



## Adolescents Need Supportive Environments Where They Can Develop Values, Goals, and a Positive Sense of Identity

**A**dolescence is an important period for exploring who we are, what we value, and who we want to be. Over the course of our adolescent years, we are developing [a more integrated, stable sense of our identity](#) that we carry with us into adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

Healthy development in adolescence involves creating a positive sense of self and belonging based on our values and aspirations. This process can be challenging for youth facing racism, sexism, or other forms of bias and discrimination, which too often cause young people to be defined by others in ways that are grounded in negative or otherwise limiting stereotypes.

Research into development helps explain why adolescence is such an important window for building a sense of identity and how adults can support the process.

- **As our cognitive abilities mature, we're able to think in more complex, abstract ways that help us engage in self-reflection on a deeper level.** [Regions in our brain](#) associated with perspective taking, decision making, self-regulation, and values become more active when we're evaluating ourselves in relation to others, especially in social contexts.<sup>2</sup> In addition, we become [more sensitive to social stimuli](#), increasing the effects of feedback from our family, peers, communities, and media on shaping our identity.<sup>3</sup>
- **Our sense of identity is more than just who we are—it also affects what we do.** Throughout adolescence, our sense of identity increasingly [influences the decisions we make](#).<sup>4</sup> Research suggests that we value behaviors more when they

### Upfront Insights

- ▶ Adolescence is a time of extraordinary opportunity and growth. Between ages 10 and 25, our brains mature in ways that help us better understand others' perspectives and also make us more sensitive to social feedback.
- ▶ During adolescence, we forge our sense of who we are and who we aspire to be—and our burgeoning sense of identity can impact the choices we make. For example, if we see ourselves as a hard-working student, we may skip a party to stay home and study.
- ▶ Adolescence is also a key window for understanding our racial-ethnic and sexual identities. Messages that support pride in these parts of our identity are critical to our well-being.
- ▶ To build a positive sense of identity, we need opportunities to explore our place in the world, set our own goals, and determine how we want to be seen, without being defined by others through negative stereotypes.
- ▶ We need safe environments in our adolescent years—in leadership positions, sports, or extracurricular activities—where we can develop our sense of self as an individual and within our community.

Policies and programs that support adolescents to explore and discover their values, goals, and a positive sense of identity lead to healthier, more connected communities.

fit with our sense of identity. For example, if we feel strongly about our identity as a good student, we may choose to skip a party the night before a big test.

- **Healthy development involves creating a positive sense of self and belonging that includes our sense of racial, ethnic, and gender identity.** Positive [feelings about our racial and ethnic identity](#) are associated with psychological well-being and even serve as a buffer against external stressors.<sup>5</sup> For youth of color, [positive identity formation](#) supports emotional adjustment, academic outcomes, and health.<sup>6</sup> For sexual minority youth, a positive sense of identity is [protective against depression](#) and makes LGBTQ+ youth [more likely to form supportive friendships](#) with other sexual minority youth.<sup>7,8</sup>
- **Our increased motivation to explore and take risks during adolescence allows us to try out different interests, “selves,” and roles within our peer groups, families, and community.**<sup>9</sup> Inequities resulting from poverty as well as discrimination within systems and by adult “gatekeepers” can limit opportunities to safely explore and reduce options related to school and work.
- **During adolescence, we need agency to explore our place in the world, to set our own goals, and to determine how we want to be seen. We also need leeway to change these over time.** The challenge for youth from historically stigmatized groups is that often they are being [defined by others](#) in ways that are grounded in [negative stereotypes](#).<sup>10,11</sup>

## Policy and Program Insights

### Create equitable opportunities for youth to explore roles and activities that can help them determine what they value and who they want to become.

These could occur throughout the contexts in which youth engage every day, such as at home with family, in the community, at vocational and career training programs, on sports teams, and in school or extended learning programs.

- ▶ Learn more about one example of an afterschool program that focuses on boosting leadership skills and embracing cultural identity, [Youth Empowerment Solutions](#).

### Ensure access to images and messages that affirm and support pride in racial, gender, or other identities and provide space for young people to explore their identities.

- ▶ A review of programs that focus on Black adolescent identity exploration found that these programs are not only developing youths’ positive sense of identity, they also can [promote positive developmental outcomes, such as by improving parent-child relationships and reducing negative risk taking](#).<sup>12</sup>
- ▶ Research suggests that supportive school climates—those that have Gay-Straight Alliances, health curricula for LGBTQ+ youth, anti-bullying policies, and staff trainings on creating a LGBTQ+-supportive environment—are [strongly associated with LGBTQ+ youths’ well-being](#).<sup>13</sup> Additional research is needed to help us understand how we can create strong programs that support and affirm adolescents’ sexual and gender identity.

### Develop opportunities for young people to forge identities as group or community members.

Substantial research has connected extracurricular activities with positive youth development [by contributing to young people’s sense of identity as a member of a group or community](#).<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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