools, with higher populations of Black and Hispanic students. These schools were also more likely to experience longer periods of remote instruction. These are some of the reasons for widening achievement gaps since the pandemic between high- and low-poverty schools.¹⁶

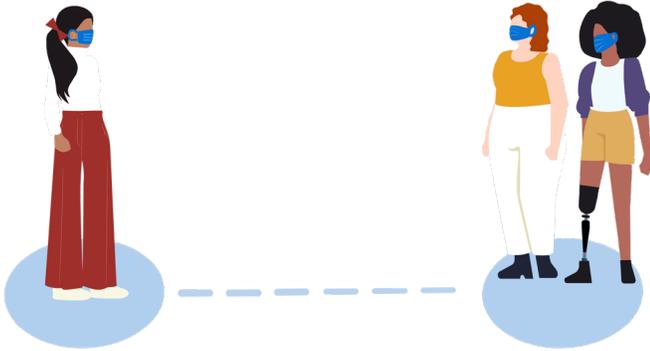
Sent home from kindergarten or forced to miss prom? Youth’s developmental stage during the most intensive years of pandemic disruption point toward promising ways to support today’s adolescents.

Research tells us that the impacts of adverse experiences differ depending on our age or developmental stage at the time of the challenge.¹⁷

Misalignments between developmental needs and environments at any age can create difficulties for young people. During the pandemic, some youth were treated as more childlike than their stage of development would indicate, stuck at home with parents when they would otherwise have been exploring and connecting with new people. Other young people were thrust into adult roles they may not have been prepared for, through losing a parent or other caregiver, a family wage-earner losing a job, or by having to care for younger siblings.

Those who were in kindergarten when COVID hit may have missed key socialization and opportunities to build foundational behavioral and emotional regulation skills that are learned during the earliest years of school. Research indicates that this group of young people as a whole shows lower scores in language development, social competence, and communication compared to kindergarten cohorts before the pandemic.¹⁸ These young people may need more support in middle school to build peer relationships along with the skills to manage their behavior and navigate emotions.

For older youth, the pandemic hit at a time when they may have been starting to expand their social world. Many of these then-middle and high school students missed or faced fundamentally changed



versions of key transitions and rites of passage such as proms, family and religious coming-of-age ceremonies, and promotions and graduations. These young people are now late adolescents or young adults, and may still need support and opportunities to fill key developmental needs like exercising agency and autonomy, exploring and taking risks, finding ways to earn respect, and developing the values, goals, and sense of identity that these missed experiences can help to provide.

The rapid learning and development that happens during adolescence makes this an important time to mitigate prior challenges to development and reflect on areas where young people have developed new skills and resilience.

When we face adversity in our earlier years, the brain responds by building and strengthening connections that help us navigate the stressful experiences in front of us. Sometimes these challenges can continue to create steeper hills for us to climb in adolescence as we build new skills and form more complex relationships in our transition to adulthood.

Fortunately, adolescent brains are primed to recover and adapt when youth receive support that matches the developmental needs of the adolescent years.

A lot happens in the brain during adolescence. Brain cells are forming, strengthening, and streamlining connections in response to experiences faster than at any point after early childhood. As a result, experiences during these years have a profound

impact on brain development, making this an opportune time to provide support that will benefit young people and their communities now and in the long term. We can help youth build positive mental health and resilience when we ensure that they have supportive relationships with peers and caring adults, opportunities to explore with room to make and learn from mistakes, and chances to contribute and to have their contributions recognized.

The more we, as adults, are able to ensure that systems and policies meet these developmental needs, the closer we are to helping all young people emerge from adolescence and from their experiences during the COVID pandemic ready to thrive.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACKNOWLEDGING THE WAYS YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ADULTS WHO SUPPORT THEM HELPED PROMOTE RESILIENCE

Like all adolescents, this newest cohort of middle school students is building their own sense of identity¹⁹ and imagining what they can contribute to the world. As they do this, it is important that they hear from adults around them not only what was difficult and what they've lost, but also about how resilient their generation has been and how they can continue to respond to challenges with creativity and hope.

One way to highlight the resilience of young people is to focus on the many young people who became civically engaged during the pandemic,²⁰ often online, and who found belonging by participating in social movements and demonstrations, organizing community support, and joining new youth advisory boards. Many others found meaning and purpose in contributing to their communities²¹ through COVID-related civic activism like making masks for others or translating health materials for family or neighbors.

Additionally, many adolescents became more politically engaged during the pandemic, with most young people reporting that the pandemic helped them realize the impacts of politics on their lives.^{22,23}

Pandemic shutdowns also led to beneficial changes in sleep patterns in the early days of the pandemic²⁴ as commutes to school were no longer necessary and young people could get the sleep they needed.

We know that sufficient sleep is critical to learning, health, and mood, and the pandemic highlighted how much more young people would sleep without the persistent demands of many typical adolescent schedules.

Policy and Practice Insights

- ◆ In addition to experiencing more intense adversity, many of those entering adolescence today missed experiences that were important for foundational social learning. As they enter early adolescence, we have the chance to support a second window of opportunity for critical social learning with research-based practices, such as fostering developmental relationships.
- ◆ Early adolescence—roughly ages 10 to 13—is a window when many mental health conditions first appear, but it is also a critical period for building positive mental health. Policymakers and school administrators should consider whether there are sufficient mental health resources and professionals in their communities to help identify or mitigate emerging mental health issues that may have been amplified by the pandemic.
- ◆ It is important that we look not only at challenges, but also at the ways this historic upheaval pushed young people and their communities to find new solutions to existing problems. Policymakers and those who develop programs for adolescents should ensure that young people continue to have opportunities to contribute in their communities, which can help others while supporting youth to build positive mental health.
- ◆ Developmental relationships during adolescence have been shown to boost academic motivation, well-being, resilience, and economic mobility. To support this cohort of young people to thrive, policymakers and other leaders should consider whether youth in their communities have sufficient opportunities for formal and informal mentorship from supportive adults.
- ◆ The way we talk about adolescence matters. Instead of focusing only on what was “lost” during the COVID pandemic, we need to emphasize the resilience of this generation of young people and the remarkable opportunity we have now to support positive outcomes and mitigate earlier adversity.
 - Explore a [research-based toolkit](#) from the FrameWorks Institute to learn strategies for effective communication about adolescent development.

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ENDNOTES

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