



# Supports Youth Need

Fundamental supports for healthy development and strategies to meet those needs



Adolescence is a time of significant development, growth and change, second only to infancy. It is a time of exploration when adolescents are figuring things out and taking charge. During this key developmental time, young people accomplish development tasks that help them move into adulthood ready and prepared.

We know from research and practice that young people need the following to be healthy and thrive:

1. Relationships with caring adults.
2. Supportive relationships with parents/caregivers.
3. Supportive peer network.
4. Positive connections to school.
5. Supportive communities.
6. Opportunities to experiment in healthy ways.
7. Opportunities to participate, give back, belong.
8. Opportunities to find and explore their “spark.”

When young people have these foundational supports to help them develop, thrive, prosper and flourish, they are less likely to be involved in risk behaviors, do better in school, and are more likely to believe in their own abilities!

This brief considers what these fundamental supports mean and provides examples of healthy youth development strategies to ensure young people have needed supports.

## Understanding Adolescence

### A DEVELOPMENTAL LENS

#### EARLY ADOLESCENCE

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Ages 10–14  
Grades 5–9

#### MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE

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Ages 15–17  
Grades 9–12

#### LATE ADOLESCENCE (emerging adulthood)

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Ages 18–24  
Post High School

## Youth need...

*Adults with whom to talk and think things through.*

*Adults who care and stick with youth through thick and thin.*

*A family that loves, guides, nurtures and holds high, realistic expectations.*

*Boundaries that provide safety but adapt as the young person grows.*

*A network of friends who care, are supportive and provide strengths.*

*Opportunities to learn in ways that fit the young person.*

*Places to learn where the young person feels like they belong.*

*Opportunities to try things out in safe ways.*

*Opportunities to have fun.*

*Opportunities to identify and explore “sparks.”*

### YOUTH NEED...

#### **Relationships with caring adults** **ADULT CONNECTEDNESS**

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Youth need opportunities to develop and strengthen connections to caring, supportive, responsible adults, including parents, family members, and other adults. They need healthy relationships with a circle of people who listen, provide high expectations, support and guidance, provide positive role model.

#### **HEALTHY YOUTH** **DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- When working with youth, spend time strengthening your relationship with them.
- Train people who work with or make decisions about youth in adolescent development, how to listen to youth and the importance of building strong relationship with youth clients.

### YOUTH NEED...

#### **Supportive relationships with parents** **PARENT CONNECTEDNESS**

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This is about strong bonds and relationships between youth and their parents or caregivers. It includes relationships in which youth feel close to and supported by their parents, perceive their parents care, feel loved and wanted, feel satisfaction with their relationship.

#### **HEALTHY YOUTH** **DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Conduct parent education programs for parents of pre-youth and youth to build their parenting skills and supports.
- Develop informal opportunities for parents of youth and emerging adults to share experiences with other parents.
- Provide parent education (formal, informal) to build parenting skills and knowledge.
- Provide opportunities in which parents can get to know and connect with other parents of adolescents (building a support network).
- Provide opportunities for youth and parents to have fun and/or work on projects together.
- Advocate for policies that support healthy family development (economic, employment, housing, education, etc.)

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Supportive peer network**  
**PEER CONNECTEDNESS**

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A network of supportive, pro-social peers is a critical part of successful development. To help them manage the changing relationships with peers in adolescence, young people need opportunities to develop and sharpen social skills such as an ability to understand emotions and practice self-discipline, work with others, develop decision-making and problem-solving skills, and develop effective communication skills.

**HEALTHY YOUTH**  
**DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Provide opportunities for young people to come together and have fun while learning with a wide array of peers (guided and supported by adults).
- Provide opportunities for youth to work together with adults and peers on leadership projects (in the community, at school, faith organizations, youth programs, etc.).

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Positive connections to school**  
**SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS**

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This refers to students' beliefs that adults in their school care about them as students and as individuals. It also involves young people surrounded by high expectations for academic success, perceived support from school staff, and a safe school environment.

**HEALTHY YOUTH**  
**DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Provide training for school staff in adolescent development, how to listen to youth and the importance of building strong relationship with students.
- Advocate and help create school environments or school climates that are positive, safe, welcoming and which youth are known by name.
- Provide opportunities for youth to work as leaders in schools in creating supportive, caring school environments.
- Provide fun opportunities for students to be active at school.
- Develop policies and opportunities for parents to be engaged in school.
- Provide supports for students during key educational transition times (entry into junior/middle school, high school, new students regardless of grade, students re-entering school following absences – suspension, expulsion, health or substance use treatment).

