

From Insights to Impact:

Embedding Adolescent Development into Philanthropy

A Guide for Funders

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Funders for Adolescent Science Translation (FAST) sponsored the development of this guide. The content was developed by **Search Institute** in collaboration with the **UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent (CDA)**, **Grantmakers for Thriving Youth (GTY)** and the **Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG)**. Staff from 14 funding organizations participated in interviews to inform the guide and we thank them for their time and insights.

Developmental science has expanded our understanding of adolescence as a distinct and powerful window of growth, marked by heightened learning, exploration and discovery, deepening reflection on our values, goals, and identities, growing capacities for managing our emotions and decisions, and stronger connections with peers and communities. The malleability of the adolescent period makes it an important time for healing from early adversity and promoting thriving pathways. From ages 10 to 25 we are especially sensitive to our environments, and the systems, contexts, and relationships that surround us can either expand opportunity or constrain it. When these systems and settings are aligned with developmental science, they can accelerate positive trajectories; when they are not they can limit potential or cause harm.

Philanthropy plays an important role in shaping the conditions for adolescent development both directly, e.g., through investments in youth-serving programs, and indirectly, by influencing the systems, policies, and settings that affect adolescents' daily lives. While investments in areas like housing stability, child welfare system capacity, education, public health, and workforce development may not always target adolescents directly, they can significantly influence the relationships, opportunities, and supports that shape their development. This means that a wide range of funders—not only those focused specifically on youth—have a role to play in advancing positive development. Funders who invest in programs and systems intended to improve outcomes for young people have an opportunity to intentionally embed this expanded understanding of adolescence into strategy, grantmaking, communications, and engagement.

From Insights to Impact: Embedding Adolescent Development into Philanthropy integrates research and field-based insights into a set of practical funder actions. The actions, which build on the work of the [UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent](#), are organized into four domains: leveraging science, addressing inequities, changing narratives, and thoughtfully engaging youth. A common thread across these domains is that meaningful impact requires attention to both programs and systems that structure young people's experiences, and that there are multiple ways philanthropy can shape developmental opportunity.

The evidence-informed actions emerged from interviews with 14 funding organizations—varying in type, geographic focus, and portfolio size—who work actively to align their strategies with adolescent developmental science. The actions are not intended to be implemented all at once, nor do they represent a new set of requirements. Instead, they offer a set of lenses and entry points that can be applied to strengthen and deepen existing strategies based on each funder's mission, portfolio, and sphere of influence.

What might you do differently if adolescent development were more fully centered in your work? This guide and the examples offered by the funders who informed it provide practical entry points and real-world examples to help you translate developmental science into action within your own context. Funders may use this resource as a reflection tool to assess current alignment with adolescent developmental science, a planning guide to identify opportunities to deepen impact, a conversation starter with staff, boards, and partners, or as a way to surface new approaches within existing portfolios.

Investing in adolescence is not only an investment in young people, it is an investment in the long-term health, equity, and vitality of communities. By aligning investments, partnerships, and strategies with what we know about how adolescents grow and thrive, funders can help create more supportive, equitable, and developmentally responsive environments at scale, shaping not only individual trajectories, but our collective future.

What might you do differently if adolescent development were more fully centered in your work?



The **Funders for Adolescence Science Translation** (FAST) is a philanthropic pooled fund working to translate the rapidly expanding science of adolescent development into policy, practice, systems change, and public understanding. Over nearly a decade, FAST partners have aligned more than \$12 million in catalytic investments to build connective tissue between the science and youth leadership, communications and narrative work, and policy and systems change that no single funder could build alone. The funders who have been engaged in or have joined FAST since 2016 include the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bezos Family Foundation, Britebound, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Hemera Foundation, Hopelab, the National Public Education Support Fund, Pivotal Philanthropies, the Raikes Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Spring Point Partners, and the Stuart Foundation.

FAST's investments have been deliberately anchored around core developmental principles and focused on what youth need to thrive. To that end, we work across the various systems that shape adolescent development — education, juvenile and adult justice, workforce, child welfare, and health and mental health. The collaborative has built science synthesis, translational infrastructure, and field partnerships that allow developmental science to take root. Early work helped seed [The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for](#)

[All Youth](#), the seminal 2019 National Academies consensus report that synthesized decades of developmental science into a unified framework, and supported the launch of the [UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent](#), a core hub for bringing developmental science to those working with and on behalf of youth. From the beginning, FAST partnered with [FrameWorks Institute](#) to help reframe public and cultural narratives about adolescence, and with cultural changemakers like the [Center for Scholars and Storytellers](#).

