



# THE PROMISE OF ADOLESCENCE:

## Realizing Opportunity for All Youth

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS

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 the parents and caregivers of adolescents 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.*

## PARENTS AND ADOLESCENCE

**During adolescence, young people learn how to make decisions and take responsibility for shaping one's life.**

**While parents and other responsible adults must respect the emerging autonomy and agency of adolescents, they must also provide guidance and support to make this growth possible.**

Supportive and nurturing adult relationships are just as important for adolescents as they are for young children. While the role of parents certainly changes compared to early in life—adolescents are very different from young children—their significance does not. In fact, recent studies have shown that parents continue to matter for adolescents' decision making, in contrast to common assumption that parents begin to "matter less" as peers "matter more."

## EFFECTIVE PARENTING PRACTICES

While there is no prescription for being the "perfect parent" to an adolescent, decades of research suggest practices that are linked to positive youth outcomes:

- **Being supportive.** While the details of what support and warmth look like is informed by cultural norms and family contexts, adolescents need to feel valued, loved, and safe, just as they do in early childhood. Being attuned to young people's emotional needs and knowing what is going on in their lives has important benefits for development throughout adolescence.
- **Being firm.** This involves setting boundaries and expectations around appropriate behavior, and consistently communicating these expectations to adolescents. Being firm while also showing support is particularly important.

In practice, supporting adolescents during this period of time requires flexibility, since the needs of a 13-year-old can be quite different from those of a 19-year old. The goal is to provide just enough support so a young person can learn how to address challenges and make decisions on her or his own.

Parents differ widely in the types of resources that they can use in rearing children, including their own time and energy.

The least advantaged parents need resources through social assistance to effectively support adolescents, so investing in youth also requires investing in the adult caregivers who support them. Interventions to change parenting behavior may be futile if systems themselves are not attuned to parents' most pressing needs.

## PARENTS' ROLE IN HELPING ADOLESCENTS NAVIGATE SYSTEMS

**Education.** Families are an important resource for help as adolescents navigate the complexity of the education system. Youth rely on their parents and caregivers to select schools through school-choice assignment systems, to advocate for the right programs and courses in high school, and to help them find resources and programs outside of school. Parents' engagement in the education of their adolescent child may help protect against declines in achievement and engagement as children progress through middle and high school.

**Health.** While adolescents can play an increasingly independent role in navigating the health care system, parents often continue to play a substantial role in their enrollment in health insurance and accessing care. Confidential care is a core principle of adolescent-friendly health services, and it is particularly important related to sensitive issues such as mental disorders and sexual behaviors. Adolescents who are counseled on confidentiality and spend time alone with their providers are more likely to discuss sensitive topics with their providers.

**Justice.** For youth who are involved in the justice system, having parents who are engaged with them and visit them has been shown to reduce young people's likelihood of re-offending, and to have a positive effect on their mental health outcomes. Opportunities for improvements in this area include providing legal orientation for parents so that they are able to assist their children in navigating the justice system, and eliminating barriers to visitation so that incarcerated youth can stay connected to their families.

**Child Welfare.** Parent training and family-based/multi-system interventions are among the most effective at preventing or reducing child maltreatment. Equitable investments in in-home services that might prevent the placement of a child or adolescent in foster care are needed.

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