THE INTERSECTION OF ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND ANTI-BLACK RACISM

COUNCIL REPORT #1

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Center for
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Adolescent

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The National Scientific Council on Adolescence (NSCA), housed at the Center for the Developing Adolescent at UCLA, was formed in 2019 to integrate and disseminate scientific knowledge about the rapidly growing science of adolescent development. The goal of the NSCA is to drive implementation and innovation in youth-serving systems in order to improve all young people's trajectories. For more information, visit developingadolescent.semel.ucla.edu/topics/item/adolescence-and-anti-black-racism

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Glossary

Adultification is a form of racism in which youth are seen and treated as being older than their actual age.

Agency is the ability (and opportunity) to make decisions and assume responsibility in the world.

Anti-Blackness describes the systemic marginalization of Black people. It operates through both interpersonal racism and structural racism.

Critical consciousness is a process through which students from historically marginalized racial groups are encouraged to understand, analyze, and challenge racial injustice at its roots and apply this understanding toward academic goals and civic engagement.

Culturally relevant pedagogy describes instructional practices that affirm cultural identity and critical social engagement.

Equity refers to fairness and justice and is not the same as equality. Equality means providing the same to everyone, while equity means providing what different groups and individuals need to correct imbalances that have resulted from previous unfair, unjust, and unequal treatment.

Identity—we discuss two types of identity in this paper:
- **Group identity** is about which groups we choose to belong to and which groups others perceive us to be a part of.
- **Personal identity** involves understanding who we are as an individual and how we are viewed by others.

Intersectionality refers to how our different group memberships—including race, gender, sexuality, and class—combine (or intersect) in ways that create differential experiences and impacts of power, privilege, and social inequality.

Microaggressions are everyday, subtle, casual, or indirect comments or behaviors—intentional or unintentional—that communicate bias toward a historically marginalized group.

Pushout describes the phenomenon of students dropping out of school as a result of unwelcoming environments and unforgiving policies.

Racialize means to categorize and make assumptions about a person or a group of people based on their race.

Racism—we discuss two types of racism in this paper:
- **Interpersonal racism** describes prejudice and discrimination shown through attitudes or behaviors of individuals, including the adults or peers who interact with adolescents.
- **Structural racism** describes the ways that social systems and institutions reinforce and perpetuate racism and inequity.

Restorative justice in education addresses challenging behaviors and learning through relationship building and supportive practices, rather than punitive and exclusionary ones.

Style note: This paper capitalizes both Black and White when describing a person's race. For a robust explanation of this style, see *The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black* by Kwame Anthony Appiah.

Introduction

Racism and related inequities have shaped the experiences and trajectories of young people in the United States since before our country's founding. Even now, and perhaps especially now, our country is engaging in passionate discourse surrounding the existence of systemic racism and the fact that Black lives matter. Young people in 2021 are entering adulthood amid an ongoing national debate that still calls into question the reality of modern racism and its widespread hold over American culture.

Adolescence—beginning around 10 years of age and ending in our early 20s—represents a particularly important period of *experience* and *opportunity* during which we identify who we are, who we want to be, and where we belong. Key milestones of adolescence offer opportunities to promote positive trajectories as we transition to adulthood. Forming our sense of *identity and belonging* is one key milestone, as we establish our views of ourselves and realize our place in the world. Our increasing *agency and exploration* during these years is another key milestone, helping us to become more self-sufficient and explore the world beyond our family and community of origin.

Adolescence is also a key window during which the effects of racism are amplified and deeply felt. Thus, adolescence is a unique time of life when healthy development and experiences with racism *intersect* within the contexts and spaces where we develop, creating different experiences along racial lines. We cannot fully support the formation of identity and belonging and increasing agency and exploration for Black youth without considering the impact that anti-Black racism has on these developmental milestones.

Fortunately, the monumental growth and learning that occur during adolescence make these years a time when interventions and anti-racist approaches can make a real difference. Insights from developmental science remind us to focus on the adolescent years as an important time to promote anti-racism in ways that can positively impact young people today, their futures, and the communities and country that they will come to lead. We can begin to dismantle not only the effects of racism, but also the system of racism itself, so that adolescents can become the healthy, compassionate, free-thinking adults of tomorrow that our nation and world need to thrive.

Scope of This Paper

A Focus on Black Adolescents

The focus of this paper is on the experience of *Black adolescents* who are growing up amidst evolving national beliefs about racism, ongoing political debate surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, and a growing national awareness about the experience of being Black in America. While some of the topics in this paper are relevant for many youth of color, we focus on Black adolescents for the following reasons:

- Anti-Black racism and race-based inequities in both historical and modern American society have created a unique *shared experience* among Black adolescents, including the necessity of coping with discrimination and other race-related stressors, which is evident at a group level despite diversity in individual experiences.[1,2,3,4]

- A focus on Black youth mirrors our country's current attention to systemic anti-Black racism and related injustices, which have been brought to the forefront of our national awareness by the Black Lives Matter response to police brutality as well as other activism, scholarship, and dialogue from people of color.

- The majority of adolescent research on racism focuses on Black youth.[5,6] A focus on the experiences of this particular group best reflects the existing scholarship.

> ### The Concept of Race
>
> Race is a social construct and not grounded in biology or genetics. The concept of "race" and the racial categories that stem from it were historically constructed as a way of maintaining power—some groups were deemed superior and others inferior. Although not biological, racial categories are associated with differential access to power. For example, in the U.S., groups defined as White experience more advantages.[10] Importantly, racial disparities in opportunities, experiences, and a variety of outcomes are caused by *racism* (interpersonal racism, structural racism, and anti-Blackness) and not by an individual's racial identity.