We've brought the science into conversations with governors at the National Governors Association on youth mental health and journalists at the Education Writers Association and NPR, and used developmental framing to strengthen parent-teen communication through the Center for Parent and Teen Communication (CPTC). And we've partnered with youth-centered organizations like Young Invincibles and Kingmakers of Oakland to help ground youth-led advocacy in young people's development. We also helped lead [Cultivating Possibilities: White House Youth Policy Summit 2024](#), which you can read about below.

FAST hopes this guide offers funders working within the many fields and systems that shape young people's lives practical ideas for how operationalizing developmental science can sharpen strategy, shift grantmaking, and deepen partnerships with the young people they aim to serve.

Domain 1: Leveraging the Science of Adolescence

How funders apply the science of adolescence directly influences their ability to strengthen systems, environments, and opportunities that shape young people's lives. Adolescence is a period of remarkable neurobiological and psychological growth marked by heightened learning, identity formation, exploration, and sensitivity to context. When funders ground their strategies in this science, they are better equipped to invest in approaches that align with what young people uniquely need to thrive: supportive relationships, meaningful roles, safe and engaging environments, and equitable opportunities for growth.

Using adolescent developmental science intentionally helps funders avoid outdated myths about adolescence and ensures decisions are guided by evidence rather than assumptions. It also strengthens alignment across initiatives by giving funders and grantees a shared developmental framework for designing programs, assessing proposals and supporting implementation. This domain highlights three core ways funders can put the science into action.

Spotlight

Adolescent developmental science played a pivotal role in shaping a new strategic direction at the **Jewish Heritage Fund**. As a health funder, the organization had traditionally supported general health and wellness initiatives across Louisville, KY. An introduction to the science of adolescent brain development highlighted adolescence as a critical window of opportunity and revealed opportunities to think about how the community was supporting young

people. In response, the foundation expanded its focus to adolescents as a priority population. Today, its **adolescent-focused funding strategy** is grounded in developmental science, with an emphasis on aligning community efforts with what young people need to thrive.

Action 1.1 Train Staff and Board Members on the Science of Adolescence

Provide staff and Board training on the science of adolescence, using approaches that can range from light-touch introductions to more intensive or tiered training models, ensuring the science meaningfully informs decision-making across portfolio-aligned and general staff.

Why it Matters

Investing in training on the science of adolescence is more than a capacity-building strategy, it is a way of ensuring that everything you support is aligned with what we currently know about how young people grow, learn, and thrive. When staff understand current developmental science, they can design portfolios aligned with this science. They are also better positioned to coach, guide, and support grantees in applying these insights in their programs which extends the science's reach far beyond the funder itself. In this way, training becomes a force multiplier strengthening not only the organization but also elevating the capacity, language and practices of grantees.



What it Looks Like

- **Bezos Family Foundation** conducted staff training on the science of adolescence, which shifted their grant focus toward youth contribution and research on developmental goals, and prompted the Foundation to increase grantee access to adolescent research.
- **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation** has found materials from **FrameWorks Institute** on Reframing Adolescence and Adolescent Development to be a valuable resource to share with their grantees as well as use internally for training.
- **Hopelab** partnered with UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent staff to train their staff in the science of adolescence, and staff then trained their Board members.
- **Spring Point Partners** trained their staff on the science of adolescence, and internally, this work helped extend the science into additional portfolios.

Action 1.2 Translate the Science for Other Stakeholders

Actively translate the science of adolescence into sector-relevant guidance for policymakers and other niche-area stakeholders so they can readily apply this knowledge in their own context.

Why it Matters

Taking the lead in translating the science of adolescence for policymakers and system stakeholders (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, out-of-school time), creates several important benefits. First, it makes the science immediately usable for people who don't have the time or capacity to interpret it for themselves. This removes the barrier of making time to sift through research, make sense of it and connect it to daily decisions or practices, making developmental science accessible, concrete, and actionable. By ensuring the science is written to impact systems, it can also make the information easier to integrate into programming and decisions and increase the likelihood that the science will influence policy and practice.

What it Looks Like



- **Britebound** partnered with the Association for Middle Level Educators to create the resource, **Career Exploration in the Middle Grades: A Playbook for Educators**. The Playbook highlights core developmental needs of early adolescence (e.g., exploration, identity development) for educators as a foundation for career exploration.
- **The Stuart Foundation** supported a recent collaboration between the Learning Policy Institute and the USC Center for Affective Neuroscience, Development, Learning and Education (USC CANDLE) to produce a paper on high school transformation aligned with adolescent developmental needs
- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation** developed **The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice with Adolescent Brain Development**, a guide that translates the science of how the adolescent brain matures for stakeholders working with youth in foster care.

Action 1.3 Use Developmental Science to Guide Funding and Strengthen Grantee Support

Apply the science of adolescence to sharpen funding priorities, articulate strong rationales for investments, evaluate grantee proposals and tailor support to help organizations more effectively meet the needs of youth.

