

SCIENCE SPOTLIGHT

A Developmental Path to Policy and Programs

Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity, both for young people, who are learning and growing rapidly during these years, and for our broader society as we choose how to support young people on their path to adulthood. By aligning policies and programs with insights from developmental science, policymakers and youth-serving organizations can find ways to more effectively meet the distinct needs of adolescents and support youth to become healthy, thriving adults who can contribute to their families, communities, and the wider world.

In the last several decades, research on adolescent development has dramatically increased our understanding of how young people ages 10 to 25 develop psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Scientists with research expertise in neuroscience, psychology, biological sciences, sociology, education, and public health, among other disciplines, have contributed to our understanding of the core developmental needs of young people. Researchers, often in partnership with young people themselves, have also investigated how these needs might be met in settings that shape adolescents' lives, such as school, home, the workplace, faith-based communities, and out-of-school activities. As a result of this work, we know more today than ever before about the types of experiences and relationships young people require during adolescence to advance toward healthy adulthood.

Understanding the developmental science of adolescence can help generate new ways of thinking about the challenges and opportunities our youth face and ultimately advance science-inspired solutions, systems, and support.

We offer below a few examples of policies and programs that draw inspiration from a developmental approach toward adolescence. In addition, the accompanying [appendix](#) highlights external clearinghouses that collect and assess evidence on existing programs and practices relevant to adolescents, which may be useful as you consider how to identify and support the core developmental needs of adolescents in your policy or program.

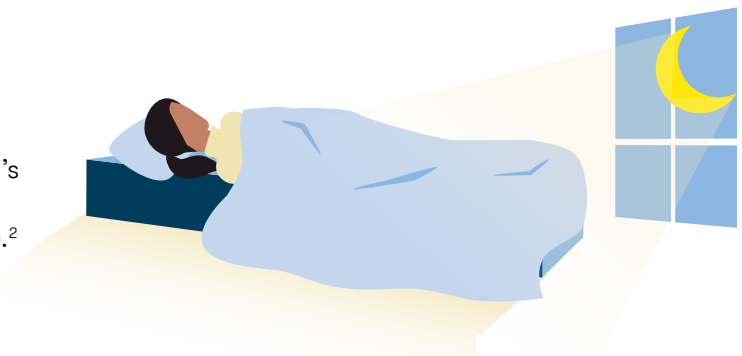
Pathways to Policy

LATER SCHOOL START TIMES

In 2019, California passed legislation requiring non-rural middle and high schools to begin the school day no earlier than 8:00 and 8:30 a.m., respectively.¹ During the legislative process, the bill's author noted that this shift aligns with research about the importance of sleep during adolescence.²

Indeed, studies have shown that later school start times make a difference for young people. In 2016, the Seattle School District shifted its school start times from 7:50 to 8:45 a.m., and a before-and-after study found that rather than simply staying up later, students slept an average of 30+ minutes more at night.³

Other research links later school start times to improved moods, better class attendance, and fewer car crashes among 17- and 18-year-old drivers.⁴



YOUNG ADULT COURTS

Research suggests that young people ages 18 to 25 who have committed moderate criminal offenses experience worse life outcomes and higher rates of recidivism when they are formally processed in the criminal justice system—that is, when they proceed through a standard series of court appearances and resultant sanctions, such as time in detention.⁵ This suggests a misalignment between the treatment of these young people in the adult criminal system and their developmental needs and capacities as adolescents.⁶

One approach that several jurisdictions in the United States have implemented in response to the needs of older adolescents is to establish “young adult courts.”⁷ For example, in partnership with developmental scientists from the University of California, Irvine, the Orange County Superior Court in California launched a pilot Young Adult Court in 2018. Young men ages 18 to 25 who proceed through the Young Adult Court receive intensive case management, supervision from officials who have received training regarding adolescent development and behavior, and resources to “strengthen their health and wellness, life skills and employment, housing, and education.”⁸

Upon completion of a minimum 18-month, court-supervised program, a judge may dismiss or reduce a young person’s felony charge.⁹ Structured as a randomized controlled trial, the Young Adult Court in Orange County will allow researchers at UC Irvine to investigate the relationship between participation in this court and young people’s short- and long-term outcomes across several areas, including health, behavior, education, and career.¹⁰



PARTNERING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE TO DESIGN CALIFORNIA HOPE ACCOUNTS

Young people have the ability to make well-reasoned decisions about their well-being when given the time and information to consider their options. Including young people in the design of policies and programs that impact their lives can benefit both adolescents and their communities. The approach taken by the California HOPE for Children Trust Account Program (the “HOPE Program”) is one example of intentionally engaging young people in the earliest stages of policy development. In 2022, the California legislature created the HOPE Program to provide financial trust accounts for youth from low-income families who lost a parent or guardian due to COVID-19 and young people who have spent at least 18 months in the foster care system.¹¹ The legislature required a Board to oversee the program, advised by a working group of subject matter experts.¹² These groups recognized “that the HOPE program could not be designed without significant direction from a set of youth who were most likely to be beneficiaries of the program.”¹³

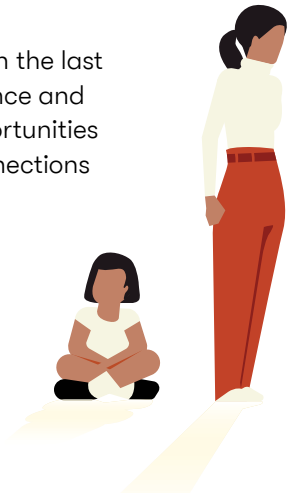
As a result, the groups sought assistance to assemble a Youth Panel of Experts. These 12 young people ages 15 to 21 had experiences that mirrored the qualifying criteria for a HOPE account¹⁴ and were compensated for their participation in the HOPE Program’s design.¹⁵ The HOPE Program’s 2024 report to the state legislature outlines an implementation plan for the program and other critical administrative choices that reflect the contributions and collaboration of the Youth Panel of Experts.¹⁶ The report also outlines an ongoing role for the Youth Panel of Experts, who will provide insights into future public outreach and educational materials for young people eligible for the program and their families.¹⁷

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE ELIGIBILITY

The earliest design of the child welfare system in the United States responded to the needs of physically abused infants and toddlers and prioritized protection and caregiver permanency for young children.¹⁸ As a system, it was not aligned with the unique developmental needs of adolescents, who can increasingly exert agency in their own lives as they practice reasoned decision-making and who may look to a variety of supportive adults and peers to help build resilience and a positive sense of identity.

One notable example of adapting this youth-serving system to better align with our understanding of adolescent development is the series of major federal policy reforms in the last 25 years that aimed to address the needs of older adolescents with foster care experience and paved the way for state-level action. In general, these reforms have expanded the opportunities for young people beyond the age of 18 to receive services and establish or deepen connections with supportive adults.

Today, in approximately 48 states, the District of Columbia, and American Samoa, young people may elect to remain in extended foster care past the age of 18 and receive supportive resources.¹⁹ Although extended foster care services vary by jurisdiction, they might include a range of resources that align with the capacities and needs of older adolescents as they learn to navigate life choices related to healthcare, housing, education, and employment with appropriate support from caring adults.²⁰



Pathways to Programs

TREATMENT FOSTER CARE OREGON

The Treatment Foster Care Oregon program is a research-informed alternative to placing youth with severe emotional or behavioral disorders in residential group care settings. First developed in 1983, Treatment Foster Care Oregon today offers separate programs for middle childhood (defined by TFCO as 7 to 11, which encompasses early adolescence) and adolescence (defined by TFCO as 12 to 17) that prioritize family settings and effective parenting over approximately nine months.²¹ The program involves weekly meetings for foster parents that teach positive parenting strategies, crisis support and respite care for foster parents, one-to-one mentorship for youth with a young adult to promote social skill building, and family and individual therapy for caregivers and youth.²²

The program's design explicitly takes into account the unique developmental needs of middle childhood and adolescence.²³ In fact, the program's effectiveness seems to be related to the support it provides for some important developmental needs of the adolescent years, including by tapping into youths' need to find a respected place among peers and to maintain secure relationships with supportive adults.

In randomized control trials, this program has been shown to cut in half the arrest rate of both boys and girls.²⁴ In addition, girls in the Treatment Foster Care Program experienced half the rate of depressive symptoms, a third less drug use in their early to mid-20s, and about half as many teen pregnancies.²⁵

STRONG AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES PROGRAM

Strong African American Families (SAAF) is a family-centered program for rural, Black families designed to strengthen early adolescents' relationships with their caregivers and prevent unhealthy risk taking.²⁶ The University of Georgia's Center for Family Research created the program expressly to apply key research insights about healthy adolescent development, including the importance of developing a positive sense of self and racial identity as well as maintaining relationships with supportive adults.²⁷

