

SCIENCE SPOTLIGHT

# Four Key Insights to Promote Positive Mental Health During Adolescence

Adapted from “[Young people need experiences that boost their mental health](#),” Nature, October 10, 2022, by UCLA CDA’s Co-Executive Directors Andrew J. Fuligni and Adriana Galván.

**A**s a result of decades of research into adolescent brain and social development, we know what helps adolescents build positive mental health. There is ample evidence that certain experiences and relationships support adolescents’ well-being. Adults can have a positive impact on young people’s lives by putting in place policies, programs, and practices to support their development during the important years between childhood and adulthood.

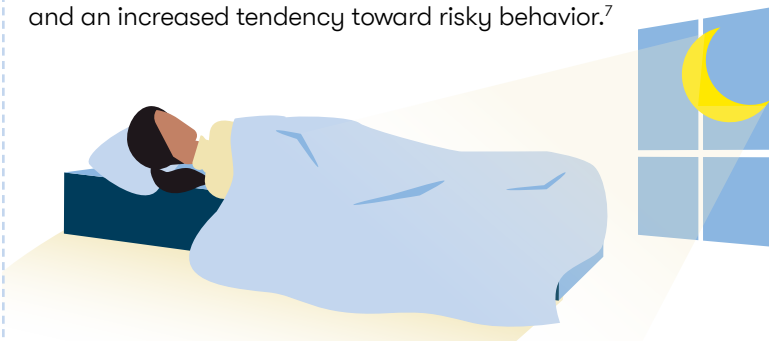
More specifically, **we can help more of our young people build positive mental health by drawing on these four key insights from developmental science:**

## 1 HEALTHY SLEEP DURING ADOLESCENCE IS IMPERATIVE

Studies indicate that mental health during adolescence is particularly sensitive to sleep. There is a consistent link between sleep problems and most of the psychiatric disorders that are evident during this period, including attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, and depression.<sup>1</sup> What’s more, recent studies in U.S. students aged 14 to 18 have shown both declines in mental health<sup>2</sup> and reductions in the amount of sleep,<sup>3</sup> although it is hard to show a causal link between the two.

While individual youth differ in the amount of sleep they need, most adolescents need between eight to 10 hours per night.<sup>4</sup> Younger adolescents and those already experiencing mental health issues may require more sleep than the average.

Research (mainly in adults) has shown that regular, sufficient sleep is connected to learning and emotional regulation. For example, sleep-deprived people are more likely to have lapses in attention, deficits in memory, and slower learning in some situations<sup>5</sup> than are control groups. Sleep deprivation also affects the reactivity of certain brain regions in response to experiences,<sup>6</sup> which can lead to greater emotional response to stressors and an increased tendency toward risky behavior.<sup>7</sup>



## Policy and Program Insights

- ▶ Schools, employers, and youth-serving programs should **structure schedules to help adolescents prioritize healthy sleep**. This could include delaying school start times, limiting the hours that adolescents can work or drive on school nights, or avoiding early-morning or late-evening meetings or practice times.
- ▶ College admissions processes, secondary schools, and youth-serving programs should **set realistic expectations of adolescents** so that pressures to excel academically or build an extracurricular resume do not infringe on young people’s ability to get healthy sleep.
- ▶ Fund programs that **support family and caregivers’ ability to identify and promote healthy sleep habits in the home**, such as quiet times before bed or limitations on technology use at night.

## 2 ADOLESCENTS NEED HEALTHY WAYS TO EXPLORE AND DISCOVER

Exploration and risk taking are an important part of healthy development during adolescence. Numerous studies indicate that brain development during adolescence supports a crucial period of learning and discovery that appropriately entails more risk taking than do earlier or later periods in our development. Our brain releases more dopamine during adolescence than during childhood or adulthood, so its reward system is more excited by the unknown during these years than at any other time in our lives. Experimental studies from developmental psychology provide additional evidence that adolescents are more tolerant of uncertainty than are adults and are also more likely than adults or younger children to actively explore new solutions when learning to perform a new task.<sup>8</sup>

School-based extracurricular activities, special-interest clubs, sports, or community-based activities such as volunteering can all provide adolescents with healthy outlets for self-directed exploration. But to have the greatest impact, programs must be designed thoughtfully. A 2014 meta-analysis showed, for example, that community service positively affected all sorts of measures in young people aged 12 to 20.<sup>9</sup> These ranged from participants' thoughts about themselves to their level of motivation in school. But this happened only if participants were also given an opportunity to process their experiences, such as through keeping a journal or in group discussions.