Why it Matters

The science of adolescence offers funders a powerful opportunity to design funding portfolios that are aligned with the most current, research-informed understanding of what young people need to thrive. Using this evidence base can guide strategic decisions about where to invest, which gaps to address, and how to maximize impact. Funders can then draw on developmental science to evaluate whether proposals align with what youth uniquely need and to identify where additional grantee support or capacity building may be needed. Using developmental science both to guide investment strategy and to strengthen grantee support promotes more developmentally responsive and impactful work across a portfolio.

What it Looks Like

- **Bezos Family Foundation** (BFF) invests in opportunities that highlight the importance of experiential learning for youths' civic identity, purpose, and power. BFF also uses developmental science to inform grant making questions such as "How do you use developmental science in your work?" or "What's informing your program's theory of change?" to assess alignment between applicants' approaches and their own science-informed priorities.
- The **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation** used the science of adolescence to build Board support for expanding their **Foster Youth portfolio** from serving ages 18 to 21 to serving ages 14 to 26. The Foundation uses developmental science to identify key elements of grantee proposals that they can elevate and strengthen (e.g., mentoring programs).
- The **Pinkerton Foundation's** grant making is guided by adolescent science and youth development principles to support New York City's young people. Among grantees, it prioritizes transformational relationships, active listening, decision-making practice, and experiences that mitigate harm stemming from system involvement.
- **Spring Point Partners** convened grantees, cross-system leaders, and other key stakeholders for a series of workshops on the science of adolescence. They are also using the science to build a shared language with grantees and host an informal community of practice with core partners.

Domain 2: Addressing Inequities in Adolescence

Adolescent development happens in the context of systems that structure access to resources, opportunities, relationships, and safety. We know from decades of science that adolescence is a period of sensitivity and adaptation, which means that young people are especially responsive to the environments and institutions around them. Inequities in education, housing, healthcare, child welfare, juvenile justice, and economic opportunity limit access to supportive conditions and disproportionately expose some groups of adolescents to harm, which shapes developmental pathways in lasting ways.

Inequities in adolescent opportunities and outcomes are produced and sustained by systems that are misaligned with developmental science. Long-term youth thriving depends not only on high-quality programs but also on the broader systems in which those programs operate. Addressing inequities requires strategic focus, cross-sector coordination, and sustained efforts to reform the policies and structures that shape young peoples' environments. Pairing investments in direct services with system reform efforts addresses structural inequities and strengthens environments where youth live, learn, and grow, enabling more enduring outcomes for adolescents. By attending to how institutions, policies, and narratives shape opportunity, funders can help create environments that support thriving developmental pathways for all adolescents, especially those most negatively impacted by longstanding inequities. The moves below reflect a range of approaches funders take to address inequities in adolescence.

Spotlight

The **Raikes Foundation's** approach to youth homelessness reflects their focus on breaking down barriers and building up solutions. By asking what young people need to experience a healthy adolescence, the foundation reframed housing stability as a core condition for positive development—one that underpins success across multiple domains.

This perspective has guided efforts to break down silos across systems. The foundation has worked with partners in education, foster care, and juvenile justice to highlight how homelessness intersects with and undermines adolescent development.

In parallel, the Foundation has supported policy changes that align with developmental science, including reducing punitive responses to adolescent behavior and improving transitions out of systems like foster care and juvenile justice.

Together, these strategies have contributed to **significant reductions in youth homelessness in Washington State** and demonstrate how funders can create more effective and equitable systems by targeting root causes, aligning across sectors, and advancing policy change.

Action 2.1 Name Inequity Explicitly in Mission and Funding Priorities

Funders committed to addressing deeply rooted disparities in resources and opportunities for adolescents should make this explicit in their mission and funding priorities. This can include a focus on specific groups of adolescents who are most harmed by inequities, specific systems where disparities are evident, or a more general commitment to creating equitable access and outcomes for young people.

Why it Matters

Explicitly naming inequities in a foundation's mission and funding priorities signals a recognition that disparities in adolescent outcomes are not the result of individual shortcomings, but of uneven access to developmental opportunities and/or disproportionate exposure to toxic conditions. By naming targets of inequity directly (e.g., **education**, **housing**, **juvenile justice**, **child welfare**, and **economic conditions**) funders make visible the systemic conditions that influence adolescent development and position their investments to address root causes rather than symptoms.

