

Improving the Health of Adolescents & Young Adults: A Guide for States and Communities

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Foreword

Promoting the health and safety of adolescents is of critical importance to the future of the Nation. Adolescence represents a unique period in the life cycle. No longer children and not yet adults, adolescents make significant choices about their health and develop attitudes and health practices that affect their current safety and well-being as well as influence their risk for future serious chronic disease. Adolescence represents an opportunity for encouraging healthy choices and prosocial behaviors that will continue into adulthood. By investing in adolescent health today, we invest in the workforce, parents, and leaders of tomorrow.

Improving adolescent health, safety, and well-being is a complex endeavor that requires the collaborative efforts of a wide array of societal sectors and institutions including, for example, parents and families, adolescents themselves, schools and postsecondary institutions, health care providers, community organizations and agencies that serve youth, faith-based organizations, media, employers, and government agencies. Together, these entities are responsible for providing a nurturing structure and environment, as well as opportunities for growth that support and sustain the healthy development of youth.

Improving the Health of Adolescents & Young Adults: A Guide for States and Communities is a companion to *Healthy People 2010*, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' comprehensive, nationwide health promotion and disease prevention agenda. The document helps communities and individuals translate the *Healthy People 2010* objectives that are key to adolescent health and safety into a vision for improving adolescent health and well-being. It provides a framework for helping communities to establish priorities, take collective action, and measure progress toward the shared goal of improving the health, safety, and well-being of their adolescents and young adults. We believe this guide will serve communities and States and be an excellent starting point for new and evolving efforts that foster the healthy development of our Nation's youth.



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Preface

Adolescence represents a unique period in the life cycle that brings special challenges and opportunities. No longer children and not yet adults, adolescents make significant choices about their health and develop attitudes and health practices that continue into adulthood. In this period of exploration, adolescents also consciously start to make choices about their future and develop ideas about their roles in society. Adolescence thus represents an opportunity to encourage healthy choices and pro-social behaviors. In creating safe and nurturing environments for today's adolescents—environments that build assets while minimizing opportunities for behaviors that endanger health and safety—we can help ensure that tomorrow's adults will be healthy and productive.

The national *Healthy People 2010* initiative presents a special opportunity to promote the health and well-being of adolescents. It is also an important element of the new prevention initiative—*Steps to a HealthierUS*—from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Serving as a blueprint for improving the health of all Americans, *Healthy People 2010* has two overarching goals: (1) to increase quality and years of healthy life and (2) to eliminate health disparities. These goals are operationalized through 467 health objectives. As part of the *Healthy People 2010* process, experts convened to select critical objectives that represented the most serious health problems among young people aged 10 to 24 years. Through this process, 21 Critical Health Objectives for adolescents and young adults were identified. The 21 Critical Health Objectives cover mortality, unintentional injury, violence, substance use and mental health, reproductive health, and the prevention of chronic disease during adulthood. These Objectives represent a framework for policy makers, professionals, and community members as well as adolescents and their families to collectively address the challenge and promise of improving the health of our nation's young people.

The efforts to develop the 21 Critical Health Objectives led to the creation of the National Initiative to Improve Adolescent Health by the Year 2010 (“The National Initiative,” or NIAH 2010), which aims to attain all 21 Critical Health Objectives as it measures progress toward meeting them at the national and state levels. The 21 Critical Health Objectives will help establish priorities for improving adolescent health and provide a road map for monitoring progress toward those priorities at the national, state, and local levels. For the purposes of the National Initiative, adolescents and young adults are defined as persons aged 10-24 years including three subgroups: young adolescents, aged 10-14; older adolescents, 15-19; and young adults, 20-24. Focusing on these age group parameters is necessary to make consistent comparisons for this population and for tracking the *Healthy People 2010* objectives for adolescents and young adults over the next decade.

