

KNOWLEDGE OF ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS

Having accurate knowledge of adolescent development is critically important because beliefs about youth influence perceptions and treatment of young people. For example, many parents believe all risk-taking is bad and will lead to undesirable, dangerous or deadly outcomes. Parents who hold this belief may discourage or try to prevent their youth from taking any risks. However, numerous studies distinguish between negative risk-taking (e.g., drinking and driving, having unprotected sex) and positive risk-taking (e.g., running for student council president, playing team sports). Behaviors that are considered to be positive risk-taking are risky because they involve the possibility of failure. Current research finds youth who challenge themselves by taking positive risks are more likely to avoid negative risks and to achieve healthy, favorable outcomes and thrive. Furthermore, positive risk-taking helps youth learn how to win and lose, supports identity development and boosts self-esteem and self-confidence. Thus, positive risk-taking should not only be allowed, it should be encouraged.

Thus, parents, adults who work with youth and young people themselves can benefit from increasing their knowledge and understanding about adolescent development. Gaining more knowledge about adolescent development is particularly important given the recent advances in the fields of neuroscience and developmental psychology. Scientists in these fields have provided much evidence about the complex neurobiological changes that take place during the teenage years and into the mid-20s, as well as the structural and functional differences between adolescent and adult brains. Understanding the nature of adolescent brain development is essential in promoting healthy outcomes in youth.

Research has shown that the adolescent brain develops unevenly. Structures and functions that contribute to emotions—such as fear, anger and pleasure—develop in early adolescence, but abilities such as thinking ahead, balancing risks and rewards and controlling impulses are still evolving well into early adulthood. This developmental timing gap may explain why some youth choose to engage in sensation-seeking behaviors and to make decisions based on feelings rather than logic. In addition, some youth have developmental histories marked by poor relationships, environments that create toxic stress, involvement in institutions that are not aligned with their developmental needs or personal trauma. These circumstances and experiences negatively impact youths' innate developmental transitions and, therefore, impede the course of healthy development. But the adolescent brain is adaptable and shaped

by experience. When youth have support and guidance from caring and encouraging adults, these experiences can help youth acquire the competencies needed for a healthy transition to adulthood.

Knowledge of other aspects of adolescent development is needed as well, including: signs indicating a youth may have a trauma history and needs special help; cultural factors that influence the perceptions of youth; and factors that promote or inhibit healthy youth outcomes. Furthermore, as youth prepare for the transition to adulthood, research studies demonstrate they need guidance about and experiences that enable them to:

- Adjust to and accept their changing body
- Make decisions about sexual behavior
- Engage in healthy behaviors such as exercising within one's physical means
- Engage in positive risk-taking and avoid negative risk-taking
- Build and sustain healthy relationships with peers and adults
- Develop abstract thinking and improved problem solving skills
- Forge a personally satisfying identity, including what and who one would like to become
- Gain independence from parents and other adults while maintaining strong connections with them
- Engage in socially responsible behavior such as volunteerism and community service
- Identify productive interests, develop realistic goals and seek to excel
- Develop mature values and behavioral controls used to assess acceptable and unacceptable behaviors
- Understand one's personal developmental history and needs
- Learn to manage stress, including learning from failure
- Deepen cultural knowledge
- Explore spirituality
- Learn essential life skills such as financial management and conflict resolution

Adolescence is a unique developmental period. It is essential to understand the science of adolescent development and to apply this knowledge when developing programs and policies that are designed to help youth acquire the competencies that set them on a path toward healthy outcomes in adulthood.

YOUTH THRIVE

PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS FOR HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

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.