What it Looks Like

- **Hopelab's mission, vision, and values** page includes their positionality as Equity Advocates: "We center equity in all facets of our work and recognize that systems of oppression, like racism, homophobia, transphobia, and wealth inequities, are connected – dismantling them benefits everyone. We passionately work to create more equitable health outcomes for young people from underinvested groups."
- **Spring Point Partners** names their focus on "transformational solutions that advance and accelerate equity and justice" in their **youth-focused portfolio** and in their broader organizational description.
- **Britebound** is especially interested in programs serving all young people who face barriers to career readiness and opportunity.
- The **Stuart Foundation's** vision statement names that the conditions of young people's lives should not determine their school experience or life outcomes, and that schools should be places where young people across all types of difference can thrive. Its Priority Populations portfolio centers students furthest from opportunity by generating policy, research, and practice insights that can be translated throughout the system to operationalize equity.

Action 2.2 Strategically Target Systems

Strategically target systems that impact adolescents by identifying areas of concentrated harm and investing when and where systems (and system leaders) are ready for change.

Why it Matters



Adolescence is a period of heightened neurobiological and social sensitivity and adaptation. Experiences within key systems – education, child welfare, housing, health care, and juvenile justice – can amplify developmental strengths or compound harm. These systems structure access to relationships, safety, and opportunity, and inequities within them can have outsized and lasting effects during and beyond adolescence. When systems are designed to be responsive to developmental needs, they can minimize harm and change adolescent pathways for the better. By focusing resources where harm is most concentrated, where there is readiness for change, and where cross-system collaborations are needed, funders can help change conditions that influence developmental pathways at scale.

What it Looks Like

- The **Pinkerton Foundation's** portfolio focuses on programs that cultivate adolescents' strengths, including programs that "offer a way forward" for youth with justice system or child welfare system involvement.
- The **Jewish Heritage Fund's** efforts to increase access to adolescent-centered health care and foster collaboration between the health care and education systems created opportunities to open comprehensive health clinics in two local high schools.
- The **Philadelphia Foundation** has worked with the reform-oriented Philadelphia District Attorney's office to help them identify organizations in the non-profit sector that are effective in youth engagement so that youth returning from incarceration have access to strong community programs to support their transition.

Action 2.3 Break Down Silos to Create Developmentally-Aligned Systems

Breaking down silos involves helping systems, organizations, and funders understand how their focused and sector-specific efforts share a common goal of supporting young people to grow, thrive, and reach positive outcomes. This practice surfaces shared aims and creates structures that connect efforts, improve coordination, and reduce fragmentation in the broader youth-serving ecosystem.

Why it Matters

Breaking down silos is essential for promoting positive development because young people's growth is shaped by the entire ecosystem of environments, relationships, and systems they encounter. Inequities often persist because siloed systems fail to account for how policies in one domain affect developmental opportunity in another. Cross-sector collaboration among funders and organizations can create developmentally-aligned ecosystems that strengthen opportunities, reduce inequities, and offer coherent, mutually reinforcing support. Just as importantly, aligned funders and organizations can deliver a unified, research-informed message to policymakers and the public about what adolescents need and why coordinated investments across systems is essential for helping all youth realize their potential.

What it Looks Like

- The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** hosted a **webinar** for child welfare leaders on Medicaid services for youth returning from incarceration. The webinar featured a grantee and was designed “to maximize collaboration among child welfare professionals, Medicaid systems and juvenile justice partners to better serve young people.”
- To ensure all young people have access to high-quality, career-connected learning, **Britebound** champions policies and systems at the local, state, and federal levels. A key example is their annual Work-based Learning Leaders Forum, which unites experts from education, workforce, advocacy, and community organizations to set the strategic priorities that drive the field forward.
- **Stuart Foundation** has invested in Breaking Barriers, a statewide collaborative uniting leaders across California's schools, county agencies, and health and social service systems around shared planning for children's educational, social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing.
- **Bezos Family Foundation** collaborates with peer funders through **Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement** (PACE) to map investments, identify shared priorities and gaps, and explore opportunities for more coordinated, field-level strategies that strengthen civic learning systems.

Action 2.4 Use Policy Change as an Equity Lever

Support system policies that align with developmental science and pair programmatic investments with intentional efforts to influence and reform state and federal policies.

Why it Matters

Policies shape the contexts in which adolescents are developing. When policies align with developmental science they can expand opportunity and reduce disparities at scale. At the same time, holistic, strengths-based narratives that recognize adolescents' need for agency and supportive relationships and their capacity for growth helps build public will for policies that promote positive development and reduce harm. Together, policy and narrative change reshape the conditions adolescents experience and the beliefs that sustain those conditions.

