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The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth

Adolescents—young people ages 10 to 25—make up nearly one-fourth of the U.S. population. Drawing upon recent scientific advances, a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine finds ample evidence that adolescence offers great promise: The changes in brain structure and connectivity that happen at this age present young people with unique opportunities for positive, life-shaping development, and for recovery from past adversity.

The nation needs policies and practices that will better leverage the developmental opportunities offered by adolescence, says *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (2019). The report provides multiple recommendations for capitalizing on these opportunities, and for addressing inequities—in education, in health care, and in other areas—that undermine the well-being of many adolescents and leave them less able to take advantage of the promise offered by this stage of life.

THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN

Although adolescence is often thought of as a time of turmoil and risk for young people, it is more accurately viewed as a developmental period rich with opportunity for youth to learn and grow. Research reveals that throughout adolescence, the connections between brain regions become stronger and more efficient, and unused connections are pruned away. 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.

Adolescent brains are not simply “advanced” child brains or “immature” adult brains but have evolved to meet the needs of this stage of life. The onset of puberty brings about changes in the limbic system region that heighten adolescents' sensitivity to rewards, willingness to take risks, and awareness of social status – tendencies that are necessary for exploring new environments and building relationships outside the family. Adolescents must explore their environments to build the cognitive, social, and emotional skills necessary for adulthood. The skills gained during adolescence also provide the capacity for other aspects of psychological development, such as developing identity and the capacity for self-direction.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN BIOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

Contrary to the common understanding that the effects of one's genetic makeup are immutable and direct, contemporary studies show that genes and environment interact: The way heredity is expressed in behavior depends



significantly on influences in a person's environment. And the trajectory of an individual's life may be changed, negatively or positively, at each life stage. Protective factors in the environment—such as supportive relationships with family and caretakers, and access to resources—support positive trajectories, while harmful experiences may lead to at-risk or poor trajectories.

Investments in programs and interventions that capitalize on the brain's capacity to change during adolescence can promote beneficial shifts in young people's life trajectories, both for youth who may have faced adverse experiences earlier in life, and for those who are facing challenges now.

INEQUITY AND ADOLESCENCE

The promise of adolescence can be severely curtailed by economic, social, and structural disadvantage and, in all-too-many cases, by racism, bias, and discrimination. These potent societal determinants shape adolescents' life-course trajectories in multiple ways. They reduce access to opportunities and supports enjoyed by more privileged youth, and they also expose less privileged youth to excess risks, stresses, and demands. These excess pressures “get under the skin” and adversely affect the brain and body during this critical developmental period.

Differences in opportunity are associated with striking differences in outcomes, for example;

- In educational achievement—as measured by reading and math proficiency, high school graduation rates, and college completion—White and higher-income youth consistently experience better outcomes than low-income and minority youth.
- Poor children develop more chronic conditions as they age compared to their better-off counterparts. Poor health in adolescence also harms educational attainment, because sicker children miss more days of school and ultimately attain fewer years of schooling.
- Black youth ages 10 to 24 have mortality rates roughly 50 percent higher than White and Latinx youth, driven mainly by differences in rates of death by homicide.
- LGBT adolescents and young adults have significantly worse health outcomes than heterosexual and cis-gender youth, including higher rates of mental health problems and suicide.

In addition, living in poverty significantly curtails economic opportunity for adolescents, and youth of color are disproportionately disadvantaged by growing up in poverty. By taking steps to reduce child poverty—such as those recommended by the recent National Academies report *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*—society can make a timely long-term investment to overcome the inequities faced by adolescents from low-income families and unleash new opportunities.

Disparities in adolescent outcomes are not immutable. They are responsive to changes in underlying conditions, and adolescents themselves show resilience and demonstrate strengths and assets that may be utilized to overcome inequities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Changes in our understanding of adolescence, together with major changes in the labor market, require rethinking and modernizing a public school system that was largely designed for early 20th century life. The secondary school system of the future must offer differentiated and responsive academic opportunities—including individualized instruction, tutoring, and credentialing—and incorporate the teaching of nonacademic skills such as decision making, practical knowledge, and adaptability into their mission. The growing diversity of U.S. adolescents also requires schools to better recognize adolescents' integrated needs, become more culturally sensitive, and become more adept at assisting youth with issues related to identity and social competence.

