

RESOURCE GUIDE

Personal Responsibility
Education Program

Increasing Our Impact by Using a Social-Ecological Approach

October 2023

TIPS FOR USING A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL APPROACH IN YOUR APP PROGRAM

- Consider the intrapersonal factors that shape youth experiences within your program. Be sure that materials are inclusive of a variety of identities and experiences.
- Invite the input of people who are important in the youth's community context to share their perspectives on programming and cultural norms and values.
- Consider how levels of context work together to shape outcomes. For example, relationships between youth, healthcare providers, and broader healthcare policies.
- Create environments that support positive health norms at the school and community levels; invite youth to practice what they have learned in various contexts.
- Use data to investigate local trends in important outcomes. Investigate the relationship between trends and policies.

Where youth live, learn, work, and play matters and so do the communities and systems that youth belong to and interact with (Healthy Teen Network, 2014; Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.). The social-ecological model provides a theory-based framework to understand, explore, and address the social determinants of health, or the environmental factors that influence health outcomes, at multiple levels (CDC, n.d.; Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.). This framework also encourages educators to shift the focus from individual behavior to a broader understanding of the many factors that influence health outcomes, taking both an individual- and a population-level approach.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986) was the first to propose an ecological systems theory, contending that individuals interact with four levels in their environment—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—and that timing (chronosystem) also influences one's interactions within and between levels. Collectively, the interactions between these levels influence one's health outcomes and development, which affects general development.



Bronfenbrenner’s framework was later refined by McLeroy et al. (1988) as a framework for health promotion programs. Since then, the framework has been applied to many domains of health, including violence and sexual violence prevention, sports medicine, mental health, and adolescent pregnancy prevention (CDC, 2002; Garney et al., 2019; Michaels et al., 2022; Scarneo et al., 2019; UNICEF, n.d.; WCSAP, n.d.;). Across all models, the grounding and general organization of framework is the same:

1. The model typically includes five levels of influence: intrapersonal/individual, interpersonal, institutional/organizational, community, and policy (McLeroy et al., 1988).
2. The levels of interaction are organized in concentric circles or a stacked Venn diagram with the intrapersonal/individual level at the center of the model. Figure 1 illustrates McLeroy et al.’s five level social-ecological model (1988).
3. The model considers the interactions between each of these levels as well as risk¹ and protective factors² that exist for each level (UNICEF, n.d.), as shown in Table 1.

Figure 1. The five levels of the social-ecological framework (adapted from McLeroy et al., 1988)

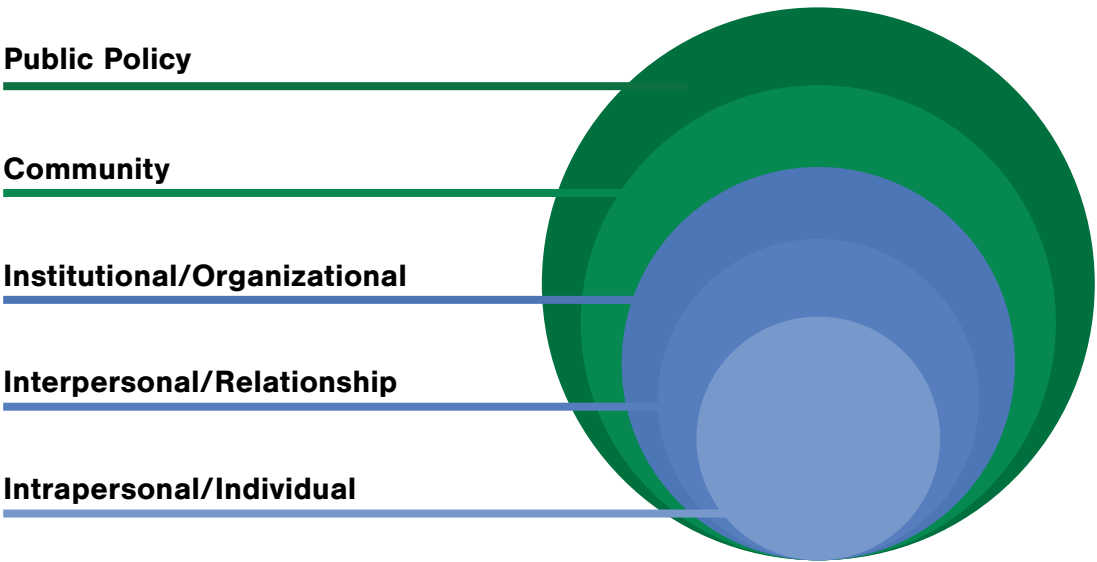


Table 1. Social-Ecological Model Levels and Risk and Protective Factors

Level	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Intrapersonal/Individual: The individual characteristics that influence behavior, such as knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills, physical characteristics, and personality traits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marginalized gender identification • Being from a marginalized racial/ethnic group • Disability or chronic health condition • Low socio-economic status • Exposure to trauma • Experience of physical or sexual abuse • History of discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-esteem • Coping styles • Civic engagement • Individual agency • Spiritual beliefs and practices • Access to needed and preferred care and support services

¹ Risk factors are any attribute, characteristic, or exposure that increases the risk of developing an adverse outcome (UNICEF, n.d.).

² Protective factors are any attribute, characteristic, or exposure that reduce risk factors, or independently act to increase positive outcomes (UNICEF, n.d.).

