



# **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.

In this report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, the expert committee uses an optimal health framework to (1) identify core components of risk-behavior prevention programs that can be used to improve a variety of adolescent health outcomes, and (2) develop evidence-based recommendations for research and the effective implementation of federal programming initiatives focused on adolescent health.

### **Social Emotional Learning and Positive Youth Development**

Adolescents need certain skills to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy risks. Often, these skills are developed through social-emotional learning and positive youth development programs. Such programs focus on providing children and adolescents with foundational skills that ultimately help them make healthy decisions in a variety of situations.

This brief describes social emotional learning and positive youth development and explains how these concepts are reflected in the committee's recommendation for improving adolescent health programs.

## Five Foundational Social Emotional Skills

Programs that aim to promote SEL competencies in children and youth focus on these five skills:

**Self-awareness:** Recognizing emotions, values, strengths, and limitations and how they influence one's behavior and sense of self-worth

**Self-management:** Regulating emotions and behaviors to effectively manage stress, control impulses, motivate oneself, and work toward personal goals

**Social awareness:** Understanding social norms and empathizing with people of diverse backgrounds

**Relationship skills:** Maintaining healthy relationships by listening to others, communicating effectively, negotiating conflicts, and providing or seeking help when needed

**Responsible decision making:** Making choices about behaviors and social interactions by weighing the consequences to oneself and others

PYD approaches for all children and youth, as these programs teach skills that, if learned successfully, underlie and impact health in multiple domains and across the life course.

Although they recommend funding SEL and PYD programs, the committee made it clear that this does not mean that programs targeting specific health behaviors, like substance abuse prevention and inclusive sex education, are not important. Rather, the committee saw these programs as providing the foundation of self-regulation, good decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills upon which other specific behavioral skills and services (e.g., understanding social norms around drugs, negotiating condom use, access to contraception) are built.

## What are social emotional learning and positive youth development?

**Social emotional learning (SEL)** is a process by which all people, not just children and adolescents, develop the foundational skills that people need throughout life. This includes learning to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, understand people of diverse backgrounds, form positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

**Positive youth development (PYD)** is an approach that builds on youth's strengths and provides them with opportunities to foster positive relationships with their families, friends, schools, and in their communities.

In many ways, PYD is an extension of SEL. Both of these frameworks suggest that supporting social and emotional skills and positive attitudes help youth develop assets that have positive effects on well-being and are protective against negative outcomes. However, PYD programs further capitalize on the immense growth and change that occur during adolescence by teaching youth how to use their social emotional skills in various contexts.

## The Committee's Recommendation for Programs

In their review of programs, the committee found that those using an SEL or PYD approach were more effective in promoting a variety adolescent health behaviors and related outcomes compared to those focused on a single health behavior like substance use or sexual behavior.

For this reason, the committee recommended that the federal government fund programs that incorporate SEL and

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