While participating in SAAF, youth ages 10 to 14 and their caregivers attend weekly program sessions over a seven-week period.²⁸ Through interactive games, discussions, and role-playing activities, youth work through topics such as setting goals, developing their sense of identity, understanding their values, and handling peer pressure.²⁹ Parents complete separate sessions focused on developing communication skills and discussing ways to support their children's development.³⁰ Adolescents and their parents also attend joint sessions focused on working together, staying connected, and supporting youths' goals.³¹

The program reduced risky sexual behavior, substance use, and behavioral problems, and increased positive racial identity.³² In addition, a recent analysis suggests that SAAF participation may reduce negative mental health effects in adolescents caused by experiencing racial discrimination.³³



ENDNOTES

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- 12 The California Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment (HOPE) for Children Trust Account Program. (2024). *Assets, Access, and Autonomy: 2024 Report to the Department of Finance and Legislature*. Office of the California State Treasurer. www.treasurer.ca.gov/hope/documents/summary.pdf
- 13 The California Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment (HOPE) for Children Trust Account Program, 2024, p. 15.
- 14 The California Hope, Opportunity, Perseverance, and Empowerment (HOPE) for Children Trust Account Program, 2024.
- 15 Pa'Lante Collaborative Strategies. (2023, August). *Know or know someone who knows foster youth? We're recruiting teen aged youth who've been in care 12 months* [Post]. LinkedIn. www.linkedin.com/posts/palante-together-know-or-know-someone-who-knows-foster-youth-activity-7094778399533002752-0Zkg
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Appendix: Evidence-Based Clearinghouses of Adolescent-Relevant Programs, Policies, and Practice

[ArtsEdSearch](#) - Arts Education Partnership (AEP)

ArtsEdSearch, a project of [AEP](#), is an online research clearinghouse focused on the outcomes of arts education for students and educators—both during and outside the school day. The clearinghouse provides summaries of over 290 research studies, focusing on the impact of arts education on students’ cognitive, personal, social, and civic development, as well as its effect on educators’ instructional practices and engagement.

[Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development \(“Blueprints”\)](#) - University of Colorado Boulder, Institute of Behavioral Science

Blueprints dedicates itself to identifying and promoting scientifically proven interventions that prevent or reduce antisocial behavior while fostering healthy youth development and adult maturity. Through rigorous evaluations, Blueprints maintains a registry of interventions, categorizing them as “Promising,” “Model,” or “Model Plus” based on their evidence of effectiveness. Blueprints’ standards ensure that only interventions meeting strict scientific criteria receive certification, contributing to the dissemination of effective strategies for youth, families, and communities.

[California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare \(CEBC\)](#)

The CEBC was established to provide reliable information on the effectiveness of programs and practices relevant to child welfare to assist professionals and stakeholders in making informed decisions about interventions for system-involved children and families. The CEBC evaluates programs and practices using rigorous criteria and assigns ratings based on the strength of evidence, helping users identify interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective.

[CrimeSolutions.gov](#) - Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice (NIJ)

CrimeSolutions.gov, operated by [NIJ](#), consists of two main components: 1) a web-based repository of programs and practices, and 2) a rigorous process for evaluating and rating these programs and practices. The clearinghouse showcases interventions that have undergone thorough evaluation and meta-analysis, assessing the strength of evidence regarding their effectiveness in achieving outcomes related to criminal justice, juvenile justice, and crime victim services. CrimeSolutions.gov aims to provide practitioners and policymakers with insights into what works, what doesn’t, and what shows promise in addressing these issues and offers guidance on how to utilize these findings for various purposes such as funding and training initiatives.

[Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center](#) - Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

[SAMHSA](#) hosts the Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center—a searchable compendium of evidence-based mental health and substance abuse interventions. Users can search by topic area, substance, or condition as well as resource type (e.g., toolkit, treatment improvement protocol, guideline), target population (e.g., youth, adult), and target audience (e.g., resource for clinicians, prevention professionals, patients, policymakers).

[Evidence for Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) - The Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University

The ESSA Clearinghouse, housed at the [Center for Research and Reform in Education](#) at Johns Hopkins University, is a resource established to support

the implementation of the [ESSA legislation](#) in K-12 education (ESSA replaced No Child Left Behind as the primary federal law governing education in the United States). The ESSA Clearinghouse provides a platform for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to access information about programs and practices that align with ESSA's evidence standards. It offers a database of programs that have been evaluated for their effectiveness and provides detailed information about each program's evidence level, characteristics, and implementation.

**[National Mentoring Resource Center \(NMRC\)](#) -
*Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention***

The NMRC aims to enhance the quality and efficiency of youth mentoring nationwide by promoting the adoption of evidence-based approaches and facilitating the exchange of innovative practices among practitioners. The NMRC offers a range of resources, guides, and toolkits tailored to different demographics, sexual orientations, specific youth populations, and types of mentoring programs.