While this paper largely focuses on the shared experiences of Black adolescents, youth who identify with the label of "Black" are diverse in their daily interactions in the world as Black young people. They live and grow within diverse social contexts (including school, home, and peers), and they feel the impact of being Black in different ways, with different impacts on their daily interactions and emotions. Black youth also encounter varying levels of racism and may interpret racist and inequitable experiences in very different ways. Developmental scientists offer frames to understand how variations in resource access, power, risk exposure, social support, and other factors can lead to different experiences and outcomes among Black youth.[7,8,9] So while it is important to consider the shared experiences of Black adolescents, we acknowledge the rich diversity of Black lived experience during adolescence and we celebrate the well-documented fact that Black youth are not a uniform group.

Types of Racism

Like the individual experiences of Black adolescents, the types of racism that youth encounter are diverse and complex. In discussing racism and race-related inequities in this paper, we address two major categories of racism: *interpersonal racism* and *structural racism*. These categories of racism are described in detail in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM)'s 2019 report *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*[11] and briefly summarized here. In addition, we discuss anti-Blackness, in which interpersonal and structural racism work together to systematically marginalize Black people in American society.

Interpersonal Racism

Interpersonal racism encompasses prejudice and discrimination shown through attitudes or behaviors of adults or peers who interact with adolescents.

Interpersonal racism describes the more widely recognized forms of racism that occur between people and groups during daily interactions at school, with friends, at work, and in the community. Interpersonal racism includes overt discrimination, racial bias, and *microaggressions* (subtle, casual, indirect, or unintentional comments and slights that highlight a person's membership in a marginalized group). Experiencing these types of racist interactions on an ongoing basis creates barriers for youth to take full advantage of adolescence as a key window for learning and development.

> ### Core Drivers of Racial Inequity[11]
> - Disparities in family wealth and income coupled with neighborhood segregation by race and income.
> - Differential institutional responses to adolescents by key systems (including education, health, justice, and child welfare).
> - Discriminatory attitudes and behavior by adults and peers who regularly interact with adolescents.

Structural Racism

Structural racism describes differences in the ways that institutions respond to adolescents from different backgrounds.

Structural racism goes beyond personal biases or prejudices, describing the social norms, policies, and institutions that create and maintain racial inequality for people of color. Inequities and discriminatory practices in education, employment, housing, community resources, the juvenile justice system, and healthcare limit opportunities and create unequal access for Black youth to the resources most crucial for healthy development.

Anti-Blackness

For Black youth, daily experiences of racism are symptoms of a larger issue within our society of *anti-Blackness*, in which interpersonal and structural racism work together to systematically marginalize Black people. Black adolescents face negative outcomes in health, education, economic success, and emotional well-being due to anti-Blackness.[2,11] Moreover, as Black adolescents learn to expect and manage encounters with anti-Blackness, their experiences evolve to reflect their growing understanding of their unfair treatment and marginalization by the people and institutions around them.[12]

The science supporting both the *existence* and the *negative impacts* of interpersonal racism, structural racism, and anti-Blackness is irrefutably clear.[5,11,13] Racism negatively impacts many aspects of healthy development, including mental health, self-esteem, academic outcomes, and high-risk behaviors.[2] More broadly, these various forms of racism result in reduced access to resources, normalization and acceptance of racist behavior, and less support for positive development within schools, communities, and other institutions that serve Black adolescents. Finally, for our society as a whole, racism severely limits economic growth and undermines our nation's ability to live up to its full potential.[14]

Multiple Layers of Racism

Racism operates at the interpersonal level through everyday interactions and is structured into social norms, policies, institutions, and systems. Anti-Blackness, or the systemic marginalization of Black people, has persisted for centuries and manifests through interpersonal and structural racism. These forms of racism can negatively impact Black youths' physical and mental well-being and systematically curtail access to resources that support positive development during adolescence.

Anti-Blackness

Structural

Includes inequitable policies and practices in institutions and systems, such as under-resourced schools, lack of access to quality healthcare, and biased juvenile justice practices

Interpersonal

Includes racial prejudice, racial microaggressions, and dehumanizing stereotypes about Black youth
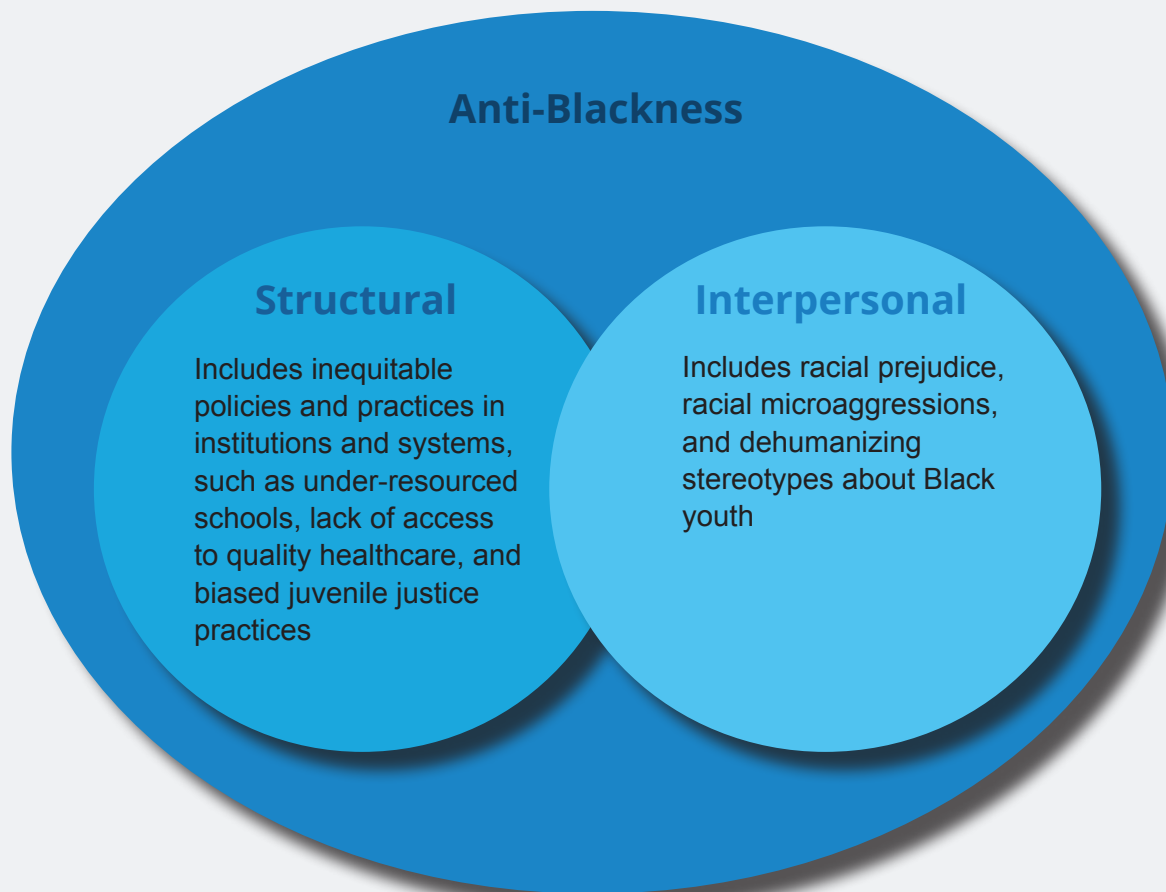
Key Milestones of Adolescence and Their Intersection with Racism

