

The questions

1. How do existing policies impact on individual health?
2. What changes in public policy and the strategies of non-commercial actors can better support adolescent health?
3. What considerations are important for supporting the health of adolescents who experience increased barriers due to factors such as gender, ethnicity, and lower socio-economic status?

Understanding individual health

Many factors influence health...

- To understand these, we have to look beyond the primary drivers and barriers to health, to the 'causes of causes'.
- An ecological approach reveals a complex web of factors – social, environmental, emotional, psychological, economic, and cultural.
- Adolescence is a distinctive period of development – adolescents experience many specific barriers to health.
- Research into youth at risk shows that many problem behaviours in adolescents occur together, and that many share the same risk-factors.
- So barriers to health tend to cluster – these young people will be disproportionately likely to have poor health outcomes.

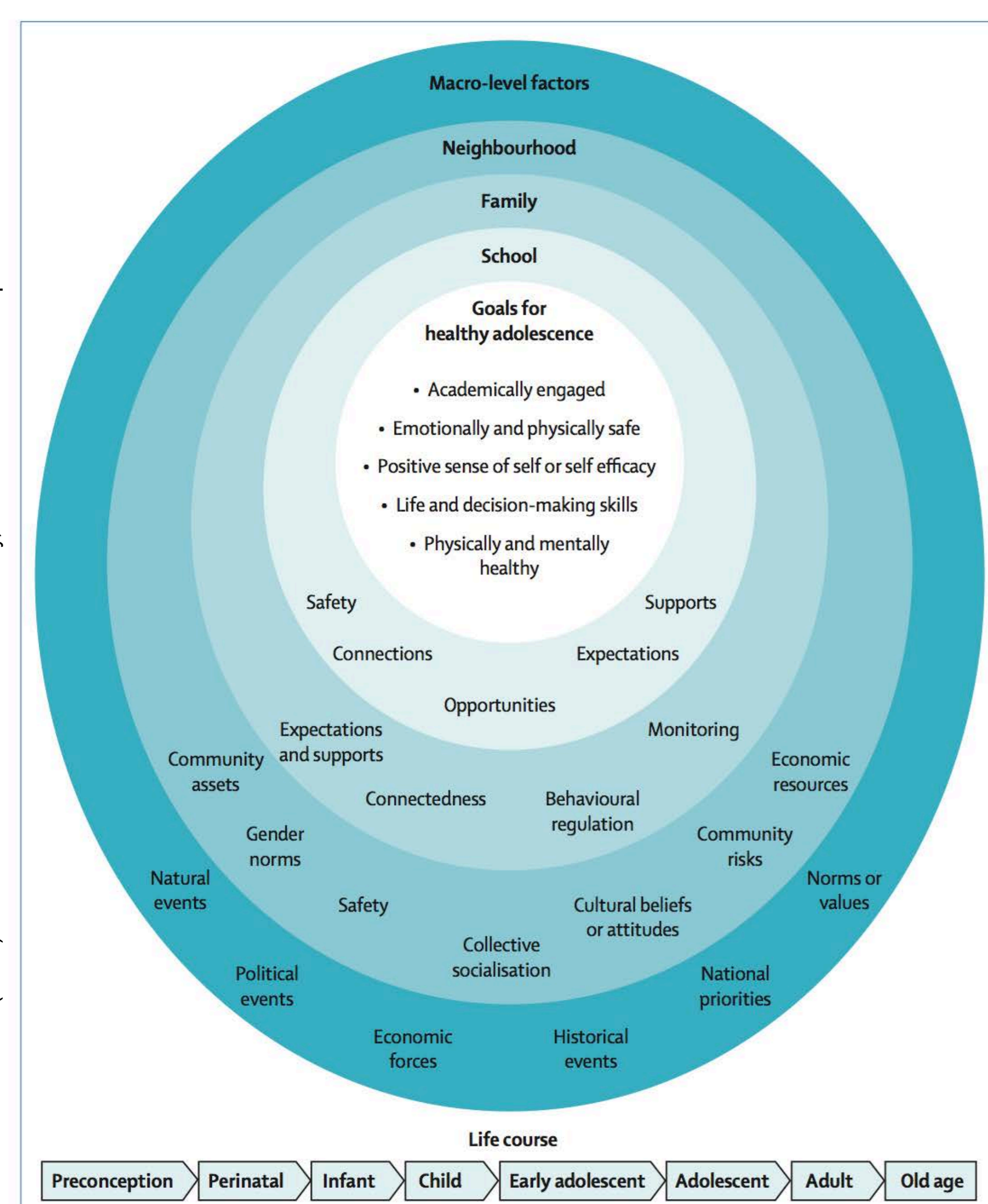


Figure: An ecological framework for adolescent health

What is agency and why does it matter?

The term 'agency' concerns an individual's ability to take responsibility for her own life.

- This includes the capacity to critically reflect on her own values and reasons, intentionally make her own choices, and act on her choices in line with her own authentic will.
- Agency is about making, acting on, and taking responsibility for choices. It is important to recognise the importance of agency if we are to make sense of 'responsibility' and 'choice' in our conversations about supporting health.

- Agency matters when we consider the multitude of factors that impact on individual health.
- Agency may be a particularly important consideration when we are thinking about public policy's impact on the gender, SES and ethnicity dimensions of health ecology.
- Agency is developing during adolescence. Policy makers can capitalise on this, and develop ways to effectively support developing agency.

What does 'taking agency seriously' mean for adolescent health?

What is special about adolescence?

- Adolescents are becoming more independent and less reliant on their parents and families. Peers become an important influence.
- Young people want to make more of their own choices, and assert their independence.
- Young people are experimenting with new and sometimes risky behaviours.
- Healthy behaviours are not always seen as 'cool' or acceptable within peer networks.
- Adolescents may have reduced self-esteem and heightened concerns about body image.
- Young people receive mixed (often contradictory) messages about what to buy, what to eat and how to spend their time.
- To find out what initiatives are needed, and how policy can support adolescents as they enter adulthood, we must find effective ways to listen to them and draw on their own ideas.



Three ways to take adolescent agency seriously in health strategies:

1. Listen to adolescents – find out what their needs are and what matters to them.
2. Aim to recognise the barriers they might be experiencing.
3. Aim to support positive youth development, and especially adolescents' developing agency.

How can public policy support adolescent health?

Examples of strategies that **take agency seriously**, and specifically aim to support adolescent health/development:

1. WHO Health 2020 Framework (children and adolescent element)
2. Healthy Generation Project, Republic of Moldova
3. Positive Youth Development (PYD) programmes (for example, 4-H Study)
4. National Council for Children, Denmark
5. WHO Health Promoting Schools Framework

1. Evidence-based policy

- What should we take as evidence for effectiveness?
- Are 'encouraging signs' enough?
- Should we re-think what outcomes matter?

2. Targeted policy

- What methods will target groups effectively?
- How can we target groups in a way that respects their agency?

3. 'Joined-up thinking'

- What policies matter?
- How can we co-ordinate different sectors?

4. Effective platforms

- Are schools the best platform to support adolescent health?
- Who is responsible for implementing strategies?