



The Opportunity of Adolescence: The Health Sector Contribution

"As children become adolescents and then adults, they are faced with increased challenges. This is represented by a greater use of detail in each metamorphic stage of the cover image. The alternating wing designs and coloured squares show that every transition into adulthood is different, while the overall form of the quilt unites adolescents in their shared experience"

Meaghan Haughian, youth, creator of cover art image

Backgrounder

October 2000

Adolescence is a time of life characterized by enormous growth and development. Adolescents are at an important stage in developing lifelong skills that will enable them to make good decisions about lifestyle, learning, relationships and self-sufficiency. The health and well-being of adolescents is significantly influenced by the determinants of health, such as access to health services, personal health and coping skills, social supports, income, physical environment, and biological and genetic endowment. In collaboration with youth and other sectors, there are many opportunities for the health system to ensure that adolescents and their families have the information, resources and services they require to foster healthy physical, intellectual, emotional and social development.

Youth face two important transitions during the adolescent years. As they enter into the adolescent years, the care and support provided by their family and school changes to accommodate emerging expectations for increased responsibility and self-reliance. Adolescents have a great deal of work to do in the few short years before they reach adulthood when they are expected to be

prepared to manage their own health and well-being, develop intimate relationships and participate in the workforce and community life.

Adolescents need supportive environments. Families, friends, schools, neighbourhoods, service delivery systems, the media and Internet, and their socio-economic status all influence adolescent health status, health behaviours and the use of health services. Adolescence is a time when youth take on more responsibility and become more independent in decision making. One of the important tasks is to experiment with new behaviours in the effort to understand choices and define oneself in relation to family, peers, community and future activities. Stable and supportive relationships with family and friends help adolescents to test and refine such life skills as setting goals and expectations, making smart choices, developing social competence, solving problems, dealing with conflict and contributing to community life.

Adolescents are an important element of our society. They have an abundance of positive energy, spirit and fresh ideas which often challenge the traditional norms of society. It is

essential that their strengths, creativity, interests, capacities and abilities are recognized and nurtured. Adolescents seek out and respond to real opportunities to contribute to the quality of life in their schools, neighbourhoods and society. The unique vision and culture of youth has been, and will continue to be, a major contributor to positive social change.

While most adolescents in Canada are doing well, some adolescents are at risk of less than optimal outcomes. Youth who are growing up in adverse conditions, such as poverty, inadequate parental support and/or social environments that promote alcohol/drug use, unprotected sex and violence, need effective interventions that promote their capacity to “beat the odds.” As the number of factors that place an adolescent at risk increase, they have a negative multiplier effect on the youth’s health and social outcomes, necessitating comprehensive strategies to foster resilience. Vulnerable youth who are provided with a supportive and flexible environment can better access the resources they need to develop their abilities to face life challenges successfully.

Purpose

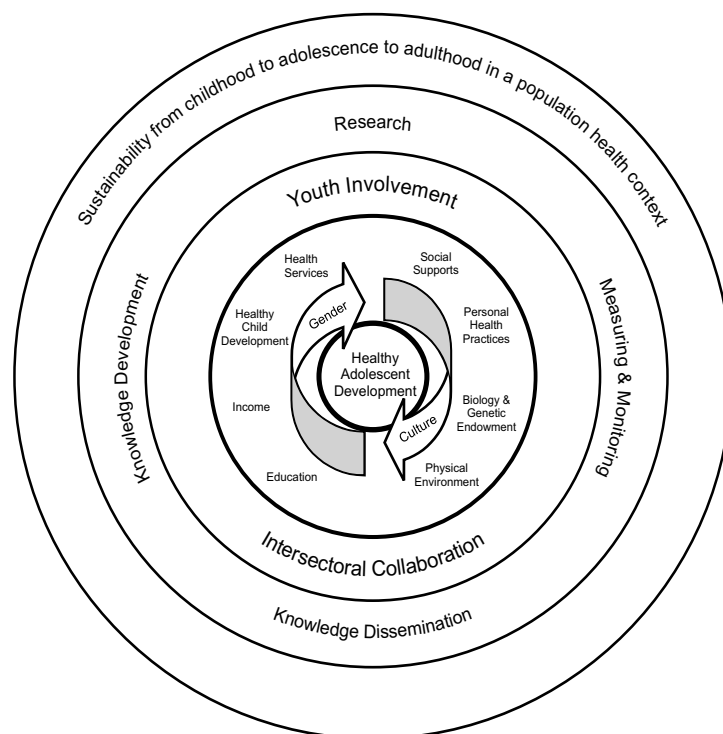
The paper provides extensive information about the specific health issues for adolescents. Using the determinants of health framework, the paper describes the current health status for adolescents and identifies areas where certain youth have greater needs for information and support. The paper considers the importance of gender, ethnic and cultural differences in adolescent development and behaviours. It identifies opportunities for the health sector to take action to promote the healthy development of adolescents, building on the health sector’s previous investments in early child development.