What it Looks Like

- **Pivotal** focuses on youth mental health by supporting organizations like **Inseparable**, who are working “across the aisle to improve mental health care policy at the state and federal level ... advancing policies that promote prevention, early intervention, expanding access to care, and improving young people’s care.”
- **Spring Point Partners** has worked with the Philadelphia District Attorney’s office to increase investment in diversion programs, which redirect adolescents from incarceration to community-based programs, and to deepen understanding of how policies aligned with developmental science can improve outcomes for youth and communities.
- The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** supports policy change through the KIDS COUNT **data center** and **data book**. “KIDS COUNT provides legislators, public officials and child advocates with reliable data, policy recommendations and tools to advance policies that benefit children.”

Domain 3: Changing Narratives about Adolescence

Mindsets about adolescence can be powerful. How adolescence is defined, discussed, and framed shapes how young people are treated by institutions, systems, and society. Decades of developmental science show that adolescence is a period of heightened learning, adaptability, and opportunity, when young people are especially responsive to supportive relationships, meaningful roles, and enriching environments. Yet dominant narratives often portray adolescents primarily in terms of risk, vulnerability, or problems.

Science-aligned framing of adolescence as a time of opportunity and growth encourages practitioners, policymakers, and program and system leaders to focus on creating environments that support adolescents growth, agency, and wellbeing. By framing their work to reflect an accurate understanding of adolescent development, funders help ensure that investments address young people's developmental needs and potential rather than reinforcing deficit-based assumptions.

Spotlight

The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** embeds developmental science into how it defines and communicates about adolescence as a “developmental window of possibility” that emphasizes young people’s capacity for growth, learning, and contribution and underscores the role of relationships, opportunities, and supportive systems in shaping long-term outcomes.

The Foundation invests in building internal and external capacity for science-aligned narrative practices. The messaging is integrated in publications, podcasts, and practitioner tools, ensuring diverse audiences can access and apply

developmental science in their work. The Foundation has also invested directly in narrative change efforts, including a multi-state initiative that brought together youth, system leaders, and community partners to identify harmful narratives and test strategies to shift them in practice.

Through these combined efforts, the foundation is supporting the field to use science-aligned narratives as a lever for more equitable and effective systems.

Action 3.1 Build Internal Capacity for Science-aligned Narrative Practice

Ensure that all staff – from executive leaders to the communications team – define adolescence using science-aligned framing that reflects the opportunities and needs of young people ages 10 to 25.

Why it Matters

Building internal capacity ensures that staff consistently use science-aligned narratives that reinforce a shared understanding of adolescence as a period of growth. Without internal alignment around developmental science, deficit-based framing can persist unintentionally. Internal alignment strengthens credibility and can set the tone for external partners, grantees, policymakers, and broader fields.

What it looks like

- The **Stuart Foundation** has worked “early and consistently” to convey a positive, affirming vision of adolescents and their experiences that highlights what is possible while also acknowledging the challenges and barriers youth regularly face in settings and systems.
- **Pivotal** provides their communications team with toolkits and resources from FrameWorks Institute and other experts. Pivotal has also invited youth in their grantee partner programs to meet with the communications staff to share their knowledge and experience. They use these framing insights and resources to promote science-aligned narratives about adolescents and related topics.
- **Bezos Family Foundation’s** communications team created guidebooks for staff on asset-based language. Staff “try to consistently reframe adolescence... away from a deficit perspective, so not using language like ‘at-risk’ or ‘behavior issues’ or ‘prevention,’ and more so towards adolescence as a window of opportunity...”
- The **Wallace Foundation** is partnering with FrameWorks Institute to support their team in understanding framing and narrative change around communicating about adolescence. In addition, Collaborative Communications provides monthly summaries of trends in media narratives about adolescence for the communities in the foundation’s **Advancing Opportunities for Adolescents** initiative.

Action 3.2 Equip Partners and Grantees with Framing Tools

Provide external partners, grantees, and other field influencers with tools, training, and guidance on how they communicate about adolescents.



Why it Matters

Grantees and other external partners play an important role in shaping how adolescence is understood in policy, practice, and public discourse. Some have to navigate environments where deficit-oriented narratives dominate, others may feel pressure to emphasize crisis or risk to secure funding. Equipping partners with science-aligned framing tools promotes consistency and can strengthen advocacy efforts and shift narratives in ways that improve conditions and promote developmental opportunities for young people.

What it looks like

- To help build understanding and drive positive change, program officers at the **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation** regularly share **Opportunity Youth framing resources** commissioned from FrameWorks Institute with their grantees and partners.
- The **Wallace Foundation** provides each grantee in their **Advancing Opportunities for Adolescents** initiative with technical assistance from Collaborative Communications to help develop and refine narrative change strategies around adolescence and align local messaging with positive, opportunity-focused frames informed by the science of adolescence.

Action 3.3 Invest in Narrative Change as a Core Strategy

Dedicate funding and strategic attention to efforts that intentionally shift how adolescence is understood in public discourse, media, institutions, and systems.