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Supportive communities**  
**COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS**

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These are the communities that embrace, respect and value youth. For community connectedness, the most influential factors are relations between adults and adolescents, voice in the community, attitudes toward adolescents, and opportunities for youth to be creatively and actively youth involved in their community.

**HEALTHY YOUTH**  
**DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Train adults who work with and/or make decisions about youth in adolescent/emerging adult development.
- Positively advocate for youth in community settings in which youth issues are raised (for example—youth hanging out on street corners).
- Say hello and engage youth in conversation wherever you encounter them (bagging groceries at the grocery store, walking by your home, etc.).
- Advocate for and provide opportunities for youth to work as leaders in community initiatives (community clean-ups, strategic planning, resource evaluation, etc.).
- Train adults to work comfortably as youth leaders in community initiatives.

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Opportunities to experiment in healthy ways**

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Experimentation is the process by which young people “try on” new behaviors, beliefs and values. Youth need opportunities to safely explore and experiment with their own identity, with relationships to other people, with ideas. They need supported to try out various roles without having to commit themselves irrevocably. In addition, young people have the opportunity to try out and discuss conflicting values in a process of defining a personal value system and opportunities to reflect on themselves, in relation to others and discover self by looking outward as well as inward.

**HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Work with youth to identify and offer opportunities for safe experimentation (rock climbing, skate parks, other physical recreation, theater, music, etc.).
- Talk with youth about their sense of identity (how it feels, what is strange, what is comfortable).
- When a young person changes their outward appearance, ask them about it in a non-judgmental way.
- Engage in friendly debates and discussions with youth about social issues.

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Opportunities for creativity and fun**

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Young people need the opportunities to find what they’re interested in, passionate about, gives them joy and sense of wellbeing. By tapping these areas, youth experience a sense of mastery, purpose and fulfillment.

**HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Partner with youth to identify and offer opportunities for fun and recreation.
- Work with youth to evaluate existing youth recreation programs - revised and adapt as needed.

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Opportunities for authentic participation**  
**YOUTH LEADERSHIP**

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This includes opportunities for leadership, for giving back to others and for participating in a full range of community life. Through these opportunities youth learn valuable skills, develop a sense of mastery. In addition, they develop a sense of citizenship, validation that they belong and can make a difference.

**HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Teach youth leadership skills.
- Engage youth as leaders and advocates in any youth, community, education or social issue/program.
- Teach adults how to work with youth as youth leaders.
- Provide youth-driven service learning and volunteer opportunities for youth (be sure to provide opportunities for these youth to process what they’ve learned/gained from these experiences).

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Exposure to the world of work**

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Young people need exposure to the work world through opportunities such as career training, volunteer community service and job experience. In addition, they need opportunities for active learning where they can develop critical thinking and reasoning skills that are needed in adult roles and responsibilities.

**HEALTHY YOUTH  
DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Engage youth in service learning and volunteer opportunities (be sure to provide opportunities for these youth to process what they've learned/gained from these experiences).
- Incorporate youth career exploration opportunities in your program (or partner with other organizations that provide these opportunities).
- Seek out and post youth employment, internship and volunteer/service learning opportunities for youth to see and explore.
- Work with businesses that employ youth and emerging adults to support their efforts in building basic job skills.

**YOUTH NEED...**

**Basic needs met**

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Young people need stability including food, shelter and physical and psychological safety.

**HEALTHY YOUTH  
DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES**

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- Advocate and ensure policies and programs that ensure safe communities, adequate housing, adequate nutrition, mental health services, opportunities for recreation, etc.
- Assess and ensure that all youth programs provide adequate structure and supervision so that all youth feel safe, secure and included.
- Provide food at youth gatherings.
- Partner with other organizations that provide basic services so that youth with basic needs can find easy access to community resources.

**HELPING YOUTH THRIVE: WHAT CAN PUBLIC HEALTH DO?**

What does or can your program do to provide the foundational supports and opportunities youth need for healthy development?

YOUNG PEOPLE NEED...	PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONDS....
"Sticky" adults to talk to and help think things through.	
A family that loves, guides, nurtures and holds high, realistic expectations.	
A network of friends who care, are supportive and provide strengths.	
Opportunities to learn in ways that fit a young person and places to learn where they feel like they belong.	
Opportunities to try out new things in safe ways.	
Boundaries that provide safety but adapt as the young person grows.	
Opportunities to have fun.	
Opportunities to identify and explore "sparks".	
Opportunities to make a difference.	