Two key areas of adolescent development are: (1) identity formation and belonging, and (2) increases in agency and exploration. Here, we examine how these key aspects intersect with race and consider how they are influenced and undermined by interpersonal and structural racism.

Identity & Belonging

During adolescence, youth develop more robust views of themselves and learn where they belong within their larger communities. Through diverse experiences and more complex social interactions, adolescents develop their *personal identity* (understanding who they are and how they are viewed by others) and their *group identity* (which groups they choose to belong to and which groups others perceive them to be a part of). While developing their identities, adolescents also develop stronger personal values and align themselves with groups that share their values and beliefs. Healthy development in adolescence supports identity formation and promotes the establishment of a positive sense of self, commitments to personal and group values, and feelings of belonging. For Black adolescents and other youth of color, specifically, positive identity formation leads to well-established benefits including emotional adjustment, academic outcomes, and health.[15]

Adolescents are able to develop more complex identities, including racial identity, with the help of their increasing cognitive abilities. These heightened abilities allow youth to develop a more nuanced understanding of how people and groups interact and how social systems influence human behavior. As this understanding grows, adolescents become particularly well-equipped to appreciate the complexities of racism at a structural level (such as historical and contemporary systems of power and oppression). As a result, complex race-related issues may take a central role in identity formation for many Black youth.[12,16,17] A range of intersecting forces influence Black adolescents' development of identity within a racialized society.[12,15,16] As they incorporate these complexities into their racial identity, Black adolescents may find it difficult to consolidate their growing understanding of racism with otherwise positive views of themselves and their racial group.

In addition to encountering interpersonal and structural forms of racism, Black adolescents may also experience *adultification*—a form of racism in which Black youth are seen and treated as being older than their actual age.[18] This perception may influence or even contradict adolescents' developing views of themselves, making it harder to form a personal identity that feels authentic

> **Identity and Belonging**
>
> During adolescence, we develop a growing sense of our *identity*—who we are, what we value, and how we are viewed by other people. As a part of this process, we also develop group identity, through which we feel a growing sense of alignment with groups that fit our values and interests. Both personal and group identity increase our feelings of belonging, as we learn where we best fit into the world and which groups we feel most connected with. Development of both identity and belonging benefit us when we're adolescents and as we grow into adults and are key aspects of healthy development.

to one's true self. Essentially, healthy identity formation for Black youth includes understanding the negative views held by others about Black people and developing positive self-identity and positive racial group-identity despite those negative views.[16,19,20,21,22,23] Particularly now, in 2021, Black adolescents must make sense of their own individual identity within the complex, controversial, and changing landscape of what it means to be Black in America.

Fortunately, having a strong, positive racial identity also protects Black adolescents from the negative impacts of discrimination and other forms of racism.[5,16,24,25] We can promote healthy development for Black youth by acknowledging that ethnic-racial identity is an important aspect of healthy development.[26] We must ensure that Black youth have the culturally sensitive support that they need to form a positive racial identity, which often goes hand-in-hand with other positive self-views, self-worth, formation of values, and feelings of belonging.

> ### Complex Identities
>
> Our identities are complex—made up of many different parts. Although two Black adolescents may both identify as "Black," they may differ in how important that identity is to them and in how they interpret and express what being Black means. How we make meaning out of our racial identity is also deeply connected to how we experience our other identities, including ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, social class, nationality, and more.

Agency & Exploration

Healthy development also includes the development of *agency*—the ability (and opportunity) to make decisions and assume responsibility in the world. Adolescents develop a sense of agency as increasing opportunities to safely explore and experiment help them gain confidence and take on adult responsibilities. Both agency and exploration support identity formation by allowing adolescents to try out different "selves" and experiment with new roles within their peer groups, family, and community. To develop agency, adolescents need adult support and safe spaces in which to explore. Perhaps most importantly, *adolescents need room to make mistakes* and apply what they learn from those mistakes to their future choices and behaviors.

