In 2014, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) embarked on a bold journey toward a Culture of Health for our country. In a Culture of Health, all people have the opportunity to live as healthy a life as possible, no matter who they are, how much money they have, where they live—or how old they are.

Adolescence should be and often is a time of wonder, optimism, and hope. Yet, adults and institutions frequently fail to see adolescents this way and focus on damage control instead. Advances in neuroscience and developmental science offer new opportunities for improving how policymakers, practitioners, and others can harness the energy and excitement of adolescents to help them enjoy a Culture of Health in their own lives and improve the lives of future generations as well.

Adolescent Wellness: Current Perspectives and Future Opportunities in Research, Policy, and Practice, synthesizes views and ideas from 25 experts about the most critical issues in adolescent wellness, gaps in research, translation of research into policy and practice, and opportunities for learning and action. In individual conversations, these researchers, policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and funders explored contemporary and emerging trends in adolescent research, policy, and practice that touch on:

- The variety of contexts and environments in which adolescents live and which play important roles in shaping their daily experiences and their trajectories
- Advances in neuroscience that have altered understanding of how young people develop, the malleability of their brain systems, and implications for their health and well-being
- The existing and significant body of prevention and intervention research that points to effective strategies for promoting growth and maturation
- How public policy and the systems that control the lives of young people—education, criminal justice, mental health, child welfare—can encourage or impede healthy development
- The challenges in translating research into policy and practice, and the disturbing implications of failing to overcome those challenges
Key Messages

Among the rich compendium of views, reflections, and commentary offered, key messages stand out.

Wellness is not simply the absence of problems. Wellness involves thriving, having voice, and being self-aware and self-accepting. Behaviors that probe and question the status-quo can be healthy efforts to create a better world.

“The attitude that young people have towards authority gets misinterpreted as somehow aberrant or abnormal...It’s seen as aggression, instead of passion.”
—Howard Stevenson, University of Pennsylvania

Taking a holistic approach to adolescent development and wellness that is applicable to just about every young person is critical. Yet some environments and forces—such as poverty, trauma, discrimination, pressure to excel, social media—make it harder for young people to succeed.

“What we do to promote adolescent wellness might not be different from what we should do to prevent problem behaviors.”
—José Szapocznik, University of Miami Health System

Despite advances in knowledge, applying research findings to real-world settings is an ongoing challenge. Too much research focuses on fixing problems and removing risks, rather than on understanding protective factors and cultural strengths and assets—and helping adolescents thrive.

“Treatment’s important, but we need more anticipatory, universal, positive, promotive strategies to be researched; and we need efficient, cost-effective strategies.”
—Kristin Anderson Moore, Child Trends

Adolescent policy is not generally driven by research, and much policy—like much of the research—focuses on problems rather than on wellness.

“The most important issue is that adolescent health is not on the national agenda.”
—Evelyn M. Kappeler, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Adolescent Health

Much may be known about how to promote adolescent wellness, but the stumbling block is translating what is known into practice with integrity and at a scale that allows for sustainability.

“One of my biggest frustrations is the translation piece—the translation to practice. There is so much knowledge out there that we don’t apply. I think it is a great question for philanthropy: ‘What is the right balance between funding research, implementation of evidence-based approaches, and new innovations?’ We clearly need innovation but if we just did what we know works, we would be so much further ahead of where we are now.”
—Alexa Eggleston, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

These experts conclude their observations with a list of opportunities for learning and action for the field to pursue in setting the stage for enabling all adolescents—from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, economic circumstances, geographical regions, and sexual identities—to grow into healthy adults.

- Identifying strong standard-bearers to take the lead in moving the field forward
- Encouraging in-depth, long-term, supported dialogue among people with different views
- Developing and exploring avenues for knowledge-sharing and learning
- Listening to the voices of adolescents themselves and the people closest to them
- Investing in research that grows the field by addressing less well-studied topics

Researchers, policymakers, practitioners, parents, teachers, and funders stand at a crossroads in determining our nation’s approach to adolescence. The traditional view holds that the adolescent years comprise a difficult phase to be endured and survived. But a newer path considers adolescence to be the best time to nurture, guide, and support our youth into becoming healthy adults. This path inspires hope and is a course toward a future powered by the energy, imagination, and resourcefulness of young people.

“The goal can’t be just to avoid disaster—that shouldn’t be enough. I don’t know a single parent who would say that is a reasonable goal for what she or he wants for their teenagers.”
—Laurence Steinberg, Temple University

To learn more, read Adolescent Wellness: Current Perspectives and Future Opportunities in Research, Policy, and Practice.