

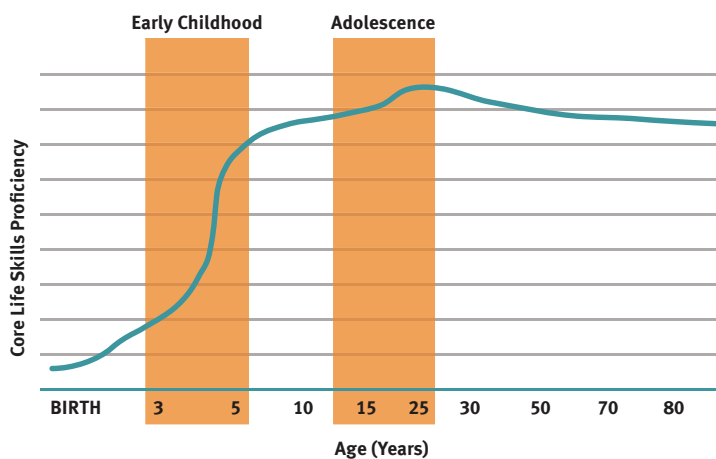
Building the Core Skills Youth Need for Life

A Guide for Education and Social Service Practitioners



All youth need to develop a set of **core life skills** to manage school, work, outside interests, and social relationships successfully. From the perspective of brain development, these skills include **planning, focus, self-control, awareness, and flexibility**—also known as “executive function” and “self-regulation” skills. No one is born with these skills, but everyone can learn them through practice.

Best “Windows of Opportunity” for Skill-Building



Early childhood is a critical time for the brain, when connections are being made that become the foundation for a child’s future health, learning, and behavior. **Adolescence is also a vital “window of opportunity” for building core life skills—and for practitioners to provide support.** During this period, the brain strengthens its most-used connections, making them faster and more efficient, and “prunes” away less-used ones. As the different areas of the brain mature during adolescence, their ability to function as an interconnected system improves. Practicing core life skills during adolescence helps the brain build the most efficient pathways to support these skills throughout life.

Core Life Skills

PLANNING

Being able to make concrete plans, carry them out, and set and meet goals

FOCUS

Concentrating on what’s most important at any given time

SELF-CONTROL

Controlling how we respond to our emotions and stressful situations

AWARENESS

Noticing people and situations around us and how we all fit into the picture

FLEXIBILITY

Adapting to changing situations

ALSO IN THIS GUIDE:

5 Ways to Help Youth Build Their Core Life Skills PAGE 2

How Stress Affects Developing Core Life Skills PAGE 3

5 Ways to Deliver Services That Reduce Stress PAGE 4

5 Ways to Help Youth Build Their Core Life Skills

Tips for Practitioners



1

Practice with real-life situations.

Encourage youth to problem-solve around real-life challenges they face (for instance, trying to finish a project for school when a friend texts with a personal problem, or handling a peer's depression).

WHY? Young people learn best when the experience is relevant to the real world and they can test out their own solutions.

SKILLS: Focus, Flexibility



2

Spot and plan for triggers.

Help youth recognize what triggers their intense emotions (for example, criticism from an adult, losing a game) and learn to take preventative actions—taking a deep breath, stopping to think, focusing on long-term goals—when those triggers come up.

WHY? This empowers youth to become more self-aware and develop coping strategies for the heat of the moment.

SKILLS: Awareness, Self-Control



3

Take another's view of stressors.

Encourage youth to ask people they trust how *they* cope with stress. Or, suggest they look at situations from someone else's point of view. As one example, for a young person upset over an early bedtime, ask them what might motivate a parent to have a firm time for "lights out." A parent caring about youth getting enough sleep to function well feels very different than a parent trying to control a young person's behavior.

WHY? Seeing stressors in a new way can diffuse anger, frustration, and fear. Young people learn there is more than one way to view problems and solutions.

SKILLS: Awareness, Flexibility, Self-Control



4

Focus on personally motivating goals.

Adolescence is a time for finding one's place in the world; for forming a consistent sense of self that will serve as a framework for making choices now and in the future. Encourage youth to try new activities and discover their passions. Support them in mapping out steps for setting and reaching their goals—and for dealing with obstacles.

WHY? This empowers young people to strengthen their self-identity, think long-term, and practice goal-directed behavior.

SKILLS: Planning, Flexibility



5

Build on positive memories and small successes.

Adversity may cause youth to feel that they lack control over their lives. They may internalize negative self-talk or peer interactions like bullying. Help them recall positive memories (such as a time when they helped a friend or finished a tough assignment) to see that even small actions make a difference.

WHY? This gives youth a starting point for building up their sense of self, undoing negative internalizations, viewing challenges as less threatening, and planning for the future.

SKILLS: Focus, Planning

Learn More

This material is adapted from the Center on the Developing Child's report, *Building Core Capabilities for Life* and the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's *Understanding the Adolescent Brain* series.

