Early Adolescence Mental Health Needs and Opportunities: A View From On the Ground

Behavioral Health

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Early adolescence, which is approximately between the ages of 10 and 13, is a period of rapid development and growth, providing an opportune window to promote positive mental health. During this period, young adolescents' bodies and brains mature; they grow increasingly independent and experience changes in their relationships. Research shows that several key areas of early adolescent development impact their mental health, including emotional and behavioral regulation and building strong relationships.

As researchers working with schools to promote student mental health, we were excited when our colleague, Dr. Rhonda Boyd, recently shared a new report with us that she co-authored on this important period of child development and the role educators can play in promoting positive mental health. Below, we'll share insights on early adolescent mental health from our own research, delve into the report's recommendations for educators, and detail how these recommendations align with our work with schools.

What We're Hearing About Mental Health Needs in Our School-based Research

For the last two years, our team at PolicyLab has worked with regional educational partners on the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Tri-County School Mental Health Consortium (SMHC). This partnership aims to support public schools' Tier I (universal) and Tier II (targeted) mental health efforts, including during the important early adolescent period. In the first phase of the project, we interviewed district and school leaders, teachers, and other student support staff to understand key concerns and priorities for student mental health.

The middle school educators we spoke with expressed that the early adolescents they serve are experiencing social isolation, difficulties with emotion regulation and limited interpersonal skills. Many noted that these difficulties were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning.

One middle school counselor described, “Now [after the pandemic] we have students who are relearning how to socialize, and they’re behind […] but they’re learning how to be middle schoolers, but they’re not developmentally there yet. They’re so behind where they should be. And so, we’re finding that there are a lot of struggles, socially.”

These difficulties extend beyond social interactions, affecting students’ ability to navigate academic and emotional challenges. As one middle school counselor observed, “A lot of my students seem to be just like stressed and overwhelmed. I mean we see more and more students saying they have anxiety, and I'm not always sure if it is anxiety or it's just the overwhelm – like feeling overwhelmed with all of their extracurriculars, with all of their school demands and finding time to balance all of that.” Addressing these mental health needs is critical to ensuring students are equipped with the skills they need to thrive in and out of school settings.

Schools Have an Opportunity to Support Early Adolescent Mental Health

As covered in the recent report published by the UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent, schools can take action to help early adolescents during this key period of growth and development. The authors identify how educators can support student mental health, describing tools to reinforce healthy regulation of their emotions as part of daily classroom activities.

They also recommend that educators support students in building strong relationships with their peers and adults. Teachers can start by building rapport with their students and by teaching and modeling effective communication, collaboration and respect for one another. Having strong relationships not only builds trust at school, but also serves as a protective factor when students face mental health challenges.

Additionally, the report emphasizes the importance of using both systematic screening measures for Tier I mental health promotion, and early identification of students who would benefit from evidence-based Tier II intervention and supports. This is especially important for youth for whom early warning signs of mental health challenges are more likely to be underdetected, such as youth of color and youth living in poverty.

How SMHC Responds to Help Students Thrive

In line with these recommendations, the second phase of the SMHC project involves implementing two learning collaboratives to support mental health needs, including those of early adolescents. The first collaborative supports schools in effectively using data to inform Tier I and II mental health programming. This includes helping school staff use data to identify students who may have increased mental health needs, as well as to inform and improve the prevention and early intervention programming they already offer.

The second collaborative supports middle and high schools in delivering an evidence-based Tier II group prevention program focused on depression and anxiety, called Interpersonal Psychotherapy – Adolescent Skills Training (IPT-AST). This intervention teaches youth communication strategies and interpersonal problem-solving skills to improve their relationships and their mood. Members of the SMHC team with expertise in IPT-AST are training and providing consultation to school counselors and other student support staff on how to implement this group intervention within their schools.

Early adolescence is a pivotal time to lay the foundation for lifelong mental health and well-being. With these two collaboratives, the SMHC team hopes to equip schools with the tools and resources they need and empower middle school educators to address the unique needs of early adolescents during this critical developmental window. These efforts can not only help students navigate current challenges, but also prepare them to thrive academically, socially and emotionally well into the future.

Emily Alexander
Emily Alexander
EdM
Clinical Research Study Lead

Molly Kerstetter
Molly Kerstetter
MPH
Clinical Research Coordinator