



Providing Positive Pathways for Adolescents to Gain Respect

Physical, cognitive, and social changes in adolescence combine to make us more sensitive to feelings of status and respect and to where we belong in our social worlds. This sensitivity is developmentally important. It motivates us to pay attention to our social environments in ways that help us learn to adapt to the more complex social demands of adulthood.

It also amplifies the impact of feeling disrespected, excluded, or given messages that we don't belong—including through experiences of racism, bias, and other forms of discrimination or harassment.

As adolescents, we're motivated to find a respected place and role among our peers. To ensure youth can channel this motivation in healthy directions, adults need to give young people ample positive pathways to gain respect and approval from the adults and peers around them.

- **At the beginning of puberty, around 10 to 13 years old, levels of testosterone increase in both boys and girls and heighten our attention to social status.**¹ Around the same time, maturational processes in the brain help us understand the perspectives of others in ways that build empathy, but also [increase self-consciousness](#) when we think we're being socially evaluated.² [Feeling rewarded from positive attention](#) appears to peak in adolescence, motivating us to find ways to earn approval from those around us.³
- **Youth-serving programs that incorporate opportunities to earn respect and status appear to be more effective than others during our adolescent years.**⁴ Relationships and environments that provide empathy, support, and positive pathways to earn status can [improve academic motivation](#) and [increase the effectiveness of health interventions](#) aimed at young people.^{5,6}
- **The flip side of our increased sensitivity to social reward is the pain of being disrespected or socially rejected.**⁷ Research indicates that when we feel as though we are being excluded by peers, [we report greater distress and show greater activity in a brain region associated with higher levels of depression in general.](#)⁸
- **Experiences that make us feel disrespected or treated as though we don't belong thus become powerful social threats.** The [negative effects of racism, discrimination, and other forms of exclusion](#) are amplified when we're adolescents^{9,10}—making efforts to eliminate or at least mitigate exposure to racism and bias for youth especially important.

Upfront Insights

- ▶ Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity and growth. From about age 10 to age 25, our maturing brains and changing hormones increase our attention to social status and make positive attention feel more rewarding. These changes motivate us to tune into the social world in ways that help us learn skills to navigate adulthood.
- ▶ Experiences that make us feel disrespected, including racism and other forms of exclusion, are amplified in adolescence. Efforts to eliminate or lessen exposure to bias, racism, and bullying are especially important in the adolescent years.
- ▶ As adults, we need to find ways to channel youths' need to be respected and valued into positive activities that help young people find a meaningful place in the world.
- ▶ Programs are more effective when they support adolescents' developmental need for agency and respect and target their desire for social standing, particularly during the middle school years.

Program and Policy Insights

Preliminary evidence suggests that programs that support adolescents' desire for autonomy and respect are more effective in delivering their messages. For example, one program found that when middle school students felt program facilitators listened to what they had to say and treated them like competent, independent individuals, [they showed greater benefits from the program](#), including reduced number of suspensions and lower pregnancy rates.¹¹

Incorporating respect for adolescents' values and desire for social status into program messaging can be a way to boost program effectiveness. As one example, a healthy eating intervention for eighth graders that respected young people's agency by replacing lectures with articles exposing deceptive marketing practices of food organizations and conveyed that higher-status (that is, older) students were choosing to eat healthier [was effective in reducing unhealthy snacking](#)¹²—and the results persisted for boys even [three months after the intervention](#).¹³

Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) programs can directly promote adolescents' sense of agency and their feeling of being respected within their communities. In these programs, youth identify an issue within their school or community, collaborate with researchers to collect data, and use their findings to suggest potential solutions and advocate for change.

Engaging youth as partners, rather than only as subjects, in policy and program development and evaluation must be undertaken thoughtfully to maximize the benefits that accrue to youth and to the resultant policy or program. Engaging youth as partners helps young people feel like they are being taken seriously and gives them a sense of ownership over developing, evaluating, or improving a policy or program. However, adolescents are keenly aware when their input is not being taken seriously. Therefore, it is essential that offices and organizations that wish to partner with youth prepare in advance to maximize the potential for effective youth engagement while minimizing the potential for tokenism and the reinforcement of youth-adult power imbalances.

► [Learn more](#) about how the science of adolescent development can inform practices when partnering with youth.¹⁴

ENDNOTES

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