For Black youth, opportunities to act with agency and explore the world are significantly impacted by both interpersonal racism and structural racism. Interpersonal racism, such as discrimination by teachers, hiring managers, law enforcement, and other adult "gatekeepers," can limit opportunities to safely practice personal agency and explore. Structural racism, such as race-related opportunity gaps, can reduce options related to school and work. Black youth must also contend with unfair consequences when they make mistakes or stray too far from mainstream standards of behavior (which are typically defined

> ### Agency and Exploration
>
> During adolescence, we develop *agency*, which is the ability to control our actions, make decisions, and take on responsibility. As we gain more agency, we become successful at setting and achieving goals of our choosing. Over time, we grow more comfortable being "in the driver's seat" of our own lives.
>
> *Exploration* directly supports agency by allowing us space and opportunity to practice decision making, goal setting, and taking on greater responsibility. Increases in agency and exploration are key aspects of healthy adolescent development.

based on typical behavior of White adolescents; see further discussion in the Appendix, *Addressing the White Standard*).

Anti-Blackness and racist disciplinary practices in schools and the juvenile justice system limit the opportunities that Black adolescents have to practice agency, explore, and make mistakes. Statistically, even after accounting for behaviors that violate rules or laws, Black adolescents are more likely to be suspended, expelled, arrested, and incarcerated,[27,28,29] and there is also evidence that simply having a more stereotypically Black appearance increases the likelihood of receiving capital punishment.[30] Racist assumptions by adults within youth-facing systems can result in youths' mild, harmless mistakes being labeled as "crimes" worthy of punitive disciplinary practices. [18,31,32,33,34] Black youth are also treated unfairly once they are brought into the justice system. Disproportionate punishments including sentencing and type of confinement can have a long chain of consequences that are particularly devastating for Black youth.[11,35,36]

Finally, the anti-Black roots of adultification often mean that those in authority neither perceive and treat Black youth as "children" at all, nor attribute the benefits of innocence to them. Rather, adults attach widely held stereotypes of danger, violence, and aggression to Black adolescents—particularly boys.[37] Ultimately, positive opportunities for agency and exploration vary widely along racial lines, and Black adolescents are experiencing a unique opportunity gap, in which their chances to *be* successful agents and their opportunities to *learn* from consequences of this agency are limited by racism.

> ### *Intersectionality and Inequality*
>
> The term "intersectionality" refers to the ways in which "power, privilege, and social inequality are differently structured based on intersectional positions" or group memberships.[38,39] In other words, different identity categories are associated with differential access to power in our society. As a group, Black people have experienced historical oppression, as have other groups (including LGBTQ groups, religious minorities, low-income communities, and others). When we separate data on Black youth to understand issues of equity, we often see how race operates differently at the intersection of gender (different patterns may be observed for Black youth who identify as cis-gender female, transgender, or cis-gender male), at the intersection of social class (Black youth vary in access to economic resources), and in many other ways.

Any efforts to support positive development of Black youth must include safe opportunities to explore, learn from mistakes, and exercise agency.

Racism and Resilience in Key Social Contexts of Adolescence

Healthy adolescent development occurs within specific social spheres. In other words, adolescents are forming identities and feelings of belonging, as well as gaining agency and exploring the world, within the context of *key social relationships*. Some of the most influential social relationships that adolescents develop within include peers (including via social media), families, schools, and communities. To successfully achieve key developmental milestones, Black adolescents must navigate these key social spaces and try to overcome the implicit and explicit racism specific to each space.

Here, we highlight these four major social contexts of adolescence that support healthy development: peers and social media, families, schools, and communities. A large scientific literature exists on each of these topics as they pertain to adolescent development. Here, our goal is simply to highlight how these key social contexts of adolescence can shape healthy development and define experiences with racism for Black youth.

Each of these social contexts also offers unique pathways for youth to lessen and overcome the negative effects of racism. Thus, we specifically focus on opportunities within each of these social contexts to mitigate the negative impacts of racism. We know that the effects of racism are diverse and complex. For most Black adolescents, racism negatively affects many aspects of healthy development (including mental health, self-esteem, academic outcomes, high-risk behaviors),[2] but positive coping can help youth successfully navigate racism, thereby promoting resilience.[40] Therefore, we explore adolescents' experiences with racism among peers, with family, at school, and in their communities, and discuss how to *boost resiliency in the face of racism* and promote positive change in each of these key social spaces.

> ### Dismantling Structural Racism
>
> In this paper, we focus on ways to lessen the negative impacts of racism for Black youth. However, first and foremost, instilling change and increasing opportunities for Black youth will require *addressing and dismantling structural racism* (including acknowledgement of its irrefutable existence by government leaders and policy makers).
>
> Expectations for positive change must be centered on the systems, institutions, and racist norms that maintain race-based inequities and create barriers for Black youth. Only by changing the policies and practices set by those in positions of power can we ensure that Black adolescents have space to navigate the milestones of adolescence without inevitably bumping up against racist barriers. Dismantling structural racism within mainstream American culture and replacing racist practices with anti-racist policies will ultimately reduce widespread anti-Black attitudes, promote racial equity, and ensure positive and equitable opportunities for Black adolescents.

Boosting Resilience in the Face of Racism

The adolescent years are a period of remarkable resilience. Young people have an exceptional ability to recover and even thrive after setbacks, stress, adversity, and trauma.[11] When faced with inequities and challenges, adolescents can still succeed if they have support and resources that

promote their resilience and strength. Thus, while we as a wider society must ultimately dismantle racism in America, promoting resilience for Black youth as they experience racism may be a useful tool to support healthy development as structural changes in our country progress.

Protective factors that promote adolescent resilience are well established and highly consistent across races, cultures, and nationalities. Supportive influences, including family and peer attachment, education, community connections, motivation, and self-efficacy, consistently improve outcomes and success among youth worldwide who are facing adversity.[41] Adolescents are remarkably adaptive. Black adolescents can achieve positive outcomes following experiences of anti-Black discrimination when they are taught culturally appropriate ways to deal with these experiences.[40] As we discuss healthy development and racism within key social contexts of adolescence, we address how to *increase resilience* in each of these settings.

