



THE PROMISE OF ADOLESCENCE:

Realizing Opportunity for All Youth

SUPPORTING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH FOR ALL ADOLESCENTS

Adolescents—young people ages 10 to 25—make up nearly one-fourth of the U.S. population. Drawing upon recent scientific advances, *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (2019), a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, highlights the need for policies and practices that better leverage the developmental opportunities offered by adolescence. The changes in brain structure and function that happen at this age present adolescents with unique opportunities for positive, life-shaping development, and for addressing the harmful effects of negative early-life experiences, such as trauma, abuse, or economic hardship.

The report examines how society can better support adolescents' behavioral health, including mental health, and the report's findings and recommendations are highlighted in this brief.

WHAT IS ADOLESCENCE?

Adolescence is a developmental period rich with opportunity for youth to learn and grow. Throughout adolescence, the connections between brain regions become stronger and more efficient. This means that adolescents' brains can adapt, and they become more specialized in response to demands placed on them by their environments—by learning opportunities at school, for example, and by social interactions with their peers and families.

The adolescent brain also has an exceptional capacity for resilience, meaning adolescents can develop neurobiological adaptations and behaviors that leave them better equipped to handle adversities. By intervening during adolescence, we can improve young people's overall well-being and help them lead meaningful, healthy, and successful lives.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND ADOLESCENCE

In this distinct period of development, young people exhibit increased neurobiological flexibility and strengthened abstract reasoning and executive function skills that help them set long-term goals and make rational decisions. But this increased flexibility also makes adolescents vulnerable to harmful or unhealthy influences that can set them on less positive paths.

For example, adolescents are more susceptible to behavioral health conditions during this period, likely due to the influence of trauma or stress on brain development, genetic underpinnings of behavioral health conditions, or the conditions of adolescence itself (for example, greater sensitivity to peer influence). Many behavioral health conditions begin during adolescence and youth themselves recognize the importance of behavioral health.

Youth-serving systems, including the health, education, justice, and child welfare systems—can work to support adolescents' growth and potential through programs, policies, and practices specifically aimed at promoting behavioral health among young people.

DISPARITIES IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Despite recent advancements and growing advocacy surrounding behavioral health, equitable care continues to evade racial/ethnic minority, sexual and gender minority, immigrant, homeless, and rural populations due to persistent disparities throughout the continuum of care. Researchers have highlighted the breadth of inequity in behavioral health care at multiple levels, from federal policies and regulations to patient-provider interactions. This research points to the need for evidence-based care that is culturally and linguistically tailored to each patient and equitably accessible to all adolescents.

Only one-third of adolescents with any mental disorder report receiving treatment. There are many reasons why adolescents, particularly adolescents from historically disadvantaged groups, are underserved in behavioral health care. Adolescents may underuse behavioral health care because they are worried about how other people will perceive them, or because they cannot find services that suit their needs. They may not be able to access services because of nationwide shortages in behavioral health professionals or because behavioral health care is poorly integrated within the health care system. LGBTQ adolescents also exhibit worse behavioral health outcomes than heterosexual or cis-gender youth. Reasons

for these continuing health disparities for LGBTQ youth can be traced to the experience of stigma, discrimination, harassment, and other forms of victimization, which occur in families, schools, and communities.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROMOTING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AMONG ADOLESCENTS

To increase both access to and use of behavioral health care services among adolescents, and address disparities in behavioral health, the report makes the following recommendations.

Increase access to behavioral health care treatment and services by growing the provider workforce, particularly those serving in underserved areas, and developing behavioral health programs at the federal, state, and local levels that serve adolescents. Federal, state, and local policy makers should work with adolescents to develop and implement these programs, especially programs serving vulnerable groups such as youth in foster care or in detention.

Improve the training and distribution and increase the number of adolescent health care providers, including behavioral health care providers. Policymakers and behavioral health professional societies should work to increase the number and diversity of providers capable of serving the needs of today's adolescents.

Protect the overall health and well-being of students. For many adolescents, school-based services are their first stop for behavioral health care. Providing behavioral health services in schools can reduce suicide risk and substance use among adolescents, and adolescents from historically disadvantaged communities, such as LGBTQ youth, may benefit from safe and supportive school environments. Schools can promote behavioral health by understanding the holistic needs of adolescents and creating opportunities for screening, prevention, and treatment of behavioral health conditions.

Better support the health and educational needs of adolescents involved in the child welfare and justice systems. All adolescents have the potential to thrive if given the proper supports, particularly those aimed at improving educational and physical and behavioral health outcomes. When youth are provided with these opportunities, the justice and child welfare systems can be pathways toward positive developmental trajectories. To this end, increased coordination and collaboration between the education, health, justice, and child welfare systems is necessary.