



Education Research

Adolescence Is Prime Time for Closing Opportunity Gap

- By Dian Schaffhauser
- 08/13/19

A new research project has suggested that the dramatic changes that take place in the brains of young people offer "unique opportunities for positive, life-shaping development and for recovering from past adversity." For that to happen, however, the country also needs to address inequities in education, healthcare and 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."

People aged 10 to 25 make up almost a fourth of the U.S. population. According to "**The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth**," as youth move through these ages, the connections between brain regions strengthen and become more efficient while unused connections "are pruned away." The brains of young people are adaptable and also become more "specialized," based on what demands are placed on them by their environments, such as learning opportunities at school and social interactions.

How genes and environment interact. Source: "**The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth**," from the **National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine**

At the same time, the adolescent brain is "vulnerable to detrimental exposures," including alcohol and drug use and other stresses, such as growing up in a dangerous neighborhood. Here's where inequity plays an outsized role.

"Too many adolescents are being left behind at this critical stage of development because their families, schools and neighborhoods lack the resources they need to overcome adversity and flourish," said Richard Bonnie, a professor at the University of Virginia and chair of the committee that wrote the report. "We need to close the opportunity gap among adolescents in our country."

The differences in opportunity are linked with "striking differences" in outcomes. For example, white and higher-income youth consistently experience better educational outcomes than low-income and minority youth; 19 percent of Black students are proficient in math compared with 51 percent of White students and 26 percent of Latinx students.

This isn't heredity speaking; contemporary studies are showing that "genes and environment interact." As the report emphasized, "The way heredity is expressed in behavior depends significantly on influences in a person's environment." The course of an individual life can change up or down. "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."

In other words, adolescent brain adaptability offers an opportunity for recovery: "Because of the malleability and plasticity of the adolescent brain, redirection, recovery and resilience are possible."

The report's recommendation: to invest in programs and interventions that can take advantage of the brain's capacity to change during adolescence and thereby promote "beneficial shifts in young people's life trajectories," both for those who have experienced adversity earlier and for those who face challenges now.

The report's recommendations highlight six key areas where state and federal government--including school districts--can implement changes for the good:

- Address the disparities in resources for the least-advantaged schools and students;
- Set up "purposeful but flexible pathways" through education;
- Teach practical lessons and nonacademic subjects, including decision-making, adaptability and social-emotional skills;
- Protect the overall health and well-being of each student;
- Promote and nurture culturally-sensitive learning environments; and
- Help adolescents and their families navigate the education structure.

Parallel sets of recommendations are offered for the child welfare, health and justice systems.

The report was undertaken by the **Committee on the Neurobiological and Socio-behavioral Science of Adolescent Development and Its Applications** and produced by the **National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine**, with support from a number of philanthropic organizations.

The report and various summaries are openly available **on the National Academies website**.

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