Four Key Social Contexts of Adolescence

Peers & Social Media

Family

Schools

Community
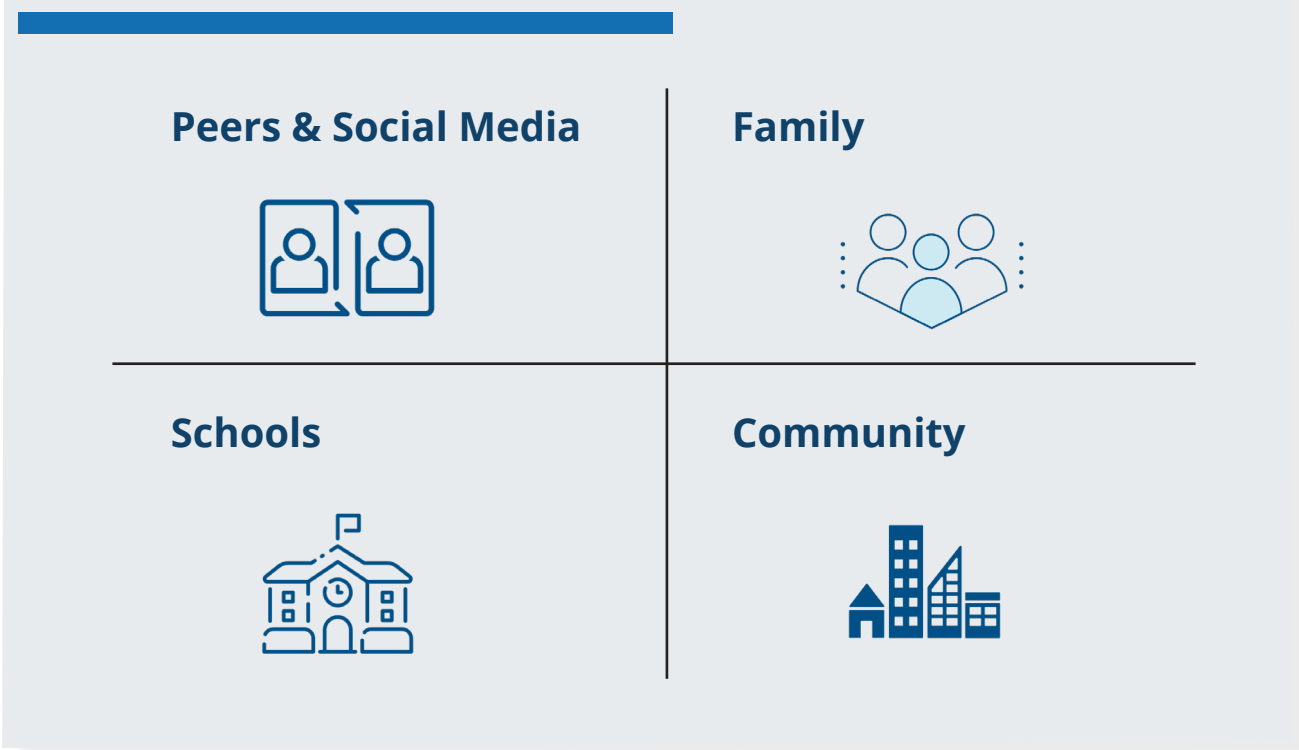
Peers & Social Media

During adolescence, relationships with peers become increasingly central to healthy development as belonging to social groups outside the family takes on new importance.

As decision-making abilities and exploration ramp up, adolescents begin spending more time with like-minded friends and other peer groups of their choosing as they renegotiate boundaries within their families.[42]

In adolescence, youth also become more sensitive to social status as their desire to earn respect from others increases. Peer relationships directly support these needs, and in doing so, can promote further healthy outcomes.[43]

For Black adolescents, peer groups provide a crucial support system. Same-race peers, in particular, as well as peers belonging to other racial groups who have experienced a similar history of marginalization and racism, can provide an important place of belonging, mutual support, understanding, and respect.[44] Sometimes peer interactions can be negative experiences for Black adolescents. For example, race-based discrimination by peers can be particularly detrimental given adolescents' desire and need for belonging.[45] Despite these risks, however, friends and other positive peer relationships provide a crucial safe space in which Black youth can navigate the milestones of adolescence.

Social Media: Peer Interactions Online

Online social networks and media outlets offer youth unparalleled opportunities to share their voices, give and receive support, organize together, and influence others. Youth can use online platforms to explore their viewpoints, advocate for change, expose wrongdoing, and demand justice. At a more personal level, adolescents can seek out support, form close relationships, and connect with nearly endless groups of like-minded peers. Overall, online settings expand adolescents' audiences for personal relationships and larger community belonging—audiences that are much larger than those in traditional in-person school and community settings.

Of course, online interactions playing out on such a large (and even global) scale may increase risks for negative experiences. For example, Black youth are more exposed to both interpersonal and structural racism in online settings,[46] and this online racism has negative impacts on mental health.[47,48] However, for Black youth, race-related online experiences are also linked to development of empathic social skills over time[49] as well as a range of social and emotional coping skills (such as problems solving, seeking support, distraction, and reframing of the situation).[50] Thus, while online social experiences may expose youth to more racism, they may also boost skills needed to reduce the negative impacts of this racism.

Overall, social media broadens the traditional range of peer interactions and provides adolescents with unprecedented opportunities to give and receive support, connect, and share their voices. Because of their broad scope, social media and other online spaces provide unique ways to promote resiliency in adolescence and better equip Black youth to manage negative experiences with racism.

