

STEPS CHECK IN

Aligning Science and Policy to Help Youth Thrive

Decades of research show that adolescence—approximately ages 10 to 25—is a developmental period of remarkable opportunity. The cognitive, physical, and psychological changes that take place during these years both help and motivate adolescents to learn from the environments, experiences, and relationships that surround them in ways that can profoundly shape their trajectories and prepare them to succeed in adulthood.

Development during adolescence is a dynamic, interdependent process: youth are influenced by the people and contexts around them, and in turn, have increasing influence on those people and contexts as they mature. The power of these connections and environments to shape development offers policymakers, community leaders, and youth-serving practitioners a tremendous opportunity to benefit adolescents and our communities. We believe that a science-based understanding of adolescent development can help us craft policies and programs that more effectively help young people thrive.


To that end, the UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent offers the STEPS Check In as a tool to help policymakers and youth-serving organizations review their understanding of the core developmental needs of adolescents, update their knowledge with new insights from ongoing research, and consider ideas for applying further research-based approaches within policy and practice settings.

The science-informed questions posed in this Check In are offered to spark conversations and provide additional ideas for enhancing existing policies and programs for youth. When this research-based Check In is used at the start of policy discussions, it may enhance the insights of community members, policymakers, and practitioners as they consider policy options.

The science of adolescent development is just one of many important inputs into designing effective policy and practices for youth. We hope that policymakers and youth-serving practitioners can use this research-based information as a first step as they go about their important work to craft approaches that help all youth thrive.

HOW TO USE THE STEPS CHECK IN

- ▶ **Review the items in the column on the left, which outlines specific developmental tasks of adolescence.** Identify which of these your policy or program seeks to address or are most applicable to your efforts. You can use the others to refresh your overall knowledge of the core needs of adolescents.
- ▶ **Use the questions in the column on the right to start conversations within your policy or program development team.** Consider bringing other stakeholders, including youth themselves, into the conversation as you consider how to tailor your efforts to the unique needs of your community.
- ▶ **Learn more from resources on the STEPS for Youth site.** Click through tabs on the Check In or search the resource library for Science Spotlights on specific issues that affect young people.

<p>Support adolescents' key developmental needs by providing opportunities to:</p>	<p>Does your policy or program...</p>
 <p>Explore the world and test out new ideas and experiences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide opportunities for adolescents to engage in experiences that are new to them? ▶ Support equitable deployment of resources (including financial, social, organizational) so that all adolescents can meaningfully access the opportunities envisioned? ▶ Anticipate that individuals will make mistakes, and establish norms for adults to help adolescents learn from them? ▶ Recognize and prevent discrimination and bias that can lead some youth to face more severe consequences for failure or mistakes than their peers? ▶ Encourage youth to engage in healthful experiences with uncertain outcomes by appropriately rewarding effort and achievement?
 <p>Cultivate meaning and purpose</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Create opportunities for adolescents to explore their purpose in healthy and safe settings? ▶ Seek collaborative input from youth about the types of opportunities they would like to explore to learn more about what is most important to them? ▶ Support parents' and families' ability to provide a safe and healthy environment at home within which young people can explore their purpose? ▶ Recognize that each adolescent navigates a unique path to cultivating what is meaningful for them, which may or may not include specialization in one area? ▶ Equip caring adults with the skills needed to provide support and feedback to youth as they experience achievements and setbacks on their path to developing their purpose?

<p>Support adolescents' key developmental needs by providing opportunities to:</p>	<p>Does your policy or program...</p>
 <p>Contribute to others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Recognize and place equal value on adolescents' contributions to others regardless of whether they take place through a structured setting (such as a volunteer program) or in a more informal way (such as within their family or home life)? ▶ Ensure that structured opportunities for contribution can have a real and meaningful impact on an individual, community, or peer group? ▶ Pair adolescents' opportunities to serve others with chances for them to reflect on their experiences? ▶ Invite young people to have a role in choosing how they would like to contribute to others, the parameters of these activities, and evaluation of their outcomes?
 <p>Build decision making and emotional regulation skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide adolescents with real-world opportunities to make decisions, manage emotions, and observe the outcomes of their efforts? ▶ Afford adolescents who demonstrate increasing ability to make well-reasoned decisions with increasing agency in decisions that impact their lives? ▶ Present adolescents facing a decision—particularly those of serious or lasting consequence—with all relevant information and sufficient time to consider the options involved? ▶ Prepare caring adults who share decision making spaces with adolescents to partner with youth respectfully and meaningfully, even if doing so requires departing from an established decision making process?
 <p>Support from parents and caring adults</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strengthen bonds within adolescents' families? ▶ Provide tools to improve adult family members' ability to communicate effectively with the adolescents in their lives? ▶ Forge connections between adolescents and natural mentors—caring adults in their existing social circles or communities? ▶ Prioritize and maintain, to the greatest extent possible, supportive connections between adolescents and caring adults in their lives?

Support adolescents' key developmental needs by providing opportunities to:	Does your policy or program...
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Develop values, goals, and identity

- ▶ Create opportunities for adolescents to engage in experiences that allow them to try out new roles and different aspects of their sense of identity within their family, peer group, or broader community?
- ▶ Recognize and respect adolescents as unique individuals instead of as a monolithic group based on aspects of their identity?
- ▶ Ensure access to images and messages that affirm and support pride in racial, gender, or other identities?
- ▶ Anticipate that adolescents are keenly attuned to the feedback they receive about their developing identities via social influences, such as family, friend groups, and the media?



Find a respected role among peers and adults

- ▶ Promote relationships with peers and adults that are grounded in mutual respect for each others' competence and autonomy?
- ▶ Support adolescents to identify and address issues that are important to their communities?
- ▶ Prevent the heightened effects of bias and racism encountered during adolescence by eliminating it wherever possible, and helping young people contextualize such discrimination where it occurs?



Get sufficient sleep to support mental and physical well-being

- ▶ Ensure opportunities and obligations are balanced to allow adolescents to get the recommended range of 8 to 10 hours of sleep each night?
- ▶ Set expectations for adolescents regarding participation or achievement that allow them to prioritize healthy sleep?
- ▶ Strengthen the ability of adolescents' parents and families to identify and promote healthy sleep habits within the home?
- ▶ Acknowledge and accommodate adolescents' expected shift toward later bedtimes at night and wake times in the morning?

Additional resources included within **STEPS for Youth** are a complement to this checklist and tailor the expertise of the UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent to the needs of policy and practice settings. Contact cda@psych.ucla.edu with any questions.