

Planning a National Adolescent Health Research Agenda

Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine &
Society for Research on Adolescence

Introduction and Background

The Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine (SAHM) and the Society for Research on Adolescence (SRA) plan the development of a national adolescent health research agenda (“research agenda”). The research agenda is designed to complement the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) national adolescent health agenda entitled Adolescent Health: Think, Act, Grow (TAG). TAG is a national call to action to improve adolescent health in the United States.

SAHM and SRA leadership acknowledge the lack of a coordinated vision and set of priorities for research in adolescent health in the United States, and propose a national adolescent health research agenda to align with and support TAG. The overarching goal of a research agenda for adolescents is the promotion of adolescent health and well-being. Specific objectives include:

- Positioning adolescent health research prominently in national health research agendas
- Demonstrating research community support of, and participation in, Adolescent Health: Think, Act, Grow (TAG)
- Energizing adolescent research through a research agenda
- Strengthening the training and number of new adolescent health researchers

In the short term, a national research agenda could provide a framework for research and identify priority areas of research in adolescent health. Over the long run, a national research agenda has the potential to improve health outcomes for adolescents, decrease disparities, and better integrate supports to adolescents.

Developing the Research Agenda

In fall 2014 representatives from SAHM, SRA, OAH, and multiple other federal agencies met to discuss the goals, use, and scope of the proposed research agenda. Guided by the TAG essentials, the group outlined a preliminary framework for a national research agenda.

TAG’s Five Essentials for Healthy Adolescents

- Positive connections with supportive people
- Safe and secure places to live, learn, and play
- Access to high-quality, teen-friendly health care
- Opportunities for youth to engage as learners, leaders, team members, and workers
- Coordinated, adolescent- and family-friendly services

A coordinating committee including representatives of SAHM and SRA will develop the form, content, and dissemination plans during 2015, with the goal of input from OAH and approval by both societies for release in spring 2016.

TAG Essential 1: Positive Connections with Supportive People

Adolescent health is fundamentally shaped by positive connections with supportive people, especially adults. Research is needed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the optimal timing and dosage of programs or interventions that support positive connections?
- 2) What combination of supportive relationships is optimal for different health outcomes?
- 3) What is the minimum positive connection needed to make a difference?
- 4) How does the need for positive connections change over time? What is the influence of gender, culture, or environments?

TAG Essential 2: Safe and Secure Places to Live, Learn, and Play

Adolescent health is enhanced when youth have safe and secure places to live, learn, and play – schools and classrooms, parks, and homes. We know much about policies and practical solutions that support adolescent access to safe and secure places, but we do not know enough about what prevents the implementation of effective policies and solutions. To address this gap between research and action, an action-oriented research agenda that engages youth in community-based decisions is needed to:

- 1) Summarize and synthesize the research about the practices and policies needed.
- 2) Highlight and identify successful implementation approaches.
- 3) Test or demonstrate the effect of using successful implementation approaches.

TAG Essential 3: Access to High Quality, Teen-friendly Health Care

There is a general lack of attention to adolescent health care needs, and many missed opportunities to improve adolescent health when young people are not connected to high-quality services. Quality adolescent health care requires having easily accessible, family- and patient-centered, developmentally-appropriate quality healthcare services; often there is a need for coordinated and collaborative services.

- 1) What measurement tools assess the gap between available and needed adolescent healthcare services, quantify impact of gaps, and provide guidance on reducing gaps?
- 2) What are effective strategies to consistently connect adolescents to high-quality healthcare?
- 3) How can healthcare professionals better support parents/families to improve adolescent health?
- 4) What are effective strategies to ensure that adolescents acquire skills to manage their own health and healthcare needs as they become adults? How can these strategies be implemented widely?

TAG Essential 4: Opportunities for Youth to Engage as Learners, Leaders, Team Members and Workers

The field is challenged to determine whether opportunities to engage youth affect the lives of youth, and how many opportunities are needed to make impact. Key knowledge gaps include:

- 1) Understand which youth become engaged and why, and differences for diverse populations.
- 2) Development of indicators of adolescent health and positive wellbeing.
- 3) How to design opportunities that remain current with trends in youth needs and youth culture.

TAG Essential 5: Coordinated, Adolescent- and Family-centered Services

This principle is an underlying component to the other five essentials for adolescent health, and particularly important for youth who have special needs and/or are vulnerable.