Takeaways:

- **Peer groups provide a crucial support system for Black youth. Adults can help provide opportunities for Black adolescents to connect with social groups, including affinity groups or those organized around interests and activities, that increase their sense of belonging and support a positive sense of ethnic-racial identity.**

- **Policy and programs addressing technology use by young people must find ways to expand the positive opportunities technology provides to Black youth while limiting negative effects due to exposure to racism online.**

Family

Supportive relationships with parents and other caregivers are crucial in adolescence, even as youth establish stronger relationships with peers and engage in more exploration.

Families support positive identity development—particularly via cultural socialization and pride,[51] they provide a safe base from which to safely explore, and they offer a literal and figurative place of belonging. Parents and caregivers can also provide an excellent buffer against negative outcomes from racism and discrimination and promote resilience in the face of racism. Black families can help adolescents respond to discrimination and other forms of racism in positive ways by providing culturally based tools that lessen the negative effects of these experiences.

Specifically, many Black families facilitate culturally relevant coping (for example, African-centered strategies such as spiritual and community-based coping that reflect historical and cultural traditions)[52] and act as a primary source of racial and ethnic socialization, cultural pride, and preparation for bias.[53]

Programs specifically aimed at bolstering these types of family supports for Black youth— such as the Strong African American Families Program (SAAF), the EMBRace intervention,[54] and Pathways for African American Success[55]— are likely to promote healthy development and positive outcomes among Black youth and other youth of color, regardless of which specific barriers these youth are facing in their daily experiences with racism.

Unique Challenges For Black Parents

Structural racism has created unique challenges for Black families supporting their adolescent children.[7] The intersection of race and wealth disparities can lead to opportunity gaps for Black parents in education and employment. These disparities can impact children directly (such as by undermining the resources that parents have to provide healthy, safe spaces for their children) and indirectly. When Black parents experience race-based inequities and discrimination in their own lives, their daily stress level increases, which affects their children's well-being.[56,57,58]

Moreover, Black parents (and non-Black parents of Black adolescents) also face a unique balancing act—they must figure out how to keep their adolescents safe from discrimination, police brutality, and other existential threats from our country's politically charged climate surrounding race, while supporting their adolescents' positive development. In other words, they must determine how to encourage their children's identity formation, belonging, agency, and exploration within a racist, unsafe world.

Takeaways:

- **Families can help Black adolescents respond to discrimination and other forms of racism in positive ways by providing culturally based tools that lessen the negative effects of these experiences.**

- **State and federal policies must address the unique challenges faced by Black families (not just Black adolescents) to ensure the well-being of Black youth.**

Schools

As the largest institution serving youth in our country, schools have great potential to promote anti-racism and facilitate positive development for Black youth.

Adolescents' combination of increasing cognitive ability and growing desire to explore and engage in the world make them ideally suited to thrive in educational settings that support their needs.

One notably positive path through which some schools are helping to counteract racism is through fostering *critical consciousness*. Critical consciousness is a process through which students from historically marginalized racial groups are encouraged to understand, analyze, and challenge racial injustice at its roots and apply this understanding toward academic goals and civic engagement.[59] Increasing critical consciousness and acknowledging structural injustices as a part of adolescents' education may increase interest and participation in civic engagement and lessen the negative impact of structural racism within schools.[60,61]

Racism in Schools

Unfortunately, in addition to opportunities for resilience and positive change, schools also expose Black youth to frequent racism that is often condoned or left unchecked by teachers and other school staff. In school, Black youth face inequitable opportunities, biased information, and disproportionate punishments.[62,63] Authority figures, including teachers, principals, and other administrators, often racialize Black youth (categorize and make assumptions about them based on race), and treat them accordingly. For example, teachers may rely on stereotypes that Black youth do not want to learn, do not try as hard, and do not care about academics. Teachers may also assume that Black youth are better suited to work directly after high school, rather than pursue higher education, due to incorrect assumptions stemming from adultification.[64] As a result of these racist assumptions, teachers and guidance counselors may set lower expectations and persuade Black students not to take advanced courses. Teachers may even avoid giving constructive feedback to students for fear of being labeled "racist,"[65] and thus students miss out on opportunities to grow as learners. Similarly, principals and other administrators may assign overly harsh punishments such as suspension and expulsion due to implicit biases or racist institutional rules, which further undermine opportunities for Black students,[35,36] and may result in "pushout"—students dropping out as a result of school environments and policies (see further discussion of how Black students are unfairly disciplined above in Agency and Exploration).

Takeaways:
- **Increasing critical consciousness and acknowledging structural injustices as a part of adolescents' education may increase interest and participation in civic engagement and lessen the negative impact of structural racism within schools.**

- **Reducing pushout and affirming the identities of Black adolescents in middle and high schools will require investments in:**

  - **Educator training to curb racial disparities in discipline such as restorative justice,[66] which addresses challenging behaviors and learning through relationship building and supportive practices, rather than punitive and exclusionary ones.**

- **Anti-racist approaches to teaching, such as *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (instructional practices that affirm cultural identity and critical social engagement) and ethnic studies curricula.[67,68,69]**
- **Racial equity–oriented approaches to supporting students' identity development such as racial literacy[70] and transformative social-emotional learning (social-emotional learning strategies that include examining root causes of inequity and developing equitable solutions).[71,72,73]**

Community

The communities and neighborhoods where adolescents spend time also offer promising avenues to support positive growth and resilience in the face of racism.