**[NeuroLaw Library](#) - *The Center for Law,
Brain & Behavior (CLBB) at Massachusetts
General Hospital***

The [CLBB](#) at Massachusetts General Hospital recently launched the NeuroLaw Library, the first open-access resource dedicated to science-informed judicial outcomes. This repository offers neuroscience resources for the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems, including journal articles, amicus briefs, affidavits, educational videos, a neurolaw dictionary, and toolkits for attorneys and incarcerated persons. Designed for use by defense attorneys, prosecutors, judges, probation and parole officers, advocates, and incarcerated individuals and their families, it features comprehensive indexes, search tools, and accessibility programs for vision or hearing impairments.

[Results First™](#) - *Penn State University*

The Results First™ Clearinghouse Database, housed at [Penn State University](#), brings together data from nine national clearinghouses and provides users with an understanding of 4,151 programs' effectiveness through a color-coded rating system. Users can easily discern a program's impact level, ranging from negative to positive effects, facilitating informed decision-making in areas such as behavioral health, criminal justice, education, and public health.

[The Campbell Collaboration](#) ("[The Collaboration](#)")

The Collaboration is a global network in the field of social science research, dedicated to creating high-quality evidence syntheses, clear summaries, and briefs relevant to policy making. Its mission is to enrich available evidence, enabling policymakers, practitioners, and service users to make well-informed decisions. The Collaboration fosters positive societal and economic transformations by generating and employing systematic reviews and other evidence synthesis methods to inform evidence-based policies and practices.

**[The Community Guide](#) - *U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services (HHS), Community Preventive
Services Task Force (CPSTF)***

The Community Guide comprises evidence-based findings from [CPSTF](#)—established by HHS in 1996 to develop guidance on community-based health promotion—and uplifts interventions that enhance health and prevent illness in various settings such as states, communities, organizations, businesses, healthcare institutions, and schools. CPSTF evaluates intervention strategies across a wide array of health topics, applicable to various groups and populations, including changes in healthcare systems, enactment of public policies, workplace and school programs, and community-based initiatives. These intervention approaches are intended to directly enhance health, prevent or mitigate risky behaviors, diseases, injuries, complications, or adverse environmental and social factors, as well as promote healthy behaviors and environments.

The Evidence2Success Toolkit - Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF)

The Evidence2Success Toolkit is a resource provided by [AECF](#) to support communities in improving the well-being of children and youth by offering tools and guidance for using data effectively, selecting evidence-based programs, and developing financing and action plans to sustain these programs. The toolkit includes assessments to determine readiness for implementing certain tools, such as the [Youth Experience Survey](#) and [Fund-Mapping](#) tools, which help prioritize community needs and shift public funding to support proven programs. Additionally, resources for building collaborative efforts among community members, public systems, and young people are provided to enhance community engagement and collective impact.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Training, Technical Assistance, and Capacity Building Center, Resource Database - Family & Youth Services Bureau (FYSB)

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Training, Technical Assistance, and Capacity Building Center (RHYTTAC) serves as a hub for resources catering to Runaway Homeless Youth Program Grantees (administered by the [FYSB](#)) and organizations assisting young people affected by homelessness or runaway situations. RHYTTAC's Resource Database collects research related to the issues and solutions surrounding runaway and homeless youth, as well as programmatic materials such as toolkits, factsheets, and brochures.

Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse - Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF)

The Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, established by the [ACF](#), conducts reviews of research on programs and services aimed at providing enhanced support to children and families to prevent foster care placements. The clearinghouse assesses evidence on mental health, substance abuse prevention and treatment, in-home parent skill-based programs and services, and kinship navigator programs. Utilizing a systematic review process with consistent standards and procedures, trained reviewers identify, prioritize, and evaluate programs and services, rating them based on the strength of evidence as well-supported, supported, promising, or not meeting criteria.

Social Programs That Work - Arnold Ventures

Social Programs That Work aims to identify social programs proven in rigorous studies to yield substantial and lasting benefits. The clearinghouse focuses on outcomes of clear policy importance, such as high school graduation and teen pregnancies, rather than intermediate outcomes, and identifies programs through systematic monitoring of rigorous evaluations.

What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) - Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

WWC is an initiative of the [IES](#) aimed at providing educators, policymakers, and researchers with reliable and accessible information about educational programs, practices, and policies. IES conducts independent reviews of research studies to assess the effectiveness of various interventions in education, and the WWC evaluates the quality of evidence and categorizes interventions based on their effectiveness.