Why it Matters

Investing in narrative change as a core strategy recognizes that sustainable improvements in conditions that support adolescent well-being require shifts in how society understands young people. By supporting efforts to influence media, public discourse, storytelling, and cultural representations, funders can help create an environment in which science-aligned, strengths-based policies and practices are more likely to take root and endure.

What it looks like

- **Interact for Health** funded [Amplifying Youth Voices](#), a pilot program with weekly digital publication, Soapbox Cincinnati, designed to promote awareness of youth mental health through a focus on community-based solutions. Interact for Health also helped support the reframing of a Superbowl ad on youth suicide prevention to emphasize factors that promote youth wellbeing.
- **The Raikes Foundation** has funded opportunities for journalists and Hollywood storyrunners to understand and apply science-aligned narratives about adolescents.
- The **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation** supported FrameWorks Institute studies on [Opportunity Youth](#) and [older youth in foster care](#), using the research findings to inform their funding portfolios.
- The **Stuart Foundation's** narrative grantmaking invests in local, state, and national media organizations to support coverage of K-12 education and adolescents, and outlets to develop youth journalism and center youth voice. The Foundation supports the [Center for Scholars & Storytellers'](#) work to advance media that supports the well-being of adolescents. It also supports a variety of communications and storytelling efforts, from writing to podcasts to documentary filmmaking.

Domain 4: Thoughtful Engagement of Adolescents

Thoughtfully engaging youth is essential for funders who aim to design strategies and support systems that truly reflect what adolescents need to thrive. When funders create authentic opportunities for youth to contribute, it not only strengthens young people's purpose, leadership and decision-making skills but also produces more relevant, responsive, and effective programs and funding strategies based not only on developmental science but also on their lived experiences.

Because organizations vary in their readiness and capacity to meaningfully engage youth, funders play a pivotal role in expanding the quality and reach of youth engagement across ecosystems, three actions are provided that offer flexible pathways for action. These actions can ensure that funders not only honor the insights and expertise of young people but also build systems and partnerships that support developmentally aligned youth engagement.

Spotlight

Interact for Health's work on youth mental health in Greater Cincinnati began with a traditional focus on expanding access to services. However, through a large-scale youth and community engagement process, including youth focus groups and a paid youth fellowship, young people played a central role in shaping a new regional strategy.

What emerged was **HEY!** (Hopeful, Empowered Youth), a cross-sector coalition of over 200 organizations working to advance a ten-year initiative driven by youth voice. Rather

than emphasizing treatment alone, young people identified upstream priorities like belonging, agency, and access to supportive adults. These insights shifted **the strategy** toward a focus on increasing youth belonging and agency in schools, increasing the number of trusted adults in youth's lives, and improving youth behavioral health access and treatment.

Action 4.1 Invest in Organizations That Center Youth Voice & Leadership

This practice involves funders investing in organizations that have, or are building, the capacity to center youth voice, elevate youth leadership, and engage young people as partners and change makers.

Why it Matters

Adolescent developmental science shows that young people thrive when they are given real opportunities to exercise agency, take on meaningful roles, and influence the environments around them. Investments in these opportunities support adolescents' growing capacities for leadership, identity formation, and civic engagement—key developmental tasks during this stage. Where relevant, funders can partner with grantee organizations to budget for compensating youth who share their time and expertise.

What it Looks Like

- **Hopelab** and **Pivotal** invest in the **Responsible Technology Youth Power Fund** which supports youth and intergenerationally-led organizations shaping responsible technology issues such as mental health and well-being, AI, climate, and online safety.
- The **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation** supports the **Center for Fair Futures**, whose Youth Advisory Board helps set the vision for providing more homes for youth exiting foster care in New York City. Another grantee, **New Orleans Youth Alliance** takes young people through a yearlong fellowship and leadership training to learn about policy and advocacy. Fellows then sit on non-profit and government advisory boards such as the city's Children and Youth Planning Board.
- **The Pinkerton Foundation** funds youth development organizations that understand and demonstrate the value of youth engagement and youth voice.
- The **Jewish Heritage Fund** supports grantees' youth-engagement efforts by offering dedicated funding for activities such as youth advisory boards, staff time to coordinate youth participation, and stipends for young people's contributions.

Action 4.2 Strengthen Youth Engagement Through Direct Partnerships with Experts

This practice involves grantmakers partnering directly with organizations or experts that specialize in youth voice, leadership, and engagement—either to build internal capacity (training staff, developing curriculum) or to co-design and implement youth-engagement initiatives—ensuring high-quality, developmentally informed strategies across programs and systems.