The increasing income segregation of U.S. schools, compounded by rising income inequality, suggests that children from disadvantaged households likely need *more* resources if society is to reduce disparities in educational outcomes. Parity in public system funding is a first step, but it will not be sufficient to significantly reduce disparities. Disadvantaged youth will likely require disproportionate funding.

The committee's recommendations highlight six key areas to implement such change:

- Rectify disparities in resources for least-advantaged schools and students.
- Design purposeful but flexible pathways through education.
- Teach practical knowledge and nonacademic skills, such as decision making, adaptability, and psychosocial skills.
- Protect the overall health and well-being of each student.

- Foster culturally sensitive learning environments.
- Help adolescents and families navigate the education sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE HEALTH SYSTEM

Access to appropriate health care services is important to ensure adolescents' well-being today and for a lifetime, particularly as they develop habits that will affect their long-term health. Yet adolescents face a variety of barriers to accessing health care, accentuating longstanding disparities in use of such care and health outcomes measurable by race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, LGBTQ status, and ability status.

The committee's recommendations draw on research to identify more effective health policies, programs, and practices with five key aims:

- Strengthen the financing of health care services for adolescents, including insurance coverage for uninsured and under-insured populations.
- Improve access to comprehensive, integrated, coordinated health services for adolescents.
- Increase access to behavioral health care and treatment services.
- Increase the number of adolescent health care providers and improve their training and distribution.
- Improve federal and state data collection on adolescent health and well-being, and conduct adolescent-specific health services research and disseminate the findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Historically, the U.S. child welfare system has focused on young children. This approach is ill-suited to help adolescents in the child welfare system flourish, given their more advanced decision making skills and their need for a balance of autonomy and healthy relationships, compared to younger children. Also of great concern are disparities: Poor children and children of color are disproportionately referred to the child welfare system.

Over the past two decades, Congress has gradually enacted statutory changes that better align the child welfare system with the developmental assets and challenges adolescents face, including focusing attention on family reunification, prioritizing placement with relatives over strangers, and providing services for adolescents aging out of foster care.

These are significant advances, but additional efforts are needed to ensure that all adolescents involved with the child welfare system have the opportunity to flourish. The committee's six key areas of recommendations are:

- Reduce racial and ethnic disparities in child welfare system involvement.
- Promote broad uptake by the states of federal programs that promote resilience and positive outcomes for adolescents involved in the child welfare system.
- Provide services to adolescents and their families in the child welfare system that are developmentally informed at the individual, program, and system levels.
- Conduct research that reflects the full range of adolescents in the child welfare system.
- Foster greater collaboration among the child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and health systems.
- Provide developmentally appropriate services for adolescents who engage in noncriminal misconduct without justice system involvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Recent advances in the science of adolescent development have had a substantial impact on juvenile justice reform. However, progress across the country is uneven, and racial and ethnic disparities in police, prosecutorial, and judicial decision making persist and in some cases are increasing.

Areas of opportunity for reform within the juvenile justice system include increased family engagement and greater attention to procedural fairness, including interactions with police, legal representation for youth, and reduced use of juvenile fines and fees. For example, state legislatures and courts should ensure that youth involved in the justice system are provided with competent counsel throughout the legal process.

Similar reform efforts recognizing the developmental needs of older adolescents and young adults are emerging within the criminal justice system, including reducing automatic transfers of juveniles to criminal courts based only on the

charged offense, and creating developmentally informed correctional programs for young offenders. These efforts should be guided by the science of adolescent development and the core principles of a developmental approach.

The committee offers the following areas of recommendation:

- Reduce disparities based on race, ethnicity, gender, ability status, and sexual orientation or gender identity and expression among adolescents involved in the justice system.
- Ensure that youth maintain supportive relationships while involved in the justice system and receive appropriate guidance and counsel from legal professionals and caregivers.
- Implement policies that aim to reduce harm to justice-involved youth in accordance with knowledge from developmental science.
- Implement developmentally appropriate and fair policies and practices for adolescents involved in the criminal justice system.
- For those youth in the custody of the justice system, ensure that policies and practices are implemented to prioritize the health and educational needs of adolescents and avoid causing harm.

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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 *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (2019). The study was sponsored by the Bezos Family Foundation, the Public Education Support Fund, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Seattle Foundation. 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.

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