Level	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Interpersonal/Relationship: Formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including family, friends, and peers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of caregiver or family member • Intimate partner violence • Household-level economic stress • Abuse and neglect within family • Experiences of racism, sexism, ableism, and gender-based violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental support and parental monitoring • Positive mental health of parent/caregiver • Emotional support • Peer social support • Participation and engagement in supportive relationships
Institutional/Organizational: Rules, regulations, policies, and informal structures of organizations and institutions that may constrain or promote recommended behaviors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence experienced at school—by peers or teachers—or within community • Lack of connectedness and a sense of belonging at school • Experiences of stigma and discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling/peer-to-peer support • Mental and physical health promotion in educational plan or curricula • Referral systems to connect youth to services • Youth advisory boards/youth voice to guide programs
Community: Social networks and norms, or standards, which exist among individuals, groups, and organizations/institutions within defined boundaries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural norms or concepts (e.g., hiding distress, using violence to resolve conflicts) • Ongoing conflict • Lack of resources available in neighborhood • Lack of recreational opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural norms, practices, or concepts (e.g., adherence to ideology, connection to land) • Community acceptance and cohesion • Inclusive services • Accessible spaces for living, working, and recreation
Public Policy: Local, state, and federal policies and laws that regulate or support healthy actions and practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited access to services and economic opportunities in historically excluded communities • Policies that serve to discriminate against members of specific communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive social and economic policies and legal frameworks that encourage community cohesion and growth • Children and adolescent specific mental health policies

Sources: American College Health Association (n.d.); McLeroy et al. (1988); UNICEF (n.d.); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2005).

STRATEGIES FOR INCORPORATING A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL APPROACH INTO YOUR ADOLESCENT PREVENTION PROGRAMMING





Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (APP) programs are in an exceptional position to incorporate a social-ecological approach. Many grantees already integrate a Positive Youth Development approach or Adult Preparation Subjects (APS) into their programs, which demonstrates an understanding of and commitment to serving the multidimensionality of adolescents' lives. Youth are influenced by various factors—peers, family, community, policies—and most evidence-based APP programs have built this concept into their curricula through activities pertaining to setting individual goals; demystifying peer norms; strengthening parent–child communication; establishing community norms; and engaging with the community through guest speakers, community service, or connecting youth to services. Here are some practical strategies APP programs can take to address each level of the social-ecological model:

Level	Strategies and activities to employ
At the intrapersonal/individual level, approaches should be designed to change individuals' knowledge, attitudes, skills, interests, or individual resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide childcare, food, and transportation during sessions with youth. • Validate and normalize the range of student emotions and opinions. • Incorporate healthy life skills into your programming. See the Adulthood Preparation Subjects Resource Guide for examples. • Examine materials for equitable representation and cultural awareness.
Interactions between the intrapersonal level and interpersonal level should seek to support relationships between youth and their peers, family, and other important people in the youth's life.	
At the interpersonal/relationship level, approaches should be designed to change the nature of existing social relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and maintain a positive and responsive relationship with every student. • Promote healthy communication and behaviors by modeling relationships through role plays and other activities. • Create opportunities for students to meaningfully connect and nurture their relationships with one another. • Encourage and support the development of family and peer connectedness. • Select comprehensive adolescent pregnancy prevention curricula that promote healthy relationships. • Integrate healthy relationships and parent–child communication topics and activities into program implementation. See the Adulthood Preparation Subjects Resource Guide for examples.
Changes between the interpersonal level and institutional/organizational level should seek to empower and educate decision-makers and leaders within the youth's community. For example, they should support relationships between parents and schools.	




Level	Strategies and activities to employ
<p>At the institutional/organizational level, approaches should promote organizational values and produce organizational changes that support long-term youth well-being.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training for all staff on a trauma-informed approach and create safe spaces for programming. See Creating Safe Spaces: Facilitator's Guide to Trauma-Informed Programming for ways to adopt a trauma-informed approach within your program. • Expand your program to offer “wraparound” services (e.g., food, shelter, tutoring, legal aid). • Engage youth in the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs so that youth feel valued, respected, and supported.
<p>Changes at the level of interaction between organizations and communities should seek to support and educate those involved in influential systems within the youth’s context, such as between school administrators and community leaders.</p>	
<p>At the community level, approaches should acknowledge the relationships and specific networks and subcultures that exist within a community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop referral network and partnerships with other social service and community-based organizations that can address the wide range of needs (e.g., food and housing support, mental health, parenting support) presented by young people. • Connect youth with social supports through use of a referral network. • Establish partnerships within your community with schools and other youth-serving organizations. • Develop a coalition to support adolescents and young adults and include new partners from other sectors within the community. • Create, share, and maintain a list of local and online resources for parents/caregivers on APP and APS topics.
<p>Strategies that involve interactions between the community and public policy levels should consider youth involvement in community groups that support community health and inform action at the public policy level.</p>	
<p>At the public policy level, approaches should support community well-being and cohesion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote efforts to strengthen household financial security, education and employment opportunities, and other policies that affect the structural determinants of health. • Promote social norms, policies, and laws that support adolescent health and healthy relationships. • Work to dismantle systems that favor certain social groups over others. • Investigate and recognize connections between public policies and well-being. • Support legislation or policies related to accessible sexual health education and access to contraception.

RESOURCES

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

1. Dr. Mindy Rutherford: [Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model](#) (Video) 
2. Odyssey Institute: [Ecological Systems Theory](#) (Video) 
3. Santa Clara University Office for Multicultural Learning: [Theoretical framework](#) 
4. The Psychology Notes Headquarters: [What is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory?](#) 

Social Ecological Model

1. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry: [Models and Frameworks for the Practice of Community Engagement](#)
2. CDC National Center for Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention: [The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Violence Prevention](#)
3. Healthy Teen Network: [Youth 360°: How & Where Youth Live, Learn, & Play Matters](#) 
4. UNICEF: [Brief on the Social Ecological Model](#) 
5. Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs: [The Social Ecological Model](#) 



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