Communities and neighborhoods can offer places of belonging and safe exploration for youth. Cultural diversity within communities can facilitate resilience in the face of racism. For example, neighborhood cultural diversity influences the coping strategies that parents use to help their adolescents manage their experiences with racism. Here we focus on two specific, related ways that communities can promote resilience for Black youth—by promoting a *sense of purpose* and through *community activism*.[74]

Sense of Purpose

Establishing a sense of purpose in adolescence promotes resiliency[75] and increases well-being by facilitating identity formation.[76] A sense of purpose can develop in many settings—with peers, with family, at school, and even online. Community involvement (such as volunteering, advocacy, or club membership) is one key context in which adolescents come to feel a sense of purpose and believe that they matter.[77,78,79]

Having a sense of purpose acts as a buffer against daily stressors[80,81] and protects against the negative effects of poverty.[82] Black adolescents who feel that their lives have purpose and meaning may be less negatively impacted by daily experiences with racism.[40,83] In fact, being marginalized—as Black youth historically are—can actually increase feelings of purpose and create a unique opportunity for resiliency in the face of racism.[84]

Community Activism

For Black youth and their peers, communities are also places in which adolescents can get involved in anti-racism campaigns and other types of activism and advocacy.[85] Getting involved in community activism and promoting anti-racism locally in one's neighborhood or in online communities may allow adolescents to work against racism in a way that promotes healthy development. Moreover, while this type of community involvement can promote resilience among Black youth facing racism, it can also encourage anti-racism among peers, adults, and policymakers in the broader community.

As discussed in the Schools section, increasing critical consciousness and encouraging youth toward civic engagement is one way to redirect negative experiences with racism toward positive

outcomes.[60,84] When civic engagement opportunities are explicitly focused on local, youth-centered issues that are personally relevant to the adolescents involved, positive outcomes emerge for everyone—the adolescent advocates and the surrounding community.[86]

Supporting youth involvement in anti-racism advocacy would yield positive effects for *all of us*—not just adolescents. Adolescents are an ideal resource to help promote anti-racism in our country because they are uniquely situated to facilitate positive change. Not only are youth, on average, more progressive and more in favor of social justice than adults, they are also in a developmental window when taking on new forms of personal agency and exploration are central to personal growth. In other words, channeling adolescents' strengths into the growing anti-racist movement in our country could have a significant impact against racism.

Takeaways:

- **We can help youth develop a sense of purpose by supporting programs that provide activities and experiences that encourage young people to think about how they can contribute to the world around them.[87,88]**

- **In addition, supporting adolescent involvement in anti-racism campaigns and activism benefits Black adolescents by:**

  - **Promoting the key adolescent milestones of identity formation and belonging, increasing agency and exploration and sense of purpose**

  - **Furthering Black youths' capacity to advocate on behalf of themselves as well as their own and other marginalized communities**

  - **Fostering positive, mutually beneficial relationships between adolescents and adults (which also promote resilience among adolescents experiencing discrimination and other race-related inequities; see discussion in *Family*).**

Summary & Recommendations

The monumental growth and learning that occur during adolescence mean that these are years when interventions and anti-racist approaches can make a real difference. Ensuring the positive development of Black youth requires a twofold response from policymakers, educators, families, and caring adults in the community—addressing the root causes of racial inequity while also supporting individual adolescents' developmental needs.

We must address racial bias and inequities at the source by transforming dysfunctional and discriminatory systems and practices. Addressing root causes of inequity requires that we support policies that address the unique challenges faced by Black adolescents and families. Investments across levels and sectors are needed so that parents and other adult caregivers can effectively support youth. Additionally, we must establish policies, programs, and training that counteract indirect and overt threats to Black adolescent health and well-being. (See the NASEM's 2019 *Promise of Adolescence* report for further discussion of policy recommendations to support adolescents and families and reduce racial disparities in the education, health, justice, and child welfare systems.[11])

To promote wellbeing and positive development among Black adolescents at an individual level, we must support the key features of adolescent development by providing safe and satisfying ways to explore the world and exercise agency as well as avenues to develop a sense of identity and belonging.

Recommendations for each of *the four key social contexts of adolescence* are as follows:

Peers and Social Media

- **Schools and Community-based Organizations:** Create space and provide resources for youth to connect with social groups that increase belonging and support positive identity.
- **Parents and Other Caring Adults:** Talk with adolescents about what they see, hear, and are exposed to online, including open dialogues about race-related content.
- **Media and Researchers:** Build and strengthen connections between researchers, media producers, and youth, such as via collaborative youth councils, to inform media representations of and content for Black adolescents.
- **Youth:** Create, advocate for, and participate in affinity groups and other affirming social spaces.

Family

- **Policymakers:** Conduct an equity analysis to identify and remediate disparate impacts of existing federal and state-level health and social policies on Black families.
- **Funders:** Fund the expansion of existing evidence-based, strengths-focused programs and the development (via research and refinement, for example) of new programs that support Black families with adolescents.

- **Parents and Other Caring Adults:** Talk with adolescents about their experiences with race and racism, acknowledge your own emotions around these topics, and build capacity to support adolescents' social and emotional needs.
- **Youth:** Share your views of race and racism with your family (however you define "family") and learn about different experiences and perspectives as you develop your own ideas.

Schools

- **Schools:** Conduct an equity analysis to identify and remediate disproportionate access to advanced coursework and enrichment programs and disparate impacts of discipline and other school policies on Black adolescents.
- **Schools:** Allocate resources for culturally responsive social-emotional learning programs and assess the implementation and benefits for Black adolescents.
- **Schools and Universities:** Provide pre-service training and ongoing professional development for anti-racist teaching methods and curricula.
- **Funders:** Fund the expansion of evidence-based best practices for promoting anti-racist and equitable school settings as well as the development and testing of new, transformational programs and practices.
- **Youth:** Create, advocate for, and participate in opportunities to build racial equity in your school community and encourage adults to take action.

Community

- **Funders:** Increase resources for community organizations committed to supporting youth activism and other activities that create space for Black adolescents to cultivate their sense of purpose and contribute to their communities.
- **Community-based Organizations:** Build staff capacity through training and ongoing support to reduce turnover and increase sustainable adult-youth relationships.
- **Community-based Organizations and Universities:** Develop or strengthen partnerships for training and supporting youth development program staff in using evidence-based best practices to meet the needs of Black adolescents.
- **Youth:** Engage in community-based programs that support your capacity for social action; share these opportunities with other youth and take advantage of social media platforms to communicate your message and involve others in the work.

