

# Adolescent Health

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## DISMANTLING STEREOTYPES ABOUT ADOLESCENTS: THE POWER OF POSITIVE IMAGES

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a unique time in human development, when young people are transitioning to adulthood, establishing their autonomy and identity, confronting new challenges, and trying to understand and interpret the world around them by taking risks and testing boundaries. As with each generation, the world and social context is ever changing and evolving. Young people adjust, adapt, and respond to their social environment. Each generation of youths faces and responds to a world unique and distinct from the world of previous generations, representing departures. These departures represent the “generation gap,” or perceived differences in lifestyle and values between young people and adults. These differences, however, are typically considered as negative and rest at the core of prevailing social images and stereotypes about adolescents.

Although undeniable changes and challenges associated with adolescence exist, most youths are transitioning successfully, creating milestone achievements and surpassing the accomplishments of previous generations. Data demonstrate that a majority of youths share the values articulated by previous generations. Youths believe in their ability to make positive contributions to their communities and are involved in positive activities. They place a high sense of value on honesty, hard work, and education and have positive outlooks on their future (Bostrom, 2000). Young people have made significant improvements in their health and well-being and are active in many initiatives and campaigns that are focused on living healthy lifestyles. Infinite examples of the positive aspects and contributions of youths exist; however, the prevailing negative stereotypes associated with this age group persist.

### EXPLORING SOCIAL ATTITUDES ABOUT ADOLESCENTS

Widely held views and popular notions about adolescents are generally negative in nature. When asked to describe today’s youths, a majority of adults use pejorative terms such as “irresponsible,” “lazy,” and “disrespectful” (Public Agenda, 1999). Equally uncomplimentary are the words most often thought of in terms of adolescent behavior—wild behavior, sex, drugs, and violence (Bostrom, 2000). Fewer than half of adults in the United States believe that the next generation of young people will make the country a better place (Public Agenda).

Contemporary views of youths are shaped by theoretical and cultural dynamics. Embedded within traditional conceptual frameworks about adolescent development are concepts and terminology that characterize this transition as one of “storm and stress”

## What Youths Are Doing Well

- Approximately 70 percent of young people between 15 and 21 have been involved in community building and volunteer activities (Bostrom, 2000).
- Record numbers of youths are completing high school and furthering their education, with an all-time high of 33 percent earning bachelor’s degrees (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2001).
- Fewer youths are involved in violent crimes, and youth homicide rates reached a 14-year low in 1999 (Cole, 1999).
- Local and national campaigns and initiatives, such as “Rock the Vote,” the “Truth” campaign for anti-smoking, and Students Against Drunk Drivers, demonstrate youth involvement in civic and health-promoting activities.
- Larger numbers of youths reported never having sexual intercourse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001).

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for describing the physical, emotional, and social changes that occur during adolescence (Santrock, 1993). These developmental models have helped mold a professional orientation toward pathology in understanding adolescent development.

Stereotypes, although based on generalizations and often contradictory to factual information, are powerful in their ability to convey ideas and images about a group of people. Stereotypes promote limited views about youths and their characteristics and behaviors and offer an incomplete analysis of the effect of the social context.

In addition to the negative labels attached to adolescents overall, compounding issues exist, including racial and ethnic stereotyping, gender, sexual orientation, religious orientation bias, as well as generalizations made on the basis of socioeconomic status and community of residence (urban, suburban, and rural). Biases about various groups of youths can affect academic expectations and subsequent educational opportunities provided to youths. Misconceptions about urban, suburban, and rural youths can lead to misinterpretations about the issues that youths are likely to face. Gender bias in education and athletic opportunities can limit choices and options for girls. These stereotypes translate to very real and tangible consequences that are harmful in a variety of ways.

### **The Effect of Stereotypes on Adolescent Health and Well-Being**

Negative stereotypes about youths are profoundly detrimental to the health and well-being of adolescents. Images that distort reality can trigger fears or misperception about causality of and appropriate strategies for resolving problems. The issue of youth violence provides an example: Although youth violence rates declined by 96 percent from 1993 to 1999, 62 percent of adults believe that youth violence is increasing (Youth Law Center, 2001). The media—an important and powerful social institution—plays a major role in creating and reinforcing images that are generalized to a broader group (Heintz-Knowles, 2000). Polling data indicate a tendency to focus on youths and violence, affecting the public's perceptions about youth crime:

- Crime stories account for almost one in every two (45 percent) news stories about children, of which 84 percent were related to violent crime.
- Racial and ethnic minority youths are more likely to be covered in the context of violence. African American and Latino youths were more likely than other youths to be in stories with explicit violence.
- African American boys are more likely than any other group to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime and violence.

