



Six Strategies for Talking about Adolescent Development

1. Balance negative perceptions of adolescents by advancing a positive vision of young people and their development.

- Reframe—don't rebut.
- Order matters—make the positive case first.
- Tell stories about youth activism and young people's engagement in their communities.
- Draw attention to support required for positive outcomes and avoid focusing on vulnerabilities.
- Listen to and amplify the stories young people tell about themselves.

Before

Younger adolescents are vulnerable to peer pressure because they're still developing the skills to make their own decisions and develop resilience.

After

Younger adolescents are **developing skills** to make good decisions and build their resilience. **They need space for positive interactions with peers** to fully develop these skills.



2. Explain the structural factors like racism that lead to disparities and inequities among adolescents.

- Don't rely on data alone.
- Signpost cause-and-effect relationships.
- Listen to and center adolescents with lived experience.

Before

Adolescents from communities of color often have lower high school graduation rates than their white peers.

After

One impact of the history of racial segregation is that schools that serve communities of color tend to have less funding and fewer resources. This is one reason why adolescents of color have lower high school graduation rates than their white peers.

3. Instead of focusing on the brain, talk about social, emotional, and identity development first.

- Lead with opportunity, not risk.
- Be clear and specific about what supports social, emotional, and identity development.
- Be concrete about what results from positive social, emotional, and identity development.
- If you need to talk specifically about brain development, connect it directly to social, emotional, and identity development.

Before

The adolescent brain changes significantly between puberty and the mid-20s. These neurobiological changes underpin a young person's cognitive and socio-emotional development.

After

The changes that occur between puberty and the mid-20s **create a period of intense learning about who we are and who we want to be.**

4. Use “discovery” metaphors to explain how adolescents benefit from opportunities to try things out and learn.

- Be creative and express the metaphor in multiple ways.
- Talk about how we can create opportunities for discovery-based learning.
- Use the language of exploration and trial and error to talk about identity formation.
- Explain how resources and environments shape opportunities for discovery-based learning.
- Repetition is powerful.

Before

Young people develop through opportunities for learning and new experiences.

After

When young people have the opportunity to **explore new terrains they develop the skills they need to become contributing adults.**

5. Build buy-in using the *Community Connections* value.

- Highlight the link between interconnected communities and positive adolescent development.
- Use the *Community Connections* value to talk about the needs of marginalized groups of adolescents.
- Explain, don't just assert, the link between adolescent development and community-level outcomes.

Before

Supporting adolescents can improve not only their personal wellbeing, but their academic and professional success.

After

Supporting adolescents **leads to healthier and more connected communities.**

6. Foreground the future effects of adolescent development.

- Connect the dots—show how supporting positive youth development today yields benefits now and in the future.
- Try to frame future impacts at the community or societal level.

Before

High school students who have strong relationships with their teachers are more likely to graduate from high school.

After

Supporting strong relationships with teachers is one way to increase the high school graduation rate, **which in turn builds a stronger workforce and a more robust economy.**