



Policies to Support Adolescent Health and Health Services

Although most of the nation's nearly 42 million adolescents (aged 10-19) are healthy, far too many young people participate in risky behavior, develop unhealthy habits, are overweight or obese, have mental health or substance abuse problems, or have serious or chronic conditions that jeopardize their health. These conditions and activities in adolescence set the behaviors and habits—healthy or unhealthy—for adulthood.

Disease prevention, early intervention, health promotion, and timely treatment can significantly improve the health status of adolescents, prepare them to become healthy adults, and decrease the incidence of many chronic diseases in adulthood.

A coordinated health care system that is geared toward the unique needs of adolescents can significantly affect benefit young people's health. Individuals, families of adolescents, federal and state agencies, private foundations, and insurers working together can improve the accessibility, acceptability, appropriateness, effectiveness, and equity of health services for adolescents.

Among these stakeholders, there are important roles that only federal and state policy makers can fill. Carefully crafted policies can provide a foundation for strong systems of care that meet a wide variety of individual and community needs. Such a system is particularly needed for adolescents, who frequently lack access to insurance and quality health services.

Supporting Health Insurance Coverage

Large numbers of adolescents are uninsured or have inadequate health insurance. More than 4 million adolescents aged 10-18 are medically uninsured, which can lead to a lack of access to regular primary care, as well as limited behavioral, medical, and dental care. As is true for all Americans, adolescents who are medically uninsured often receive care late in the development of a health problem or not at all. In comparison with adolescents who have health coverage, whether public or private, those who are uninsured are less likely to have a regular source of primary care, often delay in seeking care, fail to obtain needed prescription drugs, and do not have regular dental visits. Federal and state policy makers should develop strategies to ensure that all adolescents have comprehensive, continuous health insurance coverage.

Supporting a Coordinated Primary Health Care System

A coordinated primary health care system may improve health services for all adolescents, as well as address the particular needs of specific groups of adolescents who may be especially vulnerable to risky behavior or poor health. Federal and state agencies, private foundations, and private insurers should work together to support and promote policies on the development and use of a primary health care system by adolescents and their families. These groups should see out opportunities to improve coordination between primary and specialty care services and between primary care services and health programs for adolescents

in many safety-net settings, such as schools, hospitals, and community health centers. Such coordination could contribute to improved adolescent health and health services.

Supporting Public Health Programs

Policy makers should support the expansion of public health programs and mechanisms to speed and improve enrollment and retention of adolescents in publicly available health service programs. They should also provide health promotion and education to adolescents and their families. Community agencies—with the help of thoughtful public policies and active support from public agencies—could coordinate and link, interdisciplinary adolescent health services and programs among health care providers and health organizations. By doing so, community agencies could improve adolescent health and health services and promote health education and health promotion messages.

Supporting Training for Health Providers

Young people are best served by health providers who understand the key developmental features and the overall social environment of adolescents. Health providers can play an important role in helping adolescents set the pattern for healthy adulthood. Yet health care services are frequently not designed to be adolescent friendly, and health providers often lack both the specialized training and the necessary skills to interact successfully with this age group. Regulatory bodies for health professions that treat adolescents should develop licensing, certification, and accreditation requirements.

Providing Guidelines and Assuring Privacy and Confidentiality of Health Care for Adolescents

Critical to successfully delivering health services to adolescents is the recognition by providers that lack of confidentiality (or perceived lack of confidentiality) in services deters some adolescents from seeking or using services. Federal and state policy makers should maintain current laws, policies, and ethical guidelines that enable

adolescents who are minors to give their own consent for health services and to receive those services on a confidential basis when necessary to protect their health.

Supporting Continued Research

Developing a clear definition of adolescent health and understanding and characterizing health status within this definition depends on high-quality data, particularly data related to adolescent behavior. Those concerned with the health of adolescents—health practitioners, policy makers, and families—would benefit from ready access to better and more precise data for better understanding the consequences of risky behavior. Such data can also contribute to appropriate prevention and health promotion activities for adolescents. Federal health agencies should prepare a research agenda for improving adolescent health services that includes assessing existing service models, as well as developing new systems for providing services that meet the specific needs of adolescents.

Key Facts

- More than four million adolescents are medically uninsured
- Health services for adolescents currently consist of separate programs and services that are often highly fragmented, poorly coordinated, and delivered in multiple public and private settings.
- There are limited opportunities for health care providers to be trained about adolescent development and health, and the existing training does not address many of the needs of adolescents.
- For some adolescents, the confidentiality of the information they give to and receive from health providers is very important. If privacy cannot be assured, they may forgo needed health services—particularly for such sensitive issues as sexual behavior, reproductive health, mental health, and substance use.

For More Information

This summary was prepared by the Institute of Medicine/National Research Council, based on the report, *Adolescent Health Services: Missing Opportunities*, and the DVD produced in conjunction with that report, both of which were products of the IOM/NRC Committee on Adolescent Health Services. Copies of the report are available for sale from the National Academies Press (NAP) at 888-624-8373 or 202-334-3313 or via the NAP homepage www.nap.edu. Full text of the report and a free PDF copy of the Summary are also available at www.nap.edu. The DVD can be viewed at www.bocvf.org/ahc.html.

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