(Children Now, 2001)

Another negative consequence of stereotyping is the effect of labeling. Labels that pathologize this age group can lead to the internalization of negative messages about oneself and others. This can affect self-image, potentially alienating youths from the services to which social workers are seeking to connect them. Stereotypes and negative views about teenagers also can create barriers in communication between young people and the adults and service systems with which they interact.

Stereotypes and biases can influence the direction of youth policies and programs. Bias about youths can lead to programming and policy decisions that may not accurately reflect the true needs of youths, but rather social beliefs about who and what represent problems, and who is amenable to services. Funding for programs may be dictated or influenced by perceptions and affect whether policies promote positive youth development or are punitive in nature. This is evident in practices and policies related to mental

health and juvenile justice, as youths of color consistently are more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system rather than mental health treatment (National Mental Health Association, 1999).

### **The Power of Positive Images: Implications for Social Work Practice**

For adults, social workers, and service providers working with adolescents, ill-informed beliefs can lead to clinician bias in identifying the presentation and prevalence of “problem behaviors.” Providers may inaccurately over-, under-, or misdiagnose problems or make inappropriate recommendations for treatment on the basis of misconceptions and biases (U.S. Public Health Service, 2001). Provider perspectives based on stereotypes can hinder the detection of problems if beliefs suggest that certain groups may be immune to certain problems because of socioeconomic status, race, or other factors (U.S. Public Health Service).

The promotion of positive images can help dismantle the stereotypes about adolescents and eliminate the problems that it causes. Positive social images can help deconstruct stereotypes and lead to more accurate portrayals of youths. When youths do face challenges, social images also must make the connections to the social context.

Whether in individual practice settings, social systems such as schools, social services agencies, primary care, or macro-level policy settings, social workers have the opportunity to share the value of youths and promote positive images in ways that serve to improve adolescents’ health and well-being. Positive images are powerful. Practical considerations for helping to shift stereotypes are as follows:

- **Highlight what youths are doing well:** Self-concept and self-image are crucial aspects of adolescent development that must be considered when working with youths. By perpetuating positive images within our individual work environments and communities and highlighting the attributes that each youth possesses, social workers can help to foster positive self-image and self-esteem. These characteristics are crucial in helping youths achieve good health and avoid health-damaging behavior.
- **Share the successes:** Take opportunities to promote and use information, reports, data, and news articles that focus on positive attributes when working with youths and families, as well as, professional colleagues and policymakers. Social work and other service professionals may sometimes rely on deficit models as a framework for demonstrating the need for programmatic or policy actions on specific issue areas. It is important, however, to share a balanced perspective and to help policymakers, and society as a whole, recognize the challenges and opportunities for youths to succeed.
- **Shift the dialogue:** It is important to address identified challenges in a manner that recognizes and incorporates the effect of the social context, and that youth challenges are balanced with the broader person-in-environment perspective. Social issues, such as poverty, community violence, and lack of educational opportunities, offer significant insight into youth challenges, as well as, effective strategies to improve health outcomes for youths. Social work perspectives can help to shift dialogues in ways that acknowledge the importance of these factors.
- **Engage in self-awareness:** Fundamental to social work values is self-awareness and the recognition that personal beliefs, values, and biases influence relationships with the clients that social workers serve (NASW, 2001). By actively exploring personal and professional biases, identifying strategies and professional development opportunities that seek to reduce biases, and expanding self-awareness, social workers ultimately can facilitate better relationships with youths and their families.

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- **Challenge the norms:** As social workers challenge themselves to increase levels of awareness with respect to social attitudes and beliefs about young people, they need to challenge colleagues, other professionals, and the social systems serving youths and their families to identify and eradicate potential biases. Engage these groups and orchestrate opportunities for structured dialogue and training related to self- and professional awareness.

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