

Seizing the Promise of Adolescence

Applying Emerging Research to Develop Positive Life Trajectories for America's Youth

The Role of Policymaking in Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a developmental stage between childhood and adulthood that plays an extremely influential role in determining an individual's life trajectory and ultimate outcomes. During this critical bridge period, environmental factors play an important shaping influence. Thus, the stage of adolescence presents enormous opportunities for institutions and programs serving young people to help them flourish and become positive contributors to society as adults. At the same time, we are placing young people at significant lifelong risk if we fail them during this time.

In May 2019 the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine released *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*, which chronicles the evidence-based consensus about the science of adolescent development and provides recommendations for how institutions and policy makers can promote positive growth for young adults at a crucial juncture in their lives. This illustrative report reframes our understanding of how young people develop and outlines a roadmap for policy makers to align the country's resources and systems so that we can transform youth-serving systems to ensure the promise of adolescence is realized equitably by all of the **73.5 million adolescents** in the United States.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25388>.

OUR OBLIGATION TO YOUNG PEOPLE

"The remarkable adaptability, plasticity, and heterogeneity of adolescent brains creates accompanying opportunities—and obligations—for individuals and agencies responsible for protecting and serving youth to help all adolescents flourish."



Major Takeaways

THE IMPACT OF INEQUITIES

The rapid changes in the adolescent brain leave them “vulnerable to toxic experiences” including economic, social and structural disadvantages which can “get under the skin” of young people and adversely affect the brain and body’s development, producing barriers to positive, healthy growth and placing individuals on risky life trajectories. Not only do inequities curtail the promise of adolescence for individuals, but when we fail these young people there are considerable long-term societal costs, including lost economic opportunity and increased health care and criminal justice system costs.



PRIOR DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES CAN BE OVERCOME DURING ADOLESCENCE

The report highlights the fact that millions of young Americans are currently not fulfilling their promise because they have not received equal opportunities to succeed—a tremendous loss not just for these individuals but for the country collectively. Fortunately, adolescence provides a unique window to remediate the effects of past inequities due to the “remarkable adaptability, plasticity, and heterogeneity of adolescent brains.” The nature of these changes in the brain “present remarkable opportunities for learning and growth as well as the amelioration of the harmful effects of childhood exposures.” Thus adolescence presents society with a crucial opportunity to intervene, invest, and course-correct so that we do not continue to leave people behind.

YOUTH-SERVING INSTITUTIONS AND SYSTEMS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE

At the same time, the institutions and programs that interact with youth during adolescence across a range of domains—including education, health, child welfare and the justice system—have a powerful influence on their development. Many of these systems have a “deeply ingrained tendency to view adolescence as mainly a time of vulnerability and risk,” without fully understanding the opportunities it also presents. If they apply science and knowledge about adolescent development to their own programs and services, they can leverage their influence to propel youth onto positive life trajectories.

THE OPPORTUNITY AT HAND

“Our understanding of adolescence has grown by leaps and bounds, and the application of this knowledge has the potential to change developmental trajectories of adolescents who might otherwise have been left behind.”