Adolescent brains are uniquely fit to prepare young people to meet new life challenges. During adolescence, connections between brain regions become stronger and more efficient, and unused connections are pruned away. Such heightened neuroplasticity during adolescence provides opportunities for resilient responses to trauma and stress, and for remediating maladaptation in brain structure and behavior that accumulated from earlier developmental periods. This report outlines how the systems and settings that adolescents most frequently encounter can be redesigned and reimagined to promote well-being and resilience and to address inequalities.

The report identifies several cross-cutting principles informed by developmental science to guide policy and practice across systems.

1) Adolescence is a sensitive period for development and learning, providing opportunities for life-long impact. Policies and practices should create incentives for discovery and innovation rather than focusing narrowly on containing risks. In adolescence developmental changes heighten reward sensitivity, a willingness to take risks, and the salience of social status, necessary propensities for exploring new environments and building non-familial relationships. By exploring and taking risks, adolescents build cognitive, social, and emotional skills necessary for productive contributions in adulthood.

2) Learning how to make decisions and to take responsibility for shaping one’s own life are key developmental tasks of adolescence. Youth-serving systems should ensure that adolescents are viewed as respected partners in decision making. Adolescents’ developing competencies in flexible problem solving, their awareness of and concern with others, and their openness to exploration and novelty make this an opportune time to support agency and leadership and promote engagement.

3) Forming personal identity is a key task of adolescence. The increasing diversity of U.S. adolescents and the nation as a whole requires youth-serving systems to be culturally sensitive and to be attuned to the integrated needs of each adolescent. Young people become increasingly aware of and attuned to their social status during adolescences,
This report expands on The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth by delving deeper into adolescent health programs and health policy. In the report, the committee reviewed research to identify core components of programs that can improve adolescent health outcomes and developed evidence-based recommendations for implementing federal programming initiatives focused on adolescent health.

**Risk taking in adolescence.** Adolescents must explore their environments to build the cognitive, social, and emotional skills necessary for adulthood. The skills gained during adolescence also provide the capacity for other aspects of psychological development, such as identity formation and the capacity for self-direction.

- Risk-taking activities are normal and necessary during adolescence.
- Healthy risk behaviors are constructive and are risky due to the uncertainty of their potential outcomes. Examples of health risk taking may include enrolling...
in a challenging course, reaching out for help, or asking someone on a date. Healthy risk taking allows adolescents to learn, grow, and thrive.

- Adolescents are also more likely than members of other age groups to participate in unhealthy risk behaviors, such as unprotected sexual activity, binge drinking, and tobacco use. These behaviors can lead to negative health outcomes.

- “Discontinuation of risk” is applicable only to those unhealthy risk behaviors (e.g., unprotected sexual activity, substance abuse) that can lead to negative health outcomes (e.g., diseases, unintended pregnancy, STIs).

Healthy risk taking can be supported by providing guidance in decision-making and encouraging adolescents to engage in less dangerous risks.

**Core components.** Core components research identifies the “active ingredients” of evidence-based programs which can be used to create shorter and more effective programs that are also more accessible to diverse populations. The committee found:

- Evidence of effectiveness of specific core components was inconsistent because current research is not designed to identify which components of programs are more effective than others.

- Programs incorporating social-emotional learning and positive youth development help equip children and adolescents with the foundational skills they need to make healthy decisions in a variety of situations.

The committee made the following recommendations for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

- Fund additional research aimed at identifying, measuring, and evaluating the effectiveness of specific core components of programs focused on promoting positive health behaviors and outcomes among adolescents.

- Fund universal, holistic, multi-component programs that meet all of the following criteria:
  > promote and improve the health and well-being of the whole person, laying the foundation for specific, developmentally appropriate behavioral skills development;
  > begin in early childhood and are offered during critical developmental windows, from childhood throughout adolescence;
  > consider adolescent decision making, exploration, and risk taking as normative;
  > engage diverse communities, public policy makers, and societal leaders to improve modifiable social and environmental determinants of health and well-being that disadvantage and stress young people and their families; and
  > are theory-driven and evidence-based.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should
  > update and expand the Youth Risk Behavior Survey to include:
    + out-of-school youth, (e.g., homeless, incarcerated, dropped out), and
    + survey items that reflect a more comprehensive set of sexual risk behaviors with specific definitions; and
  > further research on the ideal setting and mode for administering the YRBS with today’s adolescents.

The committee also suggested two promising approaches that deserve more meaningful attention in research, program, and policy development:

- Implementing and evaluating practices and policies that promote inclusiveness and equity; and

- including youth from diverse age groups, racial/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, rural-ity/urbanity, sexual orientations, sexes/genders, and disability/ability status in all decision-making processes.
Learn more and download the full reports for free today.

**The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth (2019)**
Available: [http://nationalacademies.org/adolescentdevelopment](http://nationalacademies.org/adolescentdevelopment)

**Promoting Positive Adolescent Health Behaviors and Outcomes: Thriving in the 21st Century (2020)**
Available: [http://nationalacademies.org/adolescent-health](http://nationalacademies.org/adolescent-health)

The Hauser Fund was created to ensure that social science analysis and synthesis help guide informed policy decisions across the DBASSE portfolio—national statistics, science education, children’s well-being, criminal justice, environmental change, the implications of aging, among others.

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