



Supporting Healthy Development in Adolescents from Immigrant Families

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Within the United States, more than one in four children under 18 are from immigrant families, living with at least one parent who is an immigrant.
- In many cases, youth from immigrant families demonstrate more positive outcomes than their peers whose parents were born in the United States, although factors such as economic stress, discrimination, and family separations can create greater challenges for some.
- Adolescents from immigrant families may spend more time contributing to their families, which can support positive mental health but can also lead to challenges if such activities become too stressful.
- The flexible, multicultural identities developed by youth from immigrant families can promote healthy adjustment.
- Policies that separate or threaten to separate immigrant families or that interfere with young people's connections to schools and other institutions have lasting negative consequences for adolescents across legal statuses.
- Understanding the strengths and challenges shared by many adolescents from immigrant families can help us better support positive development for young people.

The adolescent years—from about 10 to 25 years old—are a period of profound growth, development, and learning, when policies, programs, and personal connections can support positive outcomes for young people as well as our communities.

Within the United States, more than one in four children under 18 (26 percent) are from immigrant families, living with at least one immigrant parent. This percentage has doubled over the past three decades. Of these children, 86 percent were born in the United States.¹

A significant number of these young people from immigrant families are adolescents. Supporting all adolescents in the United States requires understanding some of the unique characteristics and experiences of this growing population.

Developmental needs of our adolescent years

During adolescence, we are learning and growing rapidly as we explore and discover the world.

Our relationships and environments play a central role in this developmental process. During adolescence, our brains are especially adaptable, changing in response to the experiences we have within our families, our schools, our neighborhoods, and our broader world. Maturing connections within our brains help us to adapt to our environments and learn how to become contributing members of our communities. This period of dynamic brain development presents a window of opportunity in which experiences that



support our key developmental needs can promote long-term healthy development.

The diversity of immigrant families in the United States

Immigrant families within the United States vary widely in terms of their country of origin, race, ethnicity, documentation status, native language, and socioeconomic status.¹ In addition, settlement patterns have led to differences in the specific populations of immigrant families that reside in different regions, states, and localities in the country. Families' migration experiences and reasons for immigrating to the United States also differ. As a result, adolescents from immigrant families are a highly diverse group with distinct cultural dynamics and family circumstances in addition to the personal differences inherent to all of us as unique individuals. It is important to keep this diversity in mind as we consider the best ways to support this population of youth.



Still, brain and social development during adolescence as well as the experience of immigrating or being the child of immigrants combine to create some common experiences and similarities among different populations of young people from immigrant families. These commonalities are important to understand for those building policies, programs, and community initiatives designed to support positive development for these youth.

The unique strengths and challenges of adolescents from immigrant families

The experiences and circumstances of immigrating or having a parent who is an immigrant can create particular strengths as well as challenges that are shared by many young people from immigrant families.

In many cases, American youth from immigrant families demonstrate healthier outcomes than same-aged peers whose parents were born in the United States.² For instance, studies have found that many youth from immigrant families attain equal or higher levels of academic achievement, are less likely to take unsafe health risks, and have lower rates of asthma, learning disabilities, and depression than youth from similar ethnic backgrounds with US-born parents.^{3,4,5}

Despite these notable strengths, research has also shown that there is tremendous variability among adolescents from immigrant families in terms of their wellbeing. This variability stems, in part, from differences in experiences, adversity, and access to resources among this diverse population of youth. Youth from immigrant families who have fewer economic resources and who experience higher levels of discrimination face greater health challenges on average.^{6,7} As a process that often extends over a long time, migration to the US can produce periods of family separation that can in some cases create significant stress and challenges for family members.⁸ In addition, the threat of family separation due to policies that threaten deportation of a family member can have negative economic, educational, and emotional impacts on youth from immigrant families.⁹

Adolescents who are more comfortable than their parents with the languages and cultural norms of their country of residence are often asked to translate for parents and other family members



in interactions with businesses, schools, and official agencies.¹⁰ Assisting in this way provides opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their families, which has been linked to better mental health,¹¹ but it can also lead to challenges. If these translation obligations are experienced as burdensome or stressful, they can lead to greater parent-child conflict and mental health challenges.^{12,13}

Overall, while many youth from immigrant families demonstrate healthy development, there is notable variability in health outcomes among this diverse population of youth. These disparities highlight the importance of programs and policies that are tailored to meet the unique needs of each community.