Conclusion

Adolescence represents a special opportunity, not just for adolescents themselves, but for *all of us*—all of us who want a successful future with economic growth, technological innovation, and scientific progress, and all of us who want a progressive future with social justice, removal of structural barriers, and recognition of anti-racism as a mainstream norm. Quite literally, *we need adolescents*. We need their contributions, talents, innovations, and ideas, and we need them to become adults who will tackle complex challenges, disrupt current systems of oppression, and fight against racism and its grip on modern American society. By promoting the healthy development of all adolescents, we can help them thrive as individuals and ensure that we as a society get the very best that they have to offer.

We need adolescents with healthy identities—who know who they are and what they value, who are proud of their ethnic-racial identity and culture, and who accept and celebrate people with lived experience vastly different from their own. We need adolescents to develop into thoughtful, creative adults who question the current system, take risks, and explore new avenues for progress. Finally, we need adolescents to form healthy, supportive relationships within their peer groups, communities, schools, and families, so that reaching these milestones is possible. In other words, we need *healthy* adolescents who will grow into the best versions of themselves and be free from discrimination and racist policies.

As developmental scientists, parents, teachers, and policymakers, we must collectively support adolescents. Interpersonal and structural racism, anti-Blackness, and adultification pollute the adolescent experience and limit opportunities—for Black youth and for all of us. We need to interrupt this cycle of oppression in America and dismantle racism so that adolescents can become the healthy, compassionate, free-thinking adults of tomorrow that our nation and world need to thrive. Today's adolescents represent our chance to positively influence tomorrow's adult leaders and write racism out of our nation's future.

Appendix: Acknowledging Bias in the Science of Adolescence

As our nation makes progress toward widespread structural change, we need to *acknowledge bias in the science of adolescence.* When we acknowledge and correct our own biases, we can make progress toward removing racism from scientific institutions and change researchers' racist assumptions and behaviors.

Bias Among Scientists and Suppression of Knowledge

Within the space of scientific scholarship—including scholarship about adolescent development, a cycle of bias has shaped our collective understanding. Certain scholars publish more papers, are invited to give lectures more frequently, have larger readership and audiences, and ultimately gain more notoriety. Greater recognition and prestige then lead to more grant funding,[89,90,91] more interest from grad students (who are often the workhorses in terms of conducting research studies), and more interest from the media—all of which ensure the continuation of this cycle.

As this pattern continues for many researchers over many years, a biased accumulation of knowledge builds and ultimately shapes what we "know" about particular topics. Because we see and hear more about certain topics and theories, we assume that these topics and theories are more accurate and more representative of scientific truths. This bias in science alters our collective knowledge about what constitutes healthy adolescent development, and influences future scientific research, funding, and policy.

The work of Black scholars and other scientists of color is often suppressed by this cycle of bias. Scholars themselves may be pigeonholed as having a narrow focus that is euphemistically viewed as "specialized" and not widely applicable. For example, scholars who study the impact of racism on adolescent development may publish findings that are seen as specific to Black youth and irrelevant for understanding "most" adolescents. It is only now, with growing awareness of the effects of systemic racism and the growing demand for anti-racism across racial lines that a collective thinking about racism as "everybody's problem" has gained traction.

Incorporating more diverse, less traditional perspectives into the national dialogue about adolescent development will shift what we collectively *know* to be more representative of what is *true*. Increasing equity, inclusion, and access for scholars of color will reduce bias in science and promote a more accurate, less White-centric understanding of racism and its impact on Black youth. In addition, acknowledging the harmful effects of racism and segregation for *all* adolescents—including White and other privileged youth—will help underscore the importance of anti-racist practices in promoting healthy development for all young people, not just Black adolescents and other youth of color.

Together, decreasing bias in science, and increasing acceptance that racism is serious problem that interferes with healthy development for all adolescents will lessen the impact of racism on the experiences of all young people.

Addressing the White Standard

Broadening Perspectives and Increasing Inclusivity in Adolescent Norms, Standards, and Ideals

A key aspect of altering our collective thinking about race will be redefining what is normal, standard, and ideal when thinking about adolescents as a group. Policymakers and scientists who study adolescence can and should change the national dialogue about how "success" is defined in adolescence and alter long-held beliefs about what is "good" and "healthy" at this stage of life.

Historically, developmental researchers have considered White youth to be the standard of comparison for all adolescents. White adolescents dominate samples used in research studies overall (the notable exception to this being research specifically focused on topics of race and equity), and White youth are commonly assumed to be the quintessential comparison group or "norm" from which youth of color deviate in their paths to healthy development and positive outcomes. This assumption that White youth represent "the gold standard" of adolescence is outdated at best. Using White adolescents to determine ideals for any group of adolescents (including "all of them") is simply not applicable given our current understanding of how racial, ethnic, and cultural group belonging intersect with developmental trajectories.[92]

Progress toward greater inclusivity and diversity in modern research is certainly being made. However, adherence to the "White standard" continues to be a source of bias among today's scientists. With White samples dominating the historical literature—it remains unclear what non-White-centric standards about adolescence look like. Rather than examining how Black and other adolescents of color stray from White adolescent norms, we must move the accepted "center" of healthy development to a place that more accurately reflects adolescents' diversity of experiences and explicitly recognizes the many pathways that lead to positive outcomes.[7,9,93]

Current researchers, including many scholars of color, are shifting the center of adolescent research away from historical White standards, but it will take time and intentional thinking to make up for this historical lag. We can only fully illuminate White-centric patterns in adolescent scholarship by eliminating the White standard and re-centering our collective beliefs about healthy adolescent development moving forward.

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