

# Adolescent Health: What Works in Schools

## Safe and Supportive School Environments



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) has established an evidence-based approach schools can implement to help prevent HIV, STDs, and unintended pregnancy among adolescents. It includes quality health education, systems that connect students to health services, and safer and more supportive school environments. This info brief focuses on how schools can promote **safe and supportive environments** by improving students' connections to schools and increasing the support they receive from parents.

### What are safe and supportive school environments?

Creating safe and supportive environments (SSE) emphasizes aspects of the school environment that encourage students to be more engaged in their school life and feel connected to important adults at school and at home. Connecting students to their schools and families is an important protective factor that can reduce students' risk for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and unintended pregnancy. Protective factors such as feeling connected, help reduce high-risk substance use\* and mental health issues, and help keep students from committing or being victims of violence. These are behaviors and experiences that are associated with sexual risk and poor academic outcomes.

School environments that are safe and supportive are successful at connecting adolescents to a network of caring peers and adults, including parents, other primary caregivers, and teachers. Promoting SSE can be particularly helpful for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, who are more likely to be bullied at school and may lack family support at home.

Strengthening school and family environments can have substantial and long-term impacts for students. These environments create an important foundation for the other strategies in DASH's approach—sexual health education and sexual health services—to be more effective.

\*High-risk substance use is any use by adolescents of substances with a high risk of adverse outcomes (i.e., injury, criminal justice involvement, school dropout, loss of life). This includes misuse of prescription drugs, use of illicit drugs (i.e., cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, inhalants, hallucinogens, or ecstasy), and use of injection drugs (i.e., drugs that have a high risk of infection of blood-borne diseases such as HIV and hepatitis).



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### How does promoting safe and supportive school environments work?

Schools, families, and communities should work together to build a safe environment for youth at school and at home. Activities to improve school environments should aim to promote three protective factors:



#### KEYS TO SUCCESS

Reinforcing positive behavior through praise and establishing rules, routines, and expectations are classroom management techniques that promote higher levels of school connectedness.

1. **School connectedness**, which is the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals
2. **Parental monitoring**, which refers to parental knowledge of adolescents' companions, whereabouts, and activities, as well as enforcement of rules, particularly about friends and dating
3. **Parent-adolescent communication**, both generally and specifically about sex.

### What are the benefits to promoting safe and supportive school environments?

Studies show that protective factors like providing SSE can reduce health risk behaviors related to HIV and STDs in adolescents, such as, encouraging condom use and delaying sexual initiation, as well as lowering the likelihood of substance use, violence, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and pregnancy. Adolescent connections to family and school during middle school and high school are also related to numerous positive outcomes in adulthood, including:

- Fewer sexual partners and STD diagnoses
- Reduced emotional distress and suicidal ideation
- Lower likelihood of being a victim of or committing violence
- Less prescription drug use
- Higher likelihood of attending and graduating from college.





### What does promoting safe and supportive school environments look like in action?

Schools can promote safe and supportive environments by:

- Providing professional development for teachers, including those who teach sexual health education, on classroom management techniques
- Providing professional development for all school staff on policies and practices that support all youth, including LGBTQ youth
- Implementing school-based positive youth development programs, including mentorship or service learning programs, or connecting students to these types of programs in their community
- Establishing and enhancing student-led clubs that support LGBTQ youth
- Sharing information and resources with parents or other primary caregivers about positive parenting practices, including how to talk with adolescents, especially about sex.



#### KEYS TO SUCCESS

When communicating with parents, find the best method (e.g., emails, letters, online portals) that suits the community. Find out whether materials need to be translated into other languages.

Creating safe and supportive environments is particularly important for LGBTQ students. There are more schools across states with a gay-straight alliance (GSA)—up from **23% in 2008** to **40% in 2018**.

*Source: 2018 School Health Profiles*



### For More Information

Learn more about promoting safe and supportive school environments at [www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/programguidance](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/programguidance).

Check out CDC tools and resources for promoting protective factors at [www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective).

Read additional info briefs in the *Adolescent Health: What Works in Schools* series at [www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/whatworks](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/whatworks).