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

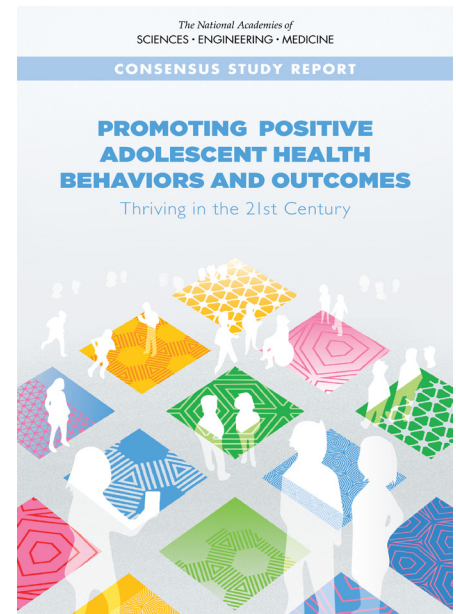
Adolescence is a period of immense growth, learning, exploration, and opportunity during which youth develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them thrive throughout life. While most youth traverse adolescence without incident, some need additional support to promote their optimal health.

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;

ADOLESCENT RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOR

Neurobiological changes that occur during adolescence influence young people to 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. Healthy risk taking involves socially acceptable and constructive risk behaviors—for example, enrolling in a challenging course, or experimenting with a different identity, or asking someone on a date—that are risky due to the uncertainty of their potential outcomes rather than the severity of their potential costs. Engaging in healthy risk taking allows adolescents to learn, grow, and thrive.

Yet adolescents are also more likely than members of other age groups to participate in unhealthy risk behaviors, such as unprotected sexual activity, binge drinking, and tobacco use. These behaviors can lead to outcomes that not only threaten an adolescent's own health but also can endanger others.

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.

- 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

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For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Highlights 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* (2019). 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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