## Policy and Program Insights

- ▶ Secondary schools and college admissions processes should **encourage adolescents to take academic risks**. For example, high schools could provide broad access to advanced classes and new subjects for all interested students and college admission offices could value earnest attempts at challenging coursework that may result in lower letter grades.
- ▶ **Identify and eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination**. In addition to other negative consequences for young people, such bias can result in young people from different backgrounds facing disparate consequences for taking risks that lead to mistakes. Recognize that racism and bias can cause adults to perceive Black and other minority youth as being more adult-like than their same-aged White peers.
- ▶ **Fund and support an array of opportunities for youth to try new activities** at school, at home, in the community, and in the digital world.

### 3 ADOLESCENTS BENEFIT PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY FROM CONTRIBUTING TO OTHERS

The network of areas in our brain that activates in social interactions matures rapidly during our adolescent years, deepening our understanding of the complex feelings, perspectives, and needs of other people. We become better able to determine who needs our help and what kind of help they might need.

Both survey work and experiments in developmental psychology show that adolescents become increasingly attuned to their position and role in the world as they age. This might manifest as a greater concern about their role among peers, or as an increased awareness of how factors such as ethnicity and economic background shape their standing in society. Adolescents also increasingly explore different ways to play a part in society through their jobs, families, and activities.

In correlational work in behavioral psychology, contributing to others has been linked to adolescents having a greater sense of meaning and purpose—which can, in turn, promote better mental health, especially for youth from marginalized groups.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, experimental interventions and surveys have shown that opportunities to contribute to others' lives can have multiple effects on adolescent well-being. In a 2013 clinical trial, adolescents who spent two months volunteering with children aged 5 to 11 had lower levels of the pro-inflammatory cytokine interleukin-6 and cholesterol and were less likely to be overweight<sup>11</sup> compared with a control group. Both body weight and biological markers of inflammation have been linked to depression and other mental health problems.



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## Policy and Program Insights

- ▶ **Provide opportunities for young people to make meaningful contributions to their social groups and communities.** Programs that support youth to contribute can have positive effects on their mental and physical health and support their academic success.
- ▶ Policies and programs should **address inequities in adolescents' opportunities to make meaningful contributions.**<sup>12</sup>
- ▶ **Families are typically the first context where youth can contribute to others** through common household chores. Youth from many lower-income, ethnic-minority, and immigrant families play significant roles in helping their families, and these contributions should be recognized by colleges and employers.<sup>13</sup>
- ▶ Time-intensive caregiving can sometimes be a source of stress that negatively impacts mental health. Schools can **support caregiving youth** by offering flexible course schedules, community service hours for caregiving, and training for teachers and counselors to support these youth.<sup>14</sup>

## 4 HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND OTHER ADULTS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING

Data show that adolescents who have secure and supportive relationships with their parents or other carers have lower levels of depression and a stronger sense of identity than do those with insecure relationships.<sup>15</sup> Caring, affectionate and validating parenting behaviors—collectively known as positive parenting—have also been linked to the maturation of certain brain regions that are associated with the regulation of emotions, such as the amygdala.<sup>16</sup> Despite common misperceptions, empirical research shows that parenting is often a stronger determinant of adolescent health and well-being than peer relationships.<sup>17</sup>

Many studies have shown that interventions to improve relationships in families, introduced by public-health and psychology researchers over the past three decades, can reduce the use of substances and improve mental health in youth.<sup>18</sup> Other studies, largely from behavioral psychology and education research, have shown that relationships with caring adults outside the family home can also be important in shaping the lives of young people. Moreover, studies examining the importance of role models suggest that formal mentoring programs, such as those involving a young adult in the community spending time with an adolescent, can positively affect the mental health of youth.<sup>19</sup>



## Policy and Program Insights

- ▶ **Fund policies and programs that seek to strengthen relationships in families.** Studies show promising interventions may include providing educational tools to increase parent or caregiver involvement in adolescents' daily lives or guidance on how to improve communication between young people and their caregivers.
- ▶ **Natural mentors—caring adults from youths' existing social circles—can help support healthy development.** Sports, extracurricular activities, and faith- or community-based activities can help introduce youth to natural mentors.
- ▶ **Formal mentoring seems to be particularly important for adolescents who lack stable home environments,** such as those who experience homelessness or are in the foster care system.

## ENDNOTES

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