Secure Relationships with Supportive Adults Continue to Matter for Adolescents

Adults in our families and communities continue to play a critical role in our healthy development during adolescence, even as we become less dependent on caregivers as we explore and expand our social world. Secure and supportive relationships with parents and other adults can help us build resilience, develop a positive sense of self, and navigate challenges. Circumstances that disrupt these connections can negatively impact our health and well-being during adolescence and into adulthood.

During adolescence, adult support remains essential to helping young people thrive. Youth need programs and policies that build on the strengths of families—including families who are facing challenges—and that ensure all young people have a caring adult in their corner.

→ **Research shows that relationships with our parents during adolescence affect both our physical and mental health.**[1,2] Secure and supportive relationships with our parents during adolescence can promote well-being, prevent negative outcomes, and help us develop a clear sense of self and identity.[3,4,5] Positive parenting behaviors—caring, validating, affectionate, or humorous interactions—affect the growth of brain regions involved in processing rewards and helping us regulate our emotions.[6]

→ **We're not only affected by what our families do for us, but also by how we contribute to our families.** Contributing to the family can be an important source of belonging and identity.[7] Helping our families can also increase our levels of happiness.[8] A strong sense of obligation to family also appears to alter brain regions involved in reward sensitivity and cognitive control in ways that can help us develop the skills and motivation to avoid unhealthy risk taking.[9]

→ **These positive relationships can vary, with different benefits and outcomes among distinct cultural and social contexts.** For example, young people from immigrant families might have more of a sense of interdependence and family obligation than youth in non-immigrant families.[10]

Upfront Insights

▶ Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity and growth. Secure and supportive relationships with our parents and other caregivers during adolescence can promote well-being, prevent negative outcomes, and help us develop a clear sense of self and identity.

▶ Contributing to our family during adolescence can increase our feelings of belonging and happiness and help us avoid unhealthy risk taking.

▶ Strong family relationships have additional benefits for youth experiencing racism or other forms of discrimination. For youth of color, families can support positive racial and ethnic identity, and for LGBTQ+ youth, family support improves emotional and physical health.

▶ Mentors can play similarly positive roles for youth who experience homelessness or who are in the foster care system.

▶ Programs and interventions can support positive development by ensuring that families and adult mentors have the social and economic support to maintain these critical relationships with youth.

▶ Policies and programs that prioritize adolescents' positive connections with supportive adults lead to healthier and more connected communities.

Families of youth of color, and of Black youth in particular, may also be a primary source of racial and ethnic socialization, cultural pride, and preparation for facing racism and discrimination.[11] LGBT youth who are accepted by their families have higher self-esteem, social support, and general health than those without supportive families.[12] Natural mentors—caring adults from a young person's existing social circle—can play similarly positive roles, particularly for youth who experience homelessness or who are in the foster care system.[13,14]

➡ **Because parents remain so important through the adolescent years, factors that disrupt these connections can have negative effects on development.** For example, youth placed in foster care have higher rates of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders as well as substance misuse than young people who did not enter the system.[15] Social inequities and biases can also interfere with positive family relationships, adding to stress in ways that affect the well-being of parents, in turn increasing depression and anxiety among youth.[16]

➡ **Effective interventions can help reduce some of these challenges and bolster the essential connections we need.** Research-informed, strength-based interventions that improve connections within families have been shown to improve mental health and reduce substance use.[17,18] In addition, youth in the foster system can benefit from programs that help them stay connected with their families, as well as programs that train foster parents to support youth who have faced adversity.

Program and Policy Insights

Programs and interventions that strengthen family bonds and give parents tools for communicating effectively with youth can support positive outcomes for young people.
▶ Learn more about one example, the Strong African American Families program.[19]

To meet the developmental needs of adolescents, policies and programs must also support the needs of the adults in their lives. Family-support programs can help support adolescent mental and behavioral health, either by treating mental health issues or preventing future mental health risks.[20]

Programs that connect young people with mentors who share their interests and advocate for their goals and ambitions can promote positive social-emotional, academic, and health outcomes. A review of formal mentoring programs for youth found positive benefits for adolescent development, including better academic performance, greater motivation, and fewer behavioral problems.[21]
▶ Learn more about one example, the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.[22]

Research suggests that having a natural mentor—a caring adult from a young person's existing social circles—can support a young person's mental and physical health.[23] Sports, extracurricular activities, community- or faith-based activities can help introduce youth to natural mentors.
▶ Learn more about one example, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program.[24]

Youth and families may benefit from extra support to help mitigate the effects when these relationships are disrupted. Disruptions exist in all communities and could include: the absence of a family member (for example, due to military deployment), illness or loss of a family member (for example, due to COVID-19 or substance use disorder), involvement in the criminal legal system of the adolescent or an adult family member, or relocations due to housing insecurity or job demands.

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