



# 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. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services asked the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to appoint a study committee to identify the key elements that help make these programs effective in improving outcomes for youth.

### Core Components of Adolescent Health Behavior Programs

What are the core components—the “active ingredients”—of programs that effectively support the health and well-being of adolescents? Efforts to identify such components are a new but promising area of research. If researchers can identify program characteristics that are essential—as opposed to those that do not affect outcomes and could be dropped—it could simplify and shorten the duration of programs and potentially enable their wider use.

To identify these components, the committee conducted a systematic review focused on programs aimed at promoting positive adolescent health behaviors and outcomes. The results showed that while some studies have been designed to identify common components of these programs, currently, few studies have been designed to evaluate their effectiveness. Thus, future research should not only identify but also evaluate these components to better understand what works in adolescent health programs.

### Supporting the Skills That Underlie Healthy Decisions

However, current 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.

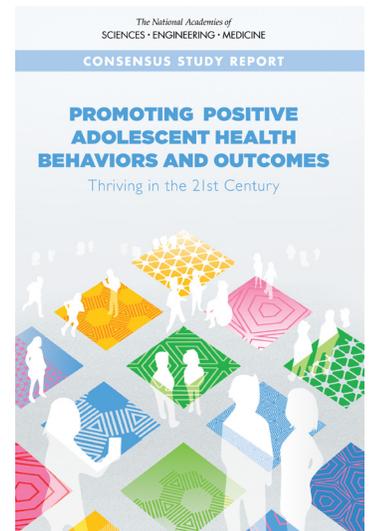
### Youth Involvement

Youth are experts in their own experiences and challenges, and this particular generation has experienced a number of technological and cultural changes (e.g., social media) that affect how they access and process health information. Understanding these experiences is therefore critical in addressing and alleviating barriers to their health promotion. For these reasons, partnering with diverse youth from the very beginning of research, policy, and program development can ensure the overall success of such research, policies, and programs.

## 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 of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 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, multicomponent 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 policies and practices that promote inclusiveness and equity so that all youth are able to thrive.

**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.

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## 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*.

**For More Information . . .** This Highlights for Researchers was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on the Consensus Study Report, *Promoting Positive Adolescent Health Behaviors and Outcomes: Thriving in the 21st Century* (2020). The study was sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nationalacademies.org/adolescent-health>.

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## ADOLESCENT RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOR

Adolescence is a period when youth seek out novel experiences and make sense of their environments through exploration, experimentation, and risk taking. Doing so helps adolescents transition from dependence on parents or other caregivers toward independence and self-identity.

Research supports an approach that understands risk-taking activities as a normal and necessary part of adolescence, both because of the heightened neurological plasticity of the brain and because of their developmental purpose in preparing youth for adulthood.

The key to healthy risk taking is to provide guidance in decision making and to encourage adolescents to engage in less dangerous and more constructive risks. A focus on “discontinuation of risk” is applicable only to those unhealthy risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, unprotected sexual activity) that can lead to negative health outcomes (e.g., diseases, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections).