

## Adolescent Health Care

The American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) supports the following measures to improve the health and well-being of adolescents in the United States:

- Legislation to increase school- and community-based health education programs, including reproductive, gender, and neurodiverse inclusive sexual health education and preventive health care information programs, that are evidence-based and sensitive to societal and public health issues.
- Funding of government programs designed to improve access to care, including Title X (family planning), State Children’s Health Insurance Programs (reproductive health), school-based health clinics, and Title V block grants (maternal-child health).
- Adolescent reproductive and sexual health program evaluation research aimed at increasing the practice of evidence-based, adolescent health care.
- Continued development, implementation, and integration of school- and community-based programs that address prevention, recognition, and treatment of adolescent intimate partner violence (IPV) and violence against transgender and gender-variant people within a sociocultural-political context.
- Provision of confidential services for adolescents, health care providers, and insurers that encourage family and peer involvement, as appropriate, for the health and social circumstances of the adolescent.
- Promotion of intergenerational models of care that emphasize education of the parents or parental figures of preadolescents and adolescents regarding communication, developmental changes, and positive health and lifestyle behaviors.
- Networking with other organizations to improve healthy behaviors in adolescents.
- Opposition to any limitations on access to essential services, such as sexually transmitted infection screening and treatment, gender-affirming care, fertility preservation for transgender and gender-nonconforming adolescents, family planning, emergency contraception, mental health services, IPV/sexual assault care, and sexual health education.
- Interdisciplinary educational initiatives to develop competent health care providers and services for preadolescents and adolescents and that consider individual and unique developmental needs.
- Interdisciplinary educational initiatives to develop competent and inclusive health care providers and reproductive, sexual, and fertility services for

preadolescents and adolescents who identify as LGBTQIA2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, 2-spirit).

- Acknowledgment of the roles that structural and systemic racism and oppression have played in health outcomes, including reproductive and sexual health, for racial-, sexual-, and gender-minority youth.
- Funding of research and program initiatives aimed at disrupting the structural and systemic causes of health disparities for racial-, sexual-, and gender-minority youth.

## Background

Adolescence is a time of exploration and emerging independence and represents the transition from childhood to adulthood. As teenagers explore these social, emotional, mental, and physical changes, they encounter decisions and experiences that may shape their ongoing sexual, reproductive, and mental health. With their newfound independence, teenagers face new challenges, including sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, substance use, violence, mental health issues, abuse, and accidental trauma. One in 4 adolescent people with a cervix is infected with at least one sexually transmitted infection.<sup>1</sup> Sexually transmitted infections, such as those caused by *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* and *Chlamydia trachomatis*, are more common in adolescents than in any other age group; however, other sexually transmitted infections, including primary and secondary syphilis and those caused by human papillomavirus, are also seeing a steady rise.<sup>1</sup> Syphilis infections between 2014 and 2016 rose 24.5% in individuals age 15 to 19 years and by 25.4% in individuals age 20 to 24 years.<sup>1</sup> Teenage pregnancy rates have declined over the last several decades; however, the United States continues to experience one of the developed world's highest teenage pregnancy rates, including disproportionately high rates among Black, Indigenous, and adolescents of color.<sup>2,3</sup> The teenage pregnancy rates among non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic adolescents are 2 times those of non-Hispanic white adolescents.<sup>2</sup> IPV, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol use are increasingly common in teenagers. Mental health issues, such as depression and suicide, are steadily increasing in adolescents, with suicide now being the second leading cause of death in adolescents.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these alarming statistics, adolescents remain one of the most underserved health care populations in the United States, and their health concerns may often be ignored. Adolescents are often uninsured or underinsured, and the availability of appropriate services is very limited. Other barriers to access include out-of-pocket co-payments, limited transportation, a lack of culturally appropriate care, a lack of gender-affirming care, and concerns about confidentiality. These barriers and health disparities are amplified for racial, sexual, gender, and neurodiverse teenagers, who have faced marginalization in the health care setting and who lack access to competent health care providers.<sup>5</sup> Education around lifestyle and sexual health and access to person-centered, gender-affirming care are critical tools for health-demoting behavior and illness prevention among adolescents. Health care providers must also work to understand and dismantle the structural and systemic causes of adolescent health disparities affecting neurodiverse and racial-, sexual-, and gender-minority adolescents.

## The Role of the Certified Nurse-Midwife/Certified Midwife

The midwifery model of care emphasizes education and family and person-centered care throughout the lifespan, which makes midwives ideal health care providers for adolescent women and for transgender and gender-variant people. In addition, midwives offer important services to the parents and parental figures of adolescents. The complex issues that face adolescents in today's society demand interdisciplinary attention, and certified nurse-midwives and certified midwives function well as part of the interdisciplinary team. Midwives promote healthy behaviors and facilitate the development of lifelong positive lifestyle choices. Midwifery care is culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate. Midwives respect the growing independence, privacy, and learning needs of the maturing adolescent.

As primary health care providers, midwives can provide intergenerational care and educate parents and parental figures regarding changes and developmental issues that are unique to adolescents. Studies have indicated that communication between parents and preadolescents is key to promoting positive health behaviors.<sup>6,7</sup> Furthermore, establishing midwifery care in adolescents affords the opportunity to foster long-term relationships that can provide continuity of ongoing person-centered, culturally humble care that continues into the childbearing years and beyond.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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*Note.* Midwifery as used throughout this document refers to the education and practice of certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and certified midwives (CMs) who have been certified by the American Midwifery Certification Board, Inc (AMCB), formerly the American College of Nurse-Midwives Certification Council, Inc (ACC).

Source: ACNM Board of Directors

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