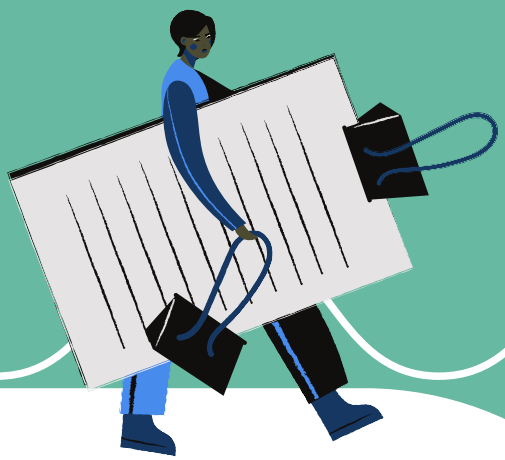
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Quick Guide





NOT JUST "LITTLE ADULTS"

Teens' Developmental Domains that Innovators Can't Ignore



Written By: Dr. Amber Childs and Anjlee Joshi





INTRO FROM THE AUTHORS

Even with growing recognition that youth need developmentally tailored approaches, many solutions are still built for adults and then later retrofitted for young people. And it shows. Let’s discuss.

Youth disengage from traditional care at high rates, with some outpatient dropout estimates between 28% and 70% (yes, you read that right). And, despite some progress, youth are still not engaging with new digital mental health solutions at rates we’d hope for. And today’s adolescents face challenges that are much different and more complex than those of past generations. You’ve seen the headlines.

We talk about this often with innovators, funders, clinicians, and youth themselves, trying to meet the mental health moment of today’s youth with transformative solutions. So, we figured it was worth going on record about why it’s so critical for youth solutions to be designed and rooted in an understanding of their unique developmental needs.

Adolescence is a trip. This critical developmental period is shaped by a wide array of biological, social, psychological and environmental factors that are unique to each individual.

To help all of you innovators out there, we’ve created a speed run of the different developmental factors to consider when building youth-focused solutions. While not exhaustive (and definitely generalized), it serves to highlight why we go so hard in the paint around youth-centered design, measurement and funding priorities in youth mental health innovation.

PRO TIP

Each section has a specific “what does this mean for innovators?” portion so that you can use these takeaways today.

Note: This article is intended for educational and informational purposes only. It does not constitute medical, clinical, or legal advice. Organizations developing youth mental health programs should consult appropriate professionals and applicable regulations.

BIOLOGICAL

Brain development: The teenage brain is rapidly changing and maturing. Not to get too scientific, but the pre-frontal cortex, where decision making, impulse control, and the ability to slow-down and understand the downstream consequences of behavior (metacognition) are still squarely in cooking mode. Likewise, the amygdala, or the "seat of emotion" in the brain, is being blasted with an influx of hormones, and teens are much more emotionally labile. (Reference Paper)

Hormonal changes: Famously, adolescence kicks off a surge of hormones that are linked to a cascade of both physical, emotional, and behavioral changes. And these changes are interconnected and typically bidirectional in their impact. For instance, increased levels of stress or changes in mood can affect behaviors (like eating and sleeping patterns), which can in turn increase or decrease certain hormonal systems, which in turn affect mood and behavior. See? Cyclical. Once the hormones are rocking, teens are primed to engage in higher reward-seeking behaviors, have a heightened awareness of being evaluated by their peers (especially those of the romantic variety), and feel the impact of social and interpersonal stressors, like rejection, particularly hard. It's all very complex.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR INNOVATORS?

- Executive function is still developing so don't assume consistent follow-through or long-term planning. Use reminders, notifications, flexibility in short and long interventions, and work on reducing friction at each step.
- Emotional responses can be intense with changes in mood and mindset that can fluctuate moment to moment.
  - For self-reported assessment, expect the data to be about the most top-of-mind experience, rather than the "last 14 days" like the rating scale says. Multiple informants (youth, caregivers, teachers) can be an important part of your data collection and overall assessment process to validate as well
  - Evaluating for safety and risk needs to be continuous and can fluctuate based on brief spikes in emotional intensity and variability.
- Emotions will change in intensity so expect variability in engagement (that means changes in KPIs). Also recognize that teens will engage with your solution during both low- and high-energy times which could impact design and options offered.
- Design solutions that can re-direct risk taking tendencies into safe challenges, structured ways of experimenting, and providing opportunities for appropriate agency.
- Don't sleep on the mind-body holistic approach. Given how hormones impact developing teens (think increased cortisol and the impact on sleep), consider how your solution considers developmentally aware links to whole body wellness.