Why it Matters



Partnerships with youth-engagement experts ensure that the strategies used to involve young people are developmentally aligned, culturally responsive, and grounded in best practices. Adolescence is a period of rapid learning, sensitivity to context, and expanding cognitive and social capacities; high-quality engagement structures help align opportunities with these developmental strengths. By bringing in specialized partners, grantees (and funders) can avoid tokenistic practices, match engagement to youths' readiness and skills, and create environments that promote agency, belonging, and leadership. Furthermore, when funders invest in opportunities that support adolescent participation in program, policy, and system reform it enables young people to shape solutions that are more responsive, effective, and equitable.

What it Looks Like

- The **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation** partnered with Leaders in Teaming (LiT) to facilitate youth listening sessions and prepare young people for conferences, presentations, and facilitation roles. LiT staff bring lived experience in foster care.
- The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** built internal capacity by developing **Elevating Youth Engagement**, a training curriculum and a **framework** that equips adults with the skills and mindsets needed to authentically partner with young people in strengthening the child welfare system. These tools also serve as a valuable resource for other organizations seeking to deepen and improve their own youth engagement practices.

- **The Philadelphia Foundation** operates YOUTHadelphia, a youth-in-philanthropy program in which young people lead the grantmaking process. In 2025, a cohort of 12 youth awarded \$50,000 to five Philadelphia nonprofits. The foundation partnered with **PhillyBOLT** to manage and support the leadership group.
- **Hopelab** supported the early development of **In-Tandem**, a non-profit organization where young people provide critical voices to shape research and co-design processes—co-creating research questions, interpreting findings, and designing solutions. Hopelab routinely engages with In-Tandem in its own research processes and promotes collaboration with partners across the ecosystem.

Action 4.3 Amplify Youth Voice to Transform Mindsets and Narratives

Invest in opportunities for young people to share their insights, lived experiences, and leadership in ways that shape public understanding, institutional perspectives, and field discourse.

Why it Matters

Mindsets influence policy and practice. When system actors – educators, judges, health providers, policymakers – hear directly from young people, it can prompt meaningful shifts in perception. These mindset changes can then influence institutional decisions and practices. By supporting youth storytelling, leadership, and public engagement, funders help redistribute narrative power in ways that can catalyze shifts in narrative and in how systems operate. Sharing power so that young people have meaningful opportunities to share their perspectives and apply their expertise can also support developmental needs around agency, identity, and contribution.

What it looks like

- Program officers at **The Pinkerton Foundation** fund organizations where staff share power with youth in their programs. They seek programs that reinforce the importance of listening to and supporting youth (versus telling young people what to do), and favor organizations that center youth voice with practices such as sitting in circles where each person has a turn to be heard. Program officers at Pinkerton solicit input from youth on their program experiences and encourage nonprofit leaders to do the same.
- The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** drew on the experiences of local partnerships in multiple U.S. cities that participated in their Generation Work™ initiative to identify potential strategies for centering young adult worker voice in employer engagement efforts, as described in this **[Child Trends brief](#)**. The Foundation also supported a pilot project, **[documented here](#)**, that engaged high school learners as researchers to study their Career Technical Education environments and generate findings to inform program and policy decisions.

Action 4.4 Create Meaningful Opportunities for Direct Youth Engagement Within Your Organization

Create structured, developmentally appropriate opportunities for youth to participate directly in the organization's work—such as contributing to communications, participating in grantmaking or research, or joining leadership and advisory roles—so they can shape decisions, processes, and outcomes from the inside.

Why it Matters

During adolescence, young people are especially primed to build agency, explore identity, and take on meaningful roles in their communities. Providing opportunities to influence real organizational work gives youth authentic responsibility, strengthens decision-making and leadership skills, and affirms that their perspectives matter. These experiences support key developmental needs—including belonging, purpose, and contribution—while improving program and funding decisions by ensuring they are grounded in the lived experience and insight of youth themselves.

What it Looks Like

- This [case study](#) from **Britebound** details their first Youth Participatory Grantmaking Pilot in which 16 high school students from across Massachusetts allocated \$900K to three non-profits the youth decision-makers selected through a competitive process.
- **Hopelab** partnered with the [Center for Digital Thriving](#), Character Lab, and [In Tandem](#) to produce this free [Youth Voice Playbook](#), which offers guidance on engaging youth in research and includes information on everything from legal and ethical considerations to resources and compensation.
- **Pivotal** engages young people as experts in their own experiences by featuring their perspectives directly in organizational communications. For example, in the blog post [We Asked, They Answered: Two Young People Share How Safe Spaces Support Their Mental Health](#), youth articulate the conditions that support their well-being.
- **Bezos Family Foundation's** [Bezos Scholars Program](#) offers high school youth a year-long leadership experience in which participants develop and lead a community-based project, giving young people applied opportunities to influence change in their local context.

