Adolescent Mental Health Topic Map

For a more comprehensive, in-depth topic map, please see here.
This topic map has been updated to include COVID-19.

Adolescence is a period of unique psychological development and unique vulnerability to mental health problems. As the adolescent brain develops, this period is marked by rapid socio-emotional learning and shaped by adolescents' experiences, social relations, and their environments. As adolescents grow toward adulthood, explore their identities, and take on greater roles in their societies, many find themselves exposed to stressful situations and, in some cases, face poverty, traumas, abuse, or violence, further exacerbating the risks for mental health problems in this sensitive period.

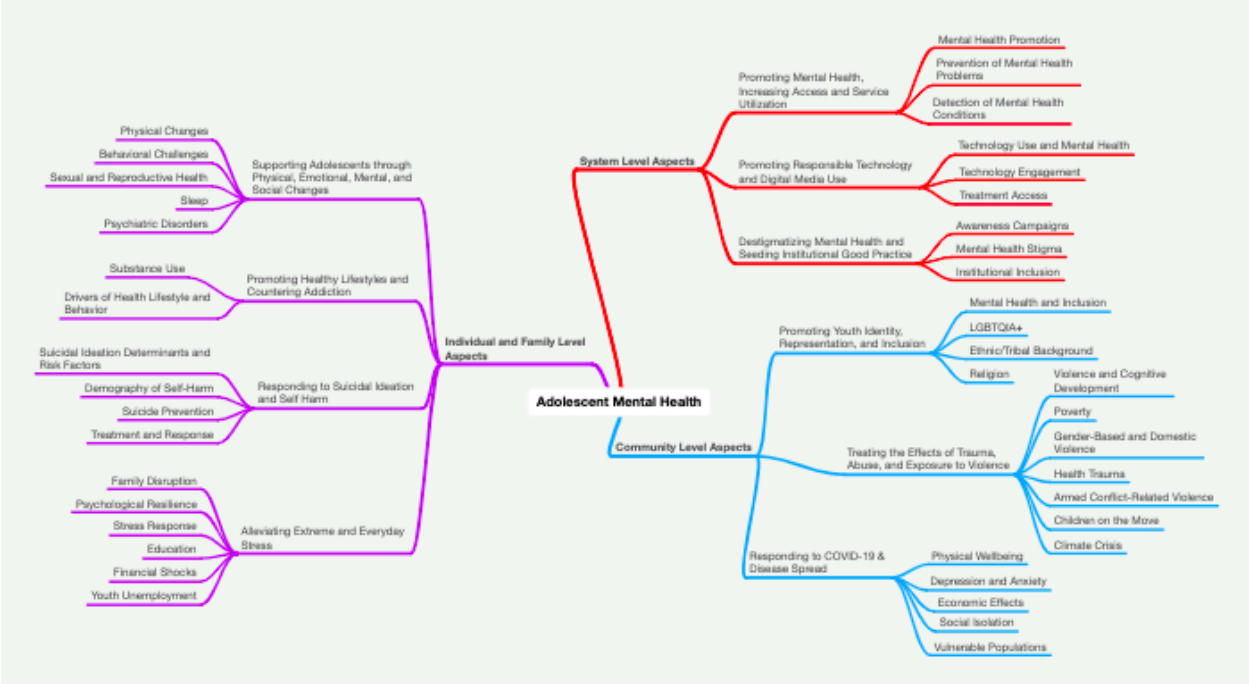
At the direction of Data for Children Collaborative, with UNICEF, The Governance Lab (The GovLab) at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering rapidly reviewed the topics associated with **adolescent mental health**. This work relied on desk research conducted with English language searches of publicly available journals, conference programmes, reports, and databases. It also relied on recommendations from The GovLab's research partners who work on issues pertaining to adolescents or mental health.

This document summarizes this work in the form of a brief **topic map** scanning the issues that are relevant for UNICEF and the Data for Children Collaborative. It does not list specific diagnosable conditions or treatment modalities but, rather, common research areas. This document is intended to serve as a broad outline of adolescent mental health topics to focus on; we recognize it does not encompass all possible aspects or issues, and we are eager to expand and improve this mapping in collaboration with experts convened as part of this effort. Once priorities are set, together we can initiate the process of designing actionable **questions** to guide future investment, research, and practice by using The 100 Questions Methodology.

Aspects:

In organizing different elements relevant to adolescent mental health, the topic map is structured as a three-part framework inspired by existing public health frameworks:

- **System-Level Aspects**, referring to how adolescent mental health affects and is affected by organizations, laws, power structures, and technological innovations;
- **Community-Level Aspects**, referring to how adolescent mental health affects and is affected by norms, attitudes, behaviors, and practices of a society;
- **Individual and Family-Level Aspects**, referring to how adolescent mental health affects and is affected by the practices, behaviors, and beliefs of individual adolescents and their families, and unique social and biological vulnerabilities on this level.



Click here for full-sized graphic

Many of the items within this framework are interconnected: for demonstration, we derived the above graphic from our research in order to categorize the different aspects. From this basis, we then reviewed specific conference agendas, peer-reviewed publications, and other material to determine which common **topics** drive research and practice. The topics and their respective **sub-topics** are not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, they are meant to suggest possible avenues for future data needs.