SOCIAL & INTERPERSONAL

Shifting social relationships: Social skills and the importance of their peers change significantly during this time. Youth become more engaged with the opinions, ideas, and perspectives of their friends and transition away from primarily relying on their parents and other adults. This process is called individuation and is typical, to be expected, and is still balanced with needing connections to trusted adults.

Social pressure: Because peers become so central during adolescence, that means that social and interpersonal relationships with peers carry significant weight. Adolescents can feel especially heightened and sensitive to behavior of peers (see hormones above), and can be more vulnerable to the impact of peer pressure, increasing risk of substance use initiation, risky behaviors (e.g., reckless driving, sexual risk-taking), and even pressure to engage in bullying or other untoward interactions. When taken together with the biological changes described above (executive functioning, hormonal surges) and the quest for identity (see below. Seriously, it's all so interconnected), youth are especially vulnerable to experiences of othering, bullying, rejection or mistreatment from peers.



Dependency on guardians: Youth still largely lean on guardians or other adults in their life to provide necessities, safety, and (depending on the age) consent to obtain treatment. Various state laws also have requirements around specific topics that must be reported to guardians if a teen discloses them during the course of treatment (note: depending on the state this can be beyond safety and harm).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR INNOVATORS?

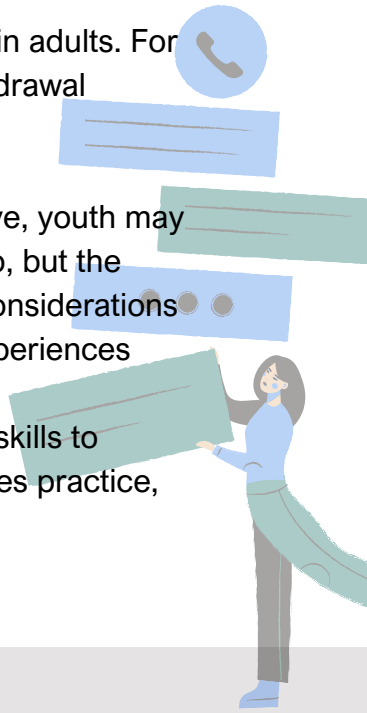
- How does your engagement strategy, service, or solution consider influence on a youth beyond their home life? How does it consider their friends, school, online activities, and more?
- Teens may need to convince their guardians that they need care vs adults who have autonomy on this front. If not, they still need permission, payment, emotional approval, and more. Design your engagement to also educate guardians or provide teens with help on how to speak with their guardians around concerns they have.
- Reporting laws may also complicate a youth's experience of privacy and confidentiality which could impact their engagement and transparency, as well as the care required by providers when reportable events arise. Ensure your confidentiality and privacy explanations are clear and in a language teens understand.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Identity formation: During this time, the major developmental task is around identity development and formation. Youth are questioning, discovering, and forming their identity at this time. It's not that adults aren’t still seeking to become self-actualized (we are), but for teens, this is their first time, and it occurs with intensity, which can impact stress, uncertainty, self-esteem, etc.

Manifestation of Symptoms: Symptoms manifest differently in youth than in adults. For example, in instances of depression, there may be more irritability and withdrawal presented.

Lack of vocabulary to explain: Beyond emotion regulation described above, youth may not have emotion identification or recognition. TBH, adults struggle here too, but the ability to articulate an experience can also be tied back to developmental considerations as well as youth using different language to describe their emotions and experiences



Coping Skills: Youth are in early innings with regard to developing coping skills to manage and regulate intense emotions. Building mastery in this area requires practice, experience, exposure to new situations and challenges, and simply...time.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR INNOVATORS?

