

# COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IN YOUTH

## PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS

Adolescence is a period marked by significant neurological, physical, emotional, social and cognitive developmental transitions. Youths' preparation for and success at navigating these transitions is influenced by their earlier developmental histories, experiences and perceptions as well as the nature and impact of their current relationships, contexts and circumstances. Youth need nurturing adult support, positive peer relationships and wholesome experiences to help them navigate these transitions, to develop cognitive and social-emotional competence and to thrive in life.

**Cognitive competence and social-emotional competence are essential developmental tasks in adolescence because they lay the foundation for forming an independent identity and having a productive, responsible and satisfying adulthood.** The interrelated components of cognitive and social-emotional competence include:

- **Executive functioning:**
  - » **cognitive flexibility** - seeing alternate solutions to problems and being able to shift perspective
  - » **future orientation** - thinking about the potential consequences of one's behavior and choices
  - » **cognitive self-regulation** - exercising control over thinking
  - » **emotional self-regulation** - exercising control over feelings
  - » **behavioral self-regulation** - staying on task even in the face of distractions
  - » **planning** - having a goal and using reasoning to develop a strategy
  - » **working memory** - following instructions sequentially and holding information in mind while engaging in another activity
- **Self-awareness** - a growing understanding about one's developmental history and needs
- **Self-concept** - a stable positive identity
- **Self-esteem** - overall good feelings about oneself
- **Self-efficacy** - realistic beliefs about one's capabilities
- **Self-compassion** - being kind to oneself when confronted with personal failings and suffering
- **Self-improvement and mastery** - committing to and preparing to achieve productive goals
- **Personal agency** - taking responsibility for one's self and one's decisions and having confidence to overcome obstacles
- **Character strengths** (e.g., persistence, hard work, gratitude, respect, integrity)
- **Positive emotions** (e.g., joy, love, hope, optimism, trust, faith, compassion)

The primary role of adolescents is that of a student. Thus, in addition to the family, the school is a primary context for cultivating youths' cognitive and social-emotional competencies, for understanding how these competencies impact academic outcomes and for working with youth who have cognitive and social-emotional difficulties. Ideally, within nurturing and responsive family, school and community contexts, youth are afforded opportunities to tap into their interests; explore and come to grips with their personal, gender and cultural identity; seek more independence and responsibility; think more about values and morals; try new experiences; and strive to reach their full potential.

However, when youth have a history of early trauma or are in families, communities or schools that are unstable, dangerous or persistently under-resourced, they may not have these opportunities and may be at greater risk for poor school performance; impaired or negative social relations; anger, acting-out and aggressive behaviors; and mental health problems.

It should be noted that experiencing challenges and adversity does not necessarily predict poor outcomes for youth. There is increasing evidence that having experiences that promote cognitive and social-emotional competencies helps to reduce the likelihood of youth developing problems and increase the likelihood of good outcomes despite threats to healthy development.

# CSSP'S PROTECTIVE AND PROMOTIVE FACTORS

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to create new ideas and promote public policies that produce equal opportunities and better futures for all children and families, especially those most often left behind. The foundation of all of CSSP's work is a child, family and community well-being framework that includes a focus on protective and promotive factors. Using an ecological perspective:

- **protective factors** are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that **mitigate or eliminate risk**
- **promotive factors** are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities or the larger society that **actively enhance well-being**

*Taken together, protective and promotive factors increase the probability of positive, adaptive and healthy outcomes, even in the face of risk and adversity.*

The **Strengthening Families™** and **Youth Thrive™** frameworks exemplify CSSP's commitment to identify, communicate and apply research-informed ideas that contribute to the healthy development and well-being of children, youth and families. As numerous studies affirm the importance of early childhood experiences in influencing adolescent and adult behavior, these frameworks provide a view of two interrelated phases of the lifespan developmental continuum: Strengthening Families focuses on families of young children (0-5 years old) and Youth Thrive on youth ages 11-26.

## The Strengthening Families Protective Factors

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Social-Emotional Competence of Children

## The Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors

- Youth Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Adolescent Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence in Youth

Parents, system administrators, program developers, service providers and policymakers can each benefit from learning about and using the Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive frameworks in their efforts to ensure that children, youth and families are on a path that leads to healthy development and well-being.