



Adolescence

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Adolescence. We have all been through it and have come out the other side—with varying results.

Adolescence is much more than simply a process of moving from childhood to adulthood. There are changes—many changes—and how we adapt to them affects our futures, including long term health.

In general, we consider the ages 12 to 19 years as the adolescent years, though that varies as it begins at different times for different people, progressing at varying rates. Adolescence is a developmental phase featuring significant physical changes and emotional development. Physical changes include remodelling of the brain's basic structure in areas that affect logic, impulse control, intuition and language. It is also a time to learn to be independent and make responsible choices instead of relying on others to do so.

Although adolescence is usually a time of good health, there are threats to health such as injury, depression, violence, risky sexual activities and substance abuse. Navigating these challenges effectively provides an adolescent with the tools to being a well-prepared and independent adult.

Successful transition to 'adult' is defined by a number of outcomes. Readiness for personal relationships and family life is important, as is the step from school to meaningful employment. Having a sense of identity combined with engaging with the community and being socially competent are features of adulthood. Being empowered to make healthy and responsible choices is also a key to adulthood.

There are key themes to a good adolescence. One is empowerment and engagement, meaning the meaningful participation in an activity focussed outside the youth. Examples include school activities, music, sports, politics, the arts... as long as it is meaningful and structured. Plus, the skills developed transfer very well to adulthood.

A second theme is resilience whereby an individual or group overcomes obstacles more effectively. It provides sort of an insulation in the face of adversity. Resilience develops and changes over time, and it helps individuals to maintain or improve their health.

The presence of 'assets' is another theme for successful adolescence. These include positive relationships, opportunities, competencies, values and self-worth; all contribute to healthy development.

The best chance for becoming a 'successful' adult is having a 'successful' adolescence. Youth who feel nurtured by family and connected to their schools, community and peers report a higher sense of self-worth.

They are also less likely to engage in risky behaviours such as smoking and drinking alcohol. Furthermore, there is evidence that having positive assets and self-esteem are cumulative.

These are not the necessary attributes for success as an adult, but they do provide the best chance for a healthy adulthood. Still, we understand that people are resoundingly capable

at making their lives work. We may describe the attributes of a 'successful' adult or adolescent, but there are many paths to the same outcome—some harder than others.

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