- We need to understand how symptoms present differently and how that requires a differentiated or adapted clinical intervention or solution
- Design your engagement and solution acknowledging that teens are still learning emotional vocabulary. This could include scenario-based prompts, sliding scales, emojis, visual mood mapping, and, in language that teens are using today.
- Coping skills need practice and reinforcement. Offer those opportunities to rehearse, give feedback and support right away, practice again, and repeat the cycle. Work with the teen to generalize those skills in other situations (it can be hard for teens to see beyond the “here and now” at times).
- Because teens are hyper-focused on identity formation, your solution or engagement with them must be identity-conscious. That means it should reflect diversity, use affirming, expansive language, support exploration rather than pathologizing it, and more. Invalidating or not acknowledging a teen’s identity exploration can be destabilizing and more harmful.

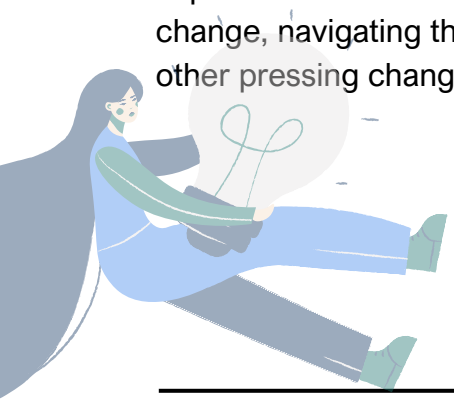
ENVIRONMENTAL & BEYOND

Academic pressures: School performance, standardized testing, extracurricular involvement, and preparing for college or post-high school plans all lead to stress, dealing with adult expectations, comparing oneself to schoolmates, and more.

Transitions and uncertainty: Life transitions and experiences? You name 'em, teens face 'em: puberty, starting high school, learning to drive, prepping for college or post-HS plans, becoming an adult, and more. This period of time has a lot of plasticity (and not just in the brain), which means it is high growth but also highly vulnerable. We often see issues pop up when teens face these transitions in isolation. Teens need validation, support, language, proper scaffolding, and the right tools. When some of those are missing, we often see issues arise.

Technology and digital media: Today's teens have grown up in a world where technology is fluid and woven into the experiences of their daily lives. Their social and interpersonal lives play out much more continuously than in the analogue days, which can have both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, youth may experience cyberbullying, unwanted contact, and/or harassment, and be increasingly exposed to problematic algorithmic design, misinformation, disinformation, or content that is intended to elicit a heightened emotional response or extreme beliefs. And given the biological factors discussed, may be more vulnerable to these known problems, which can have serious mental health consequences. On the other hand, there are benefits, including opportunities for skill building, creative exploration, connection with affinity communities, and more.

National and global issues: Exposure to distressing national and global events, including policy debates around education and school safety, technology regulation, wars, climate change, civil and political unrest, can affect youth well-being. Though youth are certainly capable of understanding, taking these issues in, and even acting as advocates for change, navigating the emotional complexity of these issues in the context of so many other pressing changes can be a heavy lift.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR INNOVATORS?

- Teens are already stressed and have a saturated nervous system. Make sure your processes, designs, forms, etc. are simple and straightforward.
- Transitions are incredibly salient and having a cache of both skills-based/functional (e.g., information and resources, practical guidance for applying for a first-job, etc) and interpersonal (e.g., coaching, peers support, connection to trusted adults) strategies and tools that are centered around transition domains relevant for the youth your serving is critical. Consider also how different populations may require a different constellation of supports to meet their unique transitional needs (eg, how do social determinants of health show up and inform that may also be needed to facilitate a transition).
- We hear all the time that teens are digital natives. That means your solution should also consider cyberbullying detection, awareness of appropriate content, sleep disruption, online comparison triggers, and more.
- Test if your solution is causing more isolation. How are you identifying if it increases connection? Is it resulting in more conversations with people in that teen's life? Does it improve their language and communication skills? Is it improving their agency? Does it support a pathway to real human support beyond clinicians?

CONCLUSION

That was a lot, but not nearly the whole of it. As you can see, if we're truly designing for teens we'll have to take a careful and flexible look at all of the complexities of adolescent development and shape our solutions and innovations to meet those specific needs. This way, we're creating solutions that are relevant and most importantly usable for real teens who are navigating real problems in the real world.

This snapshot cues up a series of resources coming your way focused on how we can do just that.