What the Health Sector Can Do

Ensuring that today’s adolescents grow up in an environment that fosters healthy physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual development will enable them to become tomorrow’s capable parents, caregivers, workers and citizens. The health sector has been successful at putting early childhood development on the social and political agenda. The health sector must now protect and enhance this initial investment by also investing in the adolescent period.

Five strategic directions have been identified to support the health sector in more effectively meeting the needs of adolescents and their families. Focussing on these strategic directions enables governments to build on their previous investment in early child development and to contribute to healthy development across the lifespan.

Framework for Healthy Adolescent Development



1. Improve the Availability and Accessibility of Health Services in Key Areas

To achieve their developmental milestones, all youth must have access to a wide range of confidential, youth-friendly health services which are accessible in both urban and rural settings. A number of concrete suggestions have been outlined in this paper that would greatly improve the availability and accessibility of services for youth. Specific programs and services can be created (e.g. outreach programs for vulnerable youth, peer mentoring programs, parent support groups), expanded (e.g. provide specific benefits not currently insured by our health system) or revised (e.g. remove legislative barriers that create barriers to access). Services can be provided in locations that are more accessible to youth (e.g. outreach programs, in schools, in malls, through the Internet). Finally, improving services in key health issue areas that have been identified in this paper (e.g. mental health, health promotion, tobacco and substance use, family violence, sexual health, injuries) can also contribute to adolescent health and well-being.

Policy Challenge:

- Improve the availability and accessibility of services to youth in key health issue areas, in youth-friendly locations that support confidentiality, and by establishing, expanding and/or revising specific programs and services.

2. Provide Supportive Environments for Youth

The social and physical environments, as well as the education system, are important determinants of adolescent health. Families, peers, schools, communities, media and communications, and the natural and built environments significantly influence adolescent health and the personal health practices of youth. These environments involve multiple sectors such as education, social services, housing and environment. There are specific strategies identified in this paper that the health sector can undertake to better support families and youth.

Policy Challenge:

- The health sector must enhance services and supports to adolescents and families that promote healthy development within the family and work more closely with other sectors to develop joint strategies that support healthy environments for youth within the home, school and community.

3. Involve Youth

The importance of working directly with adolescents to improve their health was a key priority identified in the comprehensive health report *Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians*. Youth have clearly articulated their desire to influence policies and services which are developed to support the safe and successful transition from childhood through to adulthood. Experts in adolescent development also support youth involvement and have outlined the benefits to both youth and society when opportunities are provided for youth to contribute to policy and program development and service delivery.

Policymakers and experts need to consult with youth to determine their response to the desired directions and strategic directions outlined in this document.

Policy Challenge:

- The health sector must establish mechanisms through which youth can actively participate in identifying health issues that are important to them, in establishing priorities and developing strategies that will effectively meet their health needs.

4. Intersectoral Collaboration

Many of the determinants of health lie outside the direct mandate of the health system. It is important that the health sector initiate discussion with other sectors, such as education, social services, economic, recreation, justice and housing. To increase the understanding of how policies and programs of specific sectors affect adolescent health and to assist youth by making healthy choices the easy choices, it is necessary to establish a clear role for health in these areas and to develop comprehensive strategies that foster healthy adolescent development. Some specific areas for collaboration have been identified in this paper.

Policy Challenge:

- The health sector must identify opportunities to work more closely with other sectors, particularly education and social services, and collaborate in developing joint strategies that support the healthy development of adolescents.

5. Increase the Knowledge Base on Adolescent Health and Well-Being

To support healthy adolescent development, it is essential to have reliable, timely data on adolescents on all the determinants of health. Existing information must be comparable, linked regionally and made available on a national basis. Research, program evaluation and monitoring are necessary to increase our understanding of the conditions that support youth to choose healthy risk behaviours over risk behaviours that have a greater chance of having lifelong negative health consequences. It is necessary to learn which models are the most effective and which approaches work best in specific situations.

Policy Challenge:

- The health sector, in collaboration with other sectors, must undertake research on adolescent health which collects data across all determinants, improves knowledge about interventions that promote healthy adolescent development, and provides practical information to practitioners, policymakers and individuals.

For More Information:

The Opportunity of Adolescence: The Health Sector Contribution was prepared by the Federal, Provincial, Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health. The full paper can be found at the Health Canada website: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/childhood-youth> Printed copies are also available from Provincial and Territorial Ministries of Health.