Supporting healthy development in adolescents from immigrant families

All adolescents have the same key developmental needs. Here, we focus on three particular needs for positive development and provide some specific insights about how we can best support youth from immigrant families to thrive.



Develop values, goals, and identity

During adolescence, we develop a deeper understanding of who we are, what matters to us, and what it means to be a member of the social and cultural groups with which we identify. For adolescents from immigrant families, this process may involve integrating multiple cultural identities. Adolescents from immigrant families often develop “hybridized” identities that embrace the cultural values and norms of the country where they currently reside and combine them with their families’ cultural identities.¹⁴ These multicultural identities can be very flexible, allowing adolescents to adapt to the varying social and cultural contexts

that they encounter at home, at school, and in their communities. The rapid brain development that occurs during adolescence supports this behavioral flexibility, enabling adolescents to quickly learn social norms and adapt their behaviors based on the environment that they are in.¹⁵ Research suggests that these flexible, multicultural identities are beneficial and may promote healthy adjustment in first-generation and second-generation adolescents from immigrant families.¹⁴ As a result, it is important for youth from immigrant families to have opportunities to explore and embrace complex identities that may go beyond the rigid social categories often used to classify racial and ethnic identity in the United States.



Finding a respected role among peers and adults

As we enter adolescence, we become more attuned to social cues and increasingly aware of where we belong and are accepted. This heightened awareness of social dynamics helps us prepare for the social demands of adulthood, but also amplifies the negative effects of social exclusion, disrespect, and discrimination.¹⁶ Experiences that signal to adolescents that they are not being respected—including individual experiences of discrimination as well as broader societal messaging about their racial or ethnic group—can have harmful effects on adolescent wellbeing.^{17,18}

Unfortunately, many adolescents from minority groups in the United States report increases in perceived racial discrimination between the ages of 10 and 14, and youth from immigrant backgrounds are especially likely to experience racial discrimination.¹⁹ Efforts to increase a sense of belonging, minimize discrimination, and promote mutually respectful relationships with peers and adults are integral to supporting the developmental needs of adolescents from immigrant families.



Support from parents and other caring adults

Fortunately, support from caregivers and other caring adults can help to promote healthy development even in the face of challenges. Although we gain independence and tend to spend increasing time with peers during adolescence, adults continue to play an essential role in healthy development during this stage. Research has found that caring and supportive parenting predicts higher self-esteem and lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in youth, including those from immigrant families.²⁰

Like all young people, youth from immigrant families can also receive support from adults other than parents. For example, emotional and practical support from teachers has been shown to boost academic outcomes for first- and second-generation immigrant youth.²¹ Additionally, immigrant families in the United States are more likely to live in multigenerational households.²² Living in multigenerational households during childhood has been linked to better cognitive functioning decades later, suggesting that grandparents and other adult family members can provide additional support and benefit long-term development.²³

Investing in a better future for all adolescents

Adolescence is a period of remarkable brain development that allows us to rapidly learn, adapt to changing environments, and form a lasting sense of identity that persists into adulthood. This period of flexibility provides a window of opportunity for adolescents from immigrant families to develop complex cultural identities, provide increasing support to their families, and navigate diverse social and cultural norms in their various communities.

When we create policies and programs that closely fit the unique needs and strengths of adolescents—including the more than 25 percent of youth in the US who are from immigrant families—we are investing in a better future for this next generation and our society as a whole.



SUPPORTING ADOLESCENTS IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES AFFECTED BY RAPIDLY CHANGING IMMIGRATION POLICIES

The majority of immigrants in the United States (73 percent) are naturalized citizens, visa holders, or lawful permanent residents.¹ But six million children under 18 live with at least one person, usually a parent, who is undocumented.²⁴ When a parent is detained or deported, their children experience negative impacts to their physical and mental health. Even the threat that a parent could be deported increases depression, anxiety, and substance use, and makes it less likely that a young person will attend school regularly²⁵ or access necessary medical care.²⁶

Policy changes that affect the status of immigrant families and their access to resources have lasting consequences for adolescents across legal statuses. In a recent brief, the Society for Research in Child Development outlines the ways in which policies that lead to family separation or detentions threaten the psychological, physical, and socioeconomic wellbeing of youth and their families.⁹



ENDNOTES

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