Spotlight

The **Funders for Adolescent Science Translation** (FAST) supported the planning and implementation of **Cultivating Possibilities: White House Youth Policy Summit 2024**, an intergenerational federal convening built around an exchange of nearly 100 youth leaders and nearly 100 federal policy staff, including three Cabinet Secretaries, from the White House and six federal agencies. The Summit exemplifies how funders can center youth voice in a manner aligned with developmental science while also advancing broader narrative, equity, and systems goals.

The Summit was co-designed by an intergenerational planning team of youth advisors and adult allies. Together, they established principles to ensure that youth expertise and lived experience were included, centered, and respected. Young people shaped the agenda, designed sessions, and defined what meaningful engagement with federal agencies should look like.

Breakout sessions were organized around core developmental needs of adolescence—like belonging, purpose, identity, and agency— and reinforced

strengths-based, science-aligned narratives about young people. The Summit also intentionally elevated youth from communities and groups that are often marginalized, ensuring that those most affected by inequities had a voice in shaping federal priorities.

The Summit generated concrete agency commitments to embed youth perspectives and ideas in federal decision-making, and also invested in a youth participatory pooled fund that supported 17 youth-led policy projects developed in partnership with federal agencies. FAST is now seeding state and community Youth Policy Labs to translate that model into state and local systems change.

This effort highlights the power of funder collaboration to support work that no single funder could accomplish alone. By investing in youth engagement as a core strategy, and connecting it to developmental science, equity, and systems change, FAST helped create an experience that strengthened youth leadership while also shaping how federal systems understand and respond to adolescence.

Are you ready to engage youth directly?

Youth engagement is most effective when funding organizations have the capacity and commitment to partner with young people in ways that are meaningful, well-supported, and developmentally appropriate. Funders may begin with smaller or indirect approaches and build toward deeper engagement over time. High quality engagement requires clear roles, appropriate compensation, preparation for both youth and adults, and a commitment to acting on what young people contribute.



Conclusion

The science of adolescence offers philanthropy a lens for rethinking how systems, relationships, opportunities, and environments shape young people's lives. The examples throughout the guide show that developmental science can sharpen strategy, strengthen partnerships, shift narratives, and help create more responsive and equitable systems for young people.

There is no single way to embed adolescent developmental science into philanthropy. Funders will enter this work from different starting points, priorities, and spheres of influence. Some may begin by reframing how they talk about adolescents, others by strengthening youth engagement, aligning systems, or using developmental science to guide investment decisions. The goal is not to adopt every action in this guide, but to begin asking new questions: How might developmental science sharpen existing strategies? Where are systems misaligned with adolescents' strengths and needs? How might young people themselves help shape solutions?

By centering adolescent development in philanthropy, funders are investing not only in healthier developmental pathways for young people, but in a more equitable, connected, and thriving collective future.

Resources

Center for Scholars and Storytellers @ UCLA Toolkits for Storytellers:

<https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/toolkits-for-storytellers>

Frameworks Institute (2020, October). Reframing Adolescence and Adolescent Development: A Toolkit.

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/the-core-story-of-adolescence-2/#Summary>

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2025. The Future of Youth Development: Building Systems and Strengthening Programs. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27833>.

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National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17226/25388>.

The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance: <https://soldalliance.org/>

UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent: The Core Science of Adolescent Development. developingadolescent.org/core-science-of-adolescence

UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent (2021). Leveraging the Developmental Science of Adolescence to Promote Youth Engagement in Research and Evaluation: A Guide for Funders. https://developingadolescent.org/assets/uploads/research/resources/YPARGuide_2022_funders.pdf

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Bezos Family Foundation

Britebound

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Hopelab

Interact for Health

Jewish Heritage Fund

The Philadelphia Foundation

The Pinkerton Foundation

Pivotal

Raikes Foundation

Spring Point Partners

Stuart Foundation

The Wallace Foundation



Search Institute is a field catalyst, advancing the relational ecosystems young people need to thrive. For more than 60 years, we have translated developmental science into practical tools, insights, and strategies that help adults, organizations, and communities strengthen belonging, connection, and opportunity. By aligning research, relationships, and systems, Search Institute works toward a world where every young person has the support they need to grow, contribute, and thrive.

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The logo for FAST (Funders for Adolescent Science Translation) features the word "FAST" in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. The letters are composed of multiple parallel lines, giving them a 3D, architectural appearance.

FUNDERS FOR ADOLESCENT
SCIENCE TRANSLATION

Citation:

Search Institute (2026). From Insights to impact: Embedding adolescent development into philanthropy.

<https://searchinstitute.org/resources-hub/embedding-adolescent-development-into-philanthropy>.