

## Guiding Principles for Promoting Adolescent Health

**Adolescence**—the transition from childhood to adulthood—is one of the most dynamic stages of human development. It is a time of marked physical, emotional, and intellectual changes, as well as changes in social roles, relationships and expectations.

### The “Ages” of Adolescents

Adolescents are not just teenagers. Adolescents include 10-24 year-olds. Adolescence is not one developmental stage, but three developmental stages:

- ✓ Early adolescence (10-14 years of age);
- ✓ Middle adolescence (15-17 years of age); and
- ✓ Late adolescence and young adults (18-24 years of age).

Expert opinion about the age range for adolescence varies by organization and agency. The Health Resources and Services Administration’s *Bright Futures* guidelines for health supervision defines the age range for adolescence as 11-21. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines the age range for adolescents as 10-19 and refers to 20-24 year olds as young adults, but often groups adolescents and young adults together, recognizing that 20-24 year olds have many developmental and health needs similar to adolescents. The three separate stages are important to consider when planning strategies and programs to meet the developmental needs of adolescents.

### Why Focus on Adolescent Health?

- ✓ **Adolescence is one of the most dynamic stages of human growth and development.** The rate of developmental changes during adolescence is second only to infancy.

Adolescence is a time of redefining and developing relationships, with parents, family and peers. It is important to understand adolescence in the continuum of the lifespan. The experiences of childhood have a significant impact on adolescence, while adolescence lays a foundation for the experiences in adulthood.

- ✓ **Good health (physical, emotional, social and spiritual) enables young people to make the most of their teenage years.**
- ✓ **Some adolescents’ unsafe choices or vulnerable situations can have immediate, life-threatening, and costly consequences.**
- ✓ **Adolescent health provides the foundation for adult health status. Life-long patterns of healthy behaviors are established at this time.**
- ✓ **Unhealthy adolescent behaviors can become long-term risk factors for chronic health conditions in adulthood.**
- ✓ **Mixed messages and expectations from adults and the media, regarding adolescent independence, responsibilities and sexuality make it all the more important to help guide youth as they grapple with life’s new complexities.**

As young people navigate the changes of adolescence, it is critical that they receive the guidance, support and encouragement that fosters healthy development. The health and well being of adolescents is shaped by the world in which they grow and the people that surround them. Young people who are educated and healthy are more likely to become contributing members of society and contributors to our economic prosperity.

**What is Adolescent Health?**

Adolescent Health is the optimal state of well being in all areas of life—physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual. By using the broad definition of health adolescents are healthy when they:

1. engage in healthy behaviors that contribute to a healthy lifestyle;
2. have the capacity to thrive in spite of stressors in life;
3. successfully engage in the developmental tasks of adolescence; and
4. experience a sense of wholeness and well-being.

**Factors That Affect the Health of Adolescents**

There is no single solution to address the complexity of adolescent health needs and issues. The health of adolescent is shaped by:

- |                               |                               |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| parents and families          | health care systems           |
| peers                         | media                         |
| neighborhoods and communities | employers                     |
| schools                       | social norms                  |
| community organizations       | government, policies and laws |
| faith communities             |                               |

These factors impact young people’s sense of health and well being by affecting their capacity to withstand life stressors, their ability to transition in developmentally appropriate ways, and their ability to make decisions about health behaviors.

There are a small number of behaviors that negatively affect the health of adolescents. In fact, 70% of adolescent death and illness are caused by six categories of risk behavior listed to the right.



Many studies confirm that most health risk behaviors among adolescents are interrelated. Likewise, many protective factors—things that reduce health risks—are interrelated. It is important to understand how to promote healthy behaviors among youth, understand the underlying causes and motivations, and what circumstances make unhealthy behavior seem attractive. Youth who engage in one unhealthy behavior—who for example smoke or drink—are more likely to develop a cluster of unhealthy behaviors and habits.

## **Adolescent Health and Youth Development**

Adolescent health and youth development go hand-in-hand. Youth who, with support from their families and communities, successfully engage in the developmental tasks of adolescence are more likely to choose health-promoting behaviors and avoid activities that can lead to negative health and life outcomes.

Youth development is both a philosophy and an approach to policies and programs that serve young people. The underlying philosophy of youth development is holistic, preventive and positive. It focuses on the development of assets and competencies in youth as the best means for fostering good health and for avoiding negative choices and outcomes.

### **Essential elements of the youth development approach**

- ✓ Youth are viewed as valued and respected assets to society.
- ✓ Policies and programs are focused on the evolving developmental needs and tasks of adolescents, and involve youth as partners rather than clients.
- ✓ Families, schools and communities are engaged in developing environments that support youth.
- ✓ Adolescents are involved in activities that enhance their competence, capacity, caring, character and civic engagement.
- ✓ Adolescents are provided an opportunity to experiment in a safe environment and to develop positive social values and norms.
- ✓ Adolescents are engaged in activities that promote self-understanding, self-worth, a sense of belonging and resiliency.

### **Research tells us that there are strategies that work**

Extensive work and research in the field of adolescent health over the past 30 years provides a wealth of information about strategies that can effectively support the health and well being of youth. Analyzing and applying “lessons learned” from this research can assist in making informed decisions about those strategies that most likely have a positive effect on the health of adolescents.

### **These four types of strategies have been shown to effectively support the health and well being of adolescents.**

- 1. Decreasing the Risk Factors** that contribute to risky behaviors and poor health outcomes.
- 2. Increasing the Protective Factors** that contribute to resiliency and healthy outcomes.
- 3. Providing Opportunities** for young people to successfully meet the developmental needs of adolescence.
- 4. Building Healthy Communities and Schools** that support and nurture adolescents.

## **Characteristics of effective adolescent health strategies and programs**

These characteristics can directly impact adolescents and their families and be the guiding research-based principles for building systems to support healthy youth and young adults.

1. Adolescents are viewed as resources to be nurtured and supported, not problems to be fixed.
2. Strategies are integrated and coordinated.
  - ✓ There is a diversity of strategies that focus not only on adolescents, but also on their social environment including families, peers, schools, and communities.
  - ✓ A combination of prevention, health promotion and healthy youth development strategies are used.
3. Youth are involved and engaged as active partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of strategies.
4. There is a good fit between strategies and the adolescents on which they focus.
  - ✓ The strategies are responsive to cultural, ethnic and other forms of diversity.
  - ✓ They are developmentally appropriate.
5. The people involved understand adolescent health and well being.
6. There is a focus on building and strengthening relationships.
  - ✓ The strategy focus on strengthening families. Teens who have warm, involved relationships with their parents are more likely to do well in school, have better social skills and have lower rates of risky sexual behaviors than their peers.
  - ✓ The strategy purposely focuses on building supportive adult-youth relationships.
7. Young people are supported to make successful transitions.
  - ✓ They help youth develop basic skills.
  - ✓ They help young people find and become involved in meaningful roles in their communities.
  - ✓ They strengthen the social supports available to adolescents and their families.
8. They provide an array of opportunities for young people so that risk behaviors are not the desirable option open to youth.

## **Resources**

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