System-Level Aspects

Topic 1: ***Promoting Mental Health, Increasing Access and Service Utilization:*** Many adolescents are unable to seek or access support. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Mental Health Promotion, Education and Policy**
b. **Youth Participation and Engagement**
c. **Prevention of Mental Health Conditions**
d. **Detection of Mental Health Conditions**
e. **Financial Support, Treatment Access and Building Resilience**

Topic 2: Promoting Responsible Technology and Digital Media Use: Increasingly, cognitive development and mental wellness is intertwined with the internet, social media, and smart devices that allow adolescents to remain connected with their peers throughout the day -- especially with present COVID-19 concerns. While there is general awareness of the prevalence of these tools, an understanding of their effects on adolescents remains nascent. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Technology Use and Mental Health**
b. **Technology Engagement**

Topic 3: Destigmatizing Mental Health and Seeding Institutional Good Practice: Misconceptions surrounding the cause and treatment of mental health conditions can lead to stigmatization towards adolescents with such issues. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Awareness Campaigns**
b. **Mental Health Stigma**
c. **Institutional Inclusion**

Community-Level Aspects

Topic 4: Promoting Youth Identity, Representation, and Inclusion: Adolescence is a formative period in the process of self-discovery and exploration. Many seek guidance from their families, peers, and those in their ethnic, religious, or tribal group (often in humanitarian settings), while others try to assert their independence. This is also a time frame when many adolescents are forming their sense of identity and becoming aware of their sexual orientation, gender norms, disability, etc. Many policymakers and researchers are interested in how identity forms and how to support this during adolescence and how to combat bullying or ostracization and counteract its impacts. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Mental Health Inclusion and Awareness**
b. **LGBTQIA+**
c. **Ethnic/Tribal Background**
d. **Religion**

Topic 5: Treating the Effects of Trauma, Abuse, and Exposure to Violence: Many adolescents face traumatic events that can result in long-term effects on mental health. Understanding these events and their consequences can be integral to preventing them or providing services to mitigate their psychological impact. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Impact of Violence on Cognitive Development**
b. **Poverty/Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Financial Support**
c. **Gender-Based and Domestic Violence, Child Marriage, Adolescent Pregnancy**
d. **Health Trauma, HIV**
e. **Armed Conflict-Related Violence**
f. **Children on the Move**
g. **Climate Crisis**

Topic 6: Responding to COVID-19 and Disease Spread: The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a global, unprecedented modern health crisis. Yet, there is limited research on how adolescents emotionally and mentally respond to coronavirus-related confinement or how it is affecting their behavior. More understanding is needed about the relationship between adolescent mental health and COVID-19-related changes in their lives. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Physical Well-being**
b. **Depression and Anxiety**
c. **Economic Effects**
d. **Social Isolation and Technology**

e. **Vulnerable Populations**

Individual and Family-Level Aspects

Topic 7: Supporting Adolescents through Physical, Emotional, Mental, and Social Changes: Adolescence is an unpredictable period. Teenagers undergo physical and hormonal changes that influence how they see themselves and how they interact with their peers and others. Adolescents may also experience new and unfamiliar emotions for the first time that affect their mood or behavior. Consequently, teenagers with mental health conditions may face compounded difficulty in navigating these changes, and many conditions have their onset during this developmental phase. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Physical Changes**
b. **Behavioral Challenges**
c. **Sexual and Reproductive Health**
d. **Sleep**
e. **Psychiatric Conditions**

Topic 8: Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and Countering Addiction: Self-exploration in adolescence can also coincide with experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and addictive behaviors such as gambling. Some governments have made it a priority to discourage or counteract these behaviors or are seeking effective approaches for encouraging healthy lifestyles. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Drivers of Healthy Lifestyle and Behavior**
b. **Nutrition and Physical Activity**
c. **Substance Use and Peer Group Effects**

Topic 9: Responding to Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm: In addition to other challenges, adolescents often face rates of suicidal and self-harming behaviors that are higher than other age groups, and self-harm is a leading cause of death in this age. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Suicidal Ideation Determinants and Risk Factors**
b. **Demography of Self-Harm**
c. **Suicide Prevention**
d. **Barriers to Treatment and Response**

Topic 10: Alleviating Extreme and Everyday Stress: Stress is a normal reaction by the human body to real or perceived harmful situations. However, adolescence, as a time of major physical, social, and psychological change, may be marked by heightened stress-induced emotional responses. The demands of educational systems, work, and other obligations can lead to high or sustained levels of stress for adolescents. As such, many policymakers and researchers have sought to explore ways to improve adolescent's skills in stress management to support positive health results. Some **sub-topics** of note include:

a. **Family Disruption vs. Family Support, Parenting and Caregivers**
b. **Technology and Psychological Resilience**
c. **Stress Response**

d. **Education and Mental Health Literacy**
e. **Financial Shocks and Support**
f. **Youth Unemployment**

Guidelines for Prioritizing Domains/Questions

Each area may consider questions that address knowledge gaps. Examples fall within the following categories:

- **Improving situational awareness**: Ask how increased access to previously inaccessible information might enable stakeholders across sectors to better understand the trends and the geographic distribution of various phenomena.
- **Cause and effect analysis**: Help stakeholders better understand the key drivers and consequences of an observed situation.
- **Prediction**: Seek information to enable new predictive capabilities to allow stakeholders to assess future risks, needs, and opportunities.
- **Impact assessment:** Determine which, whether, and how various inputs affect certain conditions. Stakeholders can also seek insight into the obstacles hampering the achievement of certain objectives or the success of particular experiments.

In addition, the questions we seek to answer should meet at least one of the following criteria:

- **Desirability:** Would investment toward addressing the issue have the potential to transform our understanding of the topic and support impactful interventions?
- **Novelty:** Is the area ripe for the generation of new insights or the refutation or extension of existing knowledge?
- **Feasibility:** If the requisite resources are made available, could stakeholders make meaningful progress toward addressing the issue in the near term?
- **Scalability:** Does the issue exist in varied contexts and therefore lend itself to the scaling and/or replication of effective solutions?