Using the National Initiative's framework to address adolescent health problems requires developing new approaches, working with a variety of partners, and conceptualizing adolescent health from a new perspective. This document departs from traditional approaches to adolescent health in at least three ways: it (1) de-emphasizes a categorical approach to addressing specific health problems, (2) emphasizes a multilevel approach rather than concentrating on changing the knowledge and behaviors of individual adolescents, and (3) simultaneously takes a youth development approach, one that embraces adolescents and young adults proactively as part of efforts to promote their health and safety rather than as “problems to be fixed”.

Relying on a categorical approach alone ignores the fact that there are many common antecedents to seemingly disparate health problems. Research has clearly shown that risk behaviors tend to cluster and that engaging in one risk behavior often contributes to other negative health outcomes. Although the 21 Critical Health Objectives present each



health outcome as a separate concern, we encourage interventions that address multiple health risk behaviors concomitantly.

Regarding our multilevel approach, we believe there is great danger in the common practice of emphasizing the personal attributes and behaviors of adolescents while neglecting the effects of the environments in which they live. This document stresses addressing adolescent health problems at the levels of individual/family, school/peers, community, and policy/society.

As for youth development, we believe in viewing adolescents and young adults as persons whose assets, if adequately nurtured, serve as a positive force. A youth development approach aims to enhance competence, capacities, caring, and citizenship among young people. Recent research, which later chapters describe in more detail, supports this approach. For example, some studies have demonstrated that programs and interventions that integrate youth development approaches are effective in protecting youth against engaging in health risk behaviors. Even so, prevention efforts should not focus on youth development to the exclusion of initiatives aimed at reducing health problems and risk behaviors. The National Initiative framework underscores that the two approaches must go hand-in-hand to effectively promote adolescent health.

The audience for this Companion Document includes people from a variety of backgrounds and sectors, including personal healthcare. This document provides a variety of strategies, tools, guiding questions, and additional resources to help interested agencies develop programs and interventions that can prevent adolescent health problems. It emphasizes collaborative program planning and maintaining a coalition. We encourage communities to prioritize a specific Critical Health Objective or set of Critical Health Objectives based on adolescent health issues of most concern to their particular community as well as their history, dynamics, leadership, and resources. The document highlights examples of various communities that have brought together different sectors of society to prioritize community action and that have developed mechanisms for implementing workable solutions. We could not, however, present instructions for every step necessary for communities to develop and implement adolescent health programs and initiatives.

This document is divided into three parts. Section 1: Building National Efforts to Improve Adolescent Health includes Chapters 1 through 3 and provides the background for the National Initiative. Chapter 1 describes *Healthy People 2010* as well as the development of the 21 Critical Health Objectives and the National Initiative. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the health status of U.S. adolescents and young adults. Chapter 3 presents the National Initiative's framework, which focuses on the antecedents of the 21 Critical Health Objectives and incorporates risk and resilience theory and youth development. Moving from the national to state and local levels, Section 2: Building State and Local Efforts to Improve Adolescent Health provides guidance for taking action to achieve the 21 Critical Health Objectives. Chapter 4 discusses how data can be used to shape a local adolescent health agenda, develop a local adolescent health profile, and identify priority objectives. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 provide guidance for communities on developing, enhancing, and/or expanding programs and interventions to meet the 21 Critical Health Objectives. Finally, Section 3 includes Chapter 8, which offers a list of federal resources, including manuals, Web sites, and best practices.

In summary, improving adolescent health and well-being is a complex undertaking. Program evaluation and research on antecedent factors of adolescent health risk behaviors have helped create a road map for improving adolescent health. Although all the pathways have not yet been clearly drawn, and the strategies needed to achieve the greatest success are still being developed and tested, this document serves as a starting

point for new and enhanced action. If the nation makes significant progress toward meeting the 21 Critical Health Objectives, substantial improvements in adolescent health will result. Meeting the 21 Critical Health Objectives will also lead to improvements in adult health, because adult health risk behaviors often develop during adolescence and young adulthood. In addition, adoption of healthy behaviors by adolescents helps prevent the development of many serious chronic diseases of later adulthood, including lung and heart disease, certain common types of cancer, and other chronic diseases. As adolescents represent the workforce, parents, and leaders of tomorrow, making concerted investments in their health becomes even more imperative today.