Promoting Positive Adolescent Health Behaviors and Outcomes: Thriving in the 21st Century

Adolescence is a period of immense growth, learning, exploration, and opportunity during which youth develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them thrive throughout life. While most youth traverse adolescence without incident, some need additional support to promote their optimal health.

Sometimes such support comes in the form of prevention or intervention programs designed to encourage healthy behaviors that will follow the adolescent through adulthood. A committee of the National Academies was asked to identify the key elements that help make these programs effective in improving outcomes for youth.

While limited research prevented the identification of a set of key components, the committee’s review of available evidence did reveal the strengths of population-wide programs that consider adolescent risk taking as normative, support social-emotional learning and positive youth development, and are provided from childhood throughout adolescence. The committee’s report urges federal agencies to support these programs, as well as further research to enable the identification of core components of effective interventions.

SUPPORTING THE SKILLS THAT UNDERLIE HEALTHY DECISIONS

What are the core components—the “active ingredients”—of programs that effectively support the health and well-being of adolescents? Efforts to identify such key components are a new but promising area of research. If researchers can identify program characteristics that are essential—as opposed to those that don’t affect outcomes and could be dropped—it could simplify and shorten the duration of programs and potentially enable their wider use.
Currently, few studies have identified the effectiveness of specific core components, the committee found. However, research does show the strength of programs that support social-emotional learning and positive youth development as young people progress from childhood through adolescence.

These programs aim to equip children and adolescents with the foundational skills they need—for example, self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills—in order to make healthy decisions in a variety of situations. If learned successfully, such skills underlie and impact a range of health behaviors and outcomes across the life course by providing a foundation upon which other specific behavioral skills and services can be built.

Research also shows that programs that involve youth, families, and communities and that target the social determinants of health—the environments and conditions in which a person lives, learns, and grows—can help reduce disparities in health outcomes related to social and economic disadvantage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of its review, the committee arrived at three recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should fund additional research aimed at identifying, measuring, and evaluating the effectiveness of specific core components of programs and interventions focused on promoting positive health behaviors and outcomes among adolescents.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should

- update and expand the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) 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
- conduct further research on the ideal setting and mode for administering the YRBS with today’s adolescents.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health within the Department of Health and Human Services should 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.

PROMISING APPROACHES

The committee also suggested two promising approaches that deserve more meaningful attention in the design, implementation, and evaluation of adolescent health programs.

PROMISING APPROACH 1: Programs can benefit from implementing and evaluating policies and practices that promote inclusiveness and equity so that all youth are able to thrive.

When programs are not inclusive and equitable, they risk being discriminatory, leading to overall worse outcomes for individuals and communities.

Examples of culturally sensitive practices, as identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, include using materials that are free of culturally biased information; using information, activities, and examples that are inclusive of diverse cultures and lifestyles; and promoting values, attitudes, and behaviors that acknowledge the cultural diversity of students. Beyond encouraging programs to have specific policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion, these aspects of programs need to be formally evaluated.

PROMISING APPROACH 2: Programs can benefit from including youth of diverse ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, rurality/urbanity, sexual orientations, sexes/genders, and disability/ability status in their decision-making processes.

Partnering with diverse youth in the development of policies and programs that impact their health and well-being is critical to ensure the success of these programs. Youth are experts on their own experiences and challenges, and this particular generation has experienced a number of rapid technological and cultural changes that have affected not only how they interact, but also how they access and process information about their health. Understanding these experiences is pivotal in creating policies that address and alleviate barriers to their health promotion.

COMMITTEE ON APPLYING LESSONS OF OPTIMAL ADOLESCENT HEALTH TO IMPROVE BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH

ROBERT GRAHAM (Chair), Kansas City, MO; ANGELA BRYAN, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Institute of Cognitive Science, University of Colorado Boulder; TAMMY CHANG, Department of Family Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School; ROSALIE CORONA, Psychology Department, College of Humanities and Sciences, Virginia Commonwealth University; TAMERA COYNE-BEASLEY, Division of Adolescent Medicine, School of Medicine, University of Alabama Birmingham; BONNIE HALPERN-FELSHER, Division of Adolescent Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, Stanford University; JEFFREY W. HUTCHINSON, The Wade Alliance, LLC; VELMA MCBRIDE MURRY, Departments of Health Policy and Human and Organizational Development, School of Medicine and Peabody College, Vanderbilt University; SANDRA JO WILSON, Abt Associates; NICOLE KAHN, Study Director; REBEKAH HUTTON, Program Officer; PAMELLA ATAYI, Program Coordinator.
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