For more information on the science behind core life skills, what affects their development, and how practitioners can help, visit: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>

How Stress Affects Developing Core Life Skills

Some stress in life can be positive, but **extreme, ongoing stress can wreak havoc with young people's health, behavior, and ability to develop and practice their core life skills.**

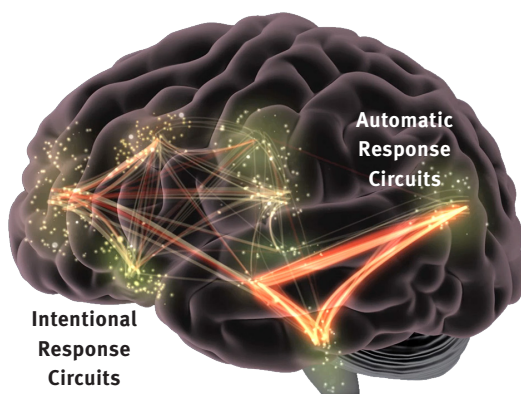
WHY? Stress and adversity trigger an automatic reaction in the brain—the immediate (and at times necessary) “fight or flight” response that spurs us to act first and think later. When that response is triggered repeatedly by extreme stress or trauma, however, it can overload the brain's capacity for more reflective, intentional responses. If this occurs during childhood, the brain actually overdevelops the ability to perceive and respond quickly to threats, instead of the ability to assess and respond to situations thoughtfully.



Extreme Stress Impacts Core Life Skills in Two Ways

In **early childhood**, extreme stress **redirects brain development away from core life skills** toward automatic (“fight, flight, or freeze”) responses.

In **adolescence**, excessive stress **overloads the ability to develop and practice core life skills**, leaving youth to rely primarily on their automatic responses.



That's why experiencing a pile-up of adversity—such as neglect, hunger, homelessness, multiple foster care placements, peer suicide, addiction, or violence—can cause youth to struggle to concentrate in school, keep track of the details in their lives, find constructive solutions for problems, and make plans for the future. It's also why interventions that add the threat of punishment or undermine autonomy are especially ineffective during adolescence. **To maximize opportunities for youth to learn core life skills, we must find ways to reduce chaos and adversity in their lives, while supporting their independence.**

How Can Practitioners Help?

Practitioners can **help ensure that programs and services do not unintentionally add more stress** to young people's lives.

NEXT:

5 Ways to Deliver Services That Reduce Stress

5 Ways to Deliver Services That Reduce Stress

Tips for Practitioners and Program Leaders



Create a safe environment.

Youth need physically and emotionally safe environments. Depending on the type of services you provide, this may mean setting up spaces that maximize privacy and confidentiality or inspire peer collaboration. Tap into their need to express their creativity and independence and engage youth in creating welcoming, appropriate spaces. Enlist their help with selecting lighting and furniture and designing the room's layout.

WHY? Optimizing the program environment gives youth the best chance to succeed and avoids triggering any stress or fear.



Leverage social relationships.

Collaborative time with peers may put youth more at ease and reduce any perceived threat of adult judgment. Encourage them to learn when to turn to friends for help and when to seek an adult's support. Give them opportunities to develop leadership skills (for example, as peer educators or facilitators). Maintaining supportive, open relationships with adults is still critical, so encourage both when appropriate.

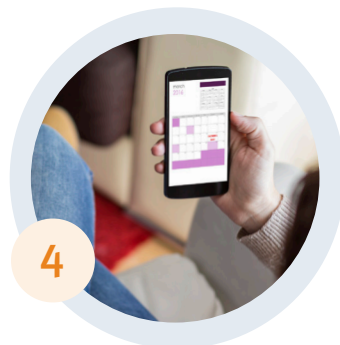
WHY? Adolescent brains are more attuned to social acceptance and rejection than at any other period of development. Aiding them in navigating social relationships helps them learn how to respond to feedback.



Support and listen.

Adolescents can be hyperaware of anything that makes them feel diminished. Offering advice may send the message that you do not believe they can make the best choices. Approach youth with respect, check your assumptions, and truly listen. Give them space to think about their decision-making process without telling them what to do. Have high but realistic expectations, and use challenges as opportunities for reflection.

WHY? Supporting young people's autonomy reduces the chance of activating their emotional and threat response systems. They'll learn to trust you and build self-confidence.



Use accessible, familiar tools.

Ask youth what helps them get and stay organized. Checklists, apps, and other tools may help them manage life's many demands and break down tasks into incremental steps. Let them sign up for text messages to remind them of upcoming meetings, deadlines, or classes.

WHY? This puts problem-solving into the hands of young people and gives them the familiarity of tools they already rely on.



Streamline and simplify.

Make it easy for youth to register for and attend your programs. They juggle many different responsibilities and expectations in their lives already. Be sure that forms and requirements are simple and meeting times and locations are convenient.

WHY? This avoids putting additional stress on developing core life skills and increases the odds for adolescent recruitment and retention.

Learn More

This material is adapted from the Center on the Developing Child's report, *Building Core Capabilities for Life* and the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's [*Understanding the Adolescent Brain*](#) series.

For more information on the science behind core life skills, how stress affects their development, and how practitioners can help reduce stress for adolescents, please see the full report on our website at <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>