



The United Nations  
sexual and reproductive  
health agency

This is not an ADB material. The views expressed in this document are the views of the author/s and/or their organizations and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Asian Development Bank, or its Board of Governors, or the governments they represent. ADB does not guarantee the accuracy and/or completeness of the material's contents, and accepts no responsibility for any direct or indirect consequence of their use or reliance, whether wholly or partially. Please feel free to contact the authors directly should you have queries.

# Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds: Youth Sexual Reproductive Health and Mental Health

ADB SECURE Webinar Series

26 February 2026

Sylvia Wong, Technical Adviser, Adolescents and Youth

UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office



# Why Adolescence?

## **Adolescence is a pivotal life stage**

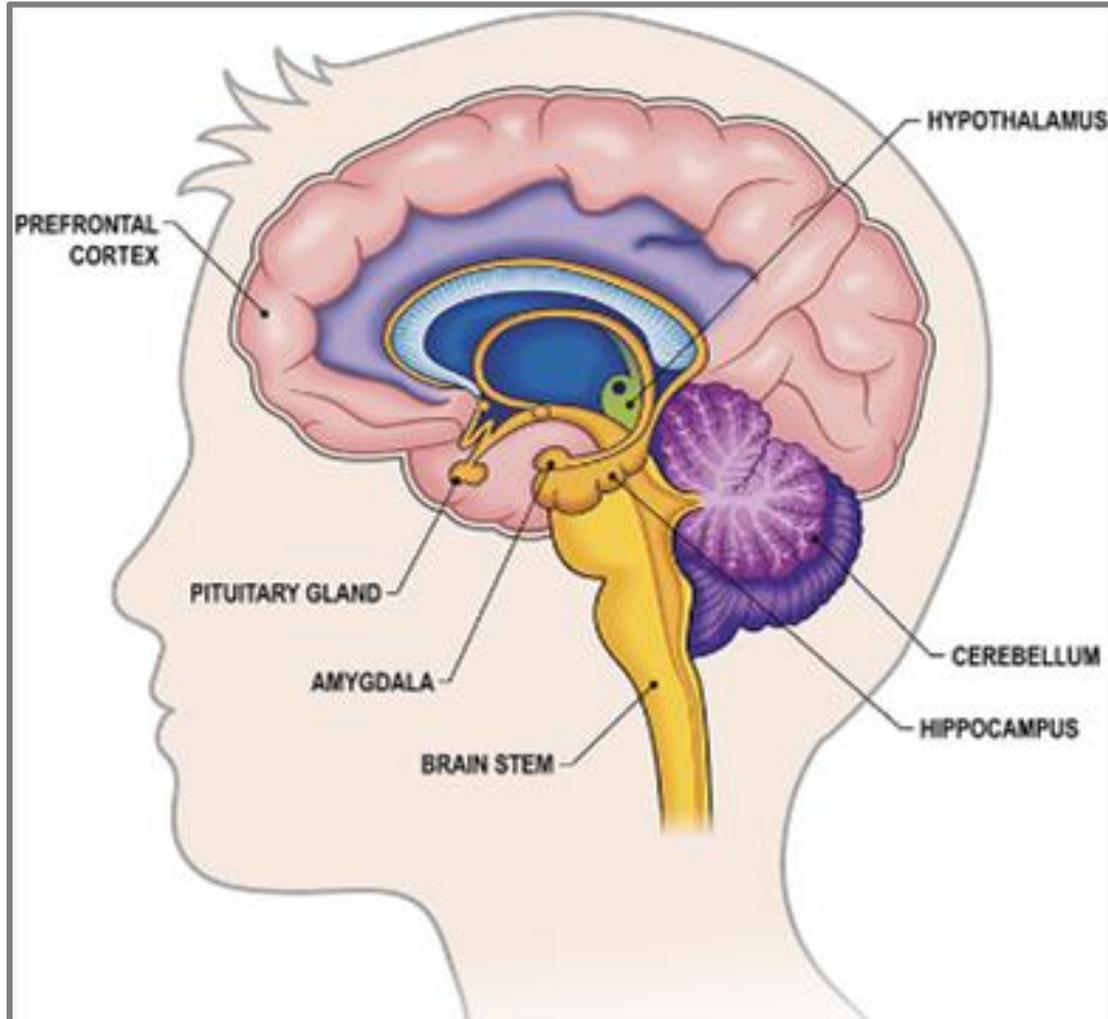
- Period of rapid physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes
- Time for building self-awareness and autonomy

**A window of opportunity:** Programme investments in adolescent health, education, development, empowerment and social protection are key to establish positive lifelong behaviors

**Investments** create intergenerational benefits and stronger communities.



# The Adolescent Brain: Under Construction



**Adolescent behavior** is influenced by a developmental mismatch between two key brain areas.

**The "Gas Pedal" (Limbic System):** This emotional center develops early. It drives intense feelings, reward-seeking, and social sensitivity.

**The "Brake" (Prefrontal Cortex):** The control center for planning and impulse control is the *last* to mature (mid-20s).

**The Result:** A window of vulnerability where emotions can override logic, increasing susceptibility to risk behaviors and mental health challenges.

# Youth Mental Health and Sexual Reproductive Health Shared Vulnerabilities and Protective Factors

- Distressed home environments
- Poverty
- Violence incl. GBV (TfGBV)
- Lack of safety/social protection
- Harmful gender norms, discrimination exclusion
- Limited agency and power
- Supportive relationships
- Safe environments
- Socio-economic security
- Positive peer friendships
- Access to safe schools and quality health services
- Positive identity and self-efficacy



# Evidence of SRH and Mental Health Linkages

Depression and anxiety linked to earlier sexual debut, multiple partners, and other risk behaviors

Adverse sexual and reproductive health events can trigger or exacerbate mental health conditions

- Early, unintended pregnancies and gender-based violence increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and social isolation.
- Adolescent mothers face significantly higher risks of postpartum depression and socioeconomic stress compared to adult women.



# Mental Health, SRHR, and Technology

## **Virtual is Real**

Young people's offline and online worlds deeply integrated

Misinformation is abundant

Increased screen time linked with mental health concerns, anxiety and depression

## **Gendered Risks**

Girls, young women, and LGBTQI youth vulnerable to online risks, unsafe content, and other forms TfGBV

Boys exposed to harmful masculinities and online communities

## **Striking a Balance**

Need for safe, ethical and responsible design AND healthier digital ecosystems to amplify vital support and benefits for young people



# What Works - Education and Health Sector Linkages

## **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)**

Integrating Mental Health literacy and digital skills into CSE programmes build student resilience, socio-emotional learning, healthy habits and life skills (on and offline)

## **Safe School and Community Environments**

A supportive school climate and community promotes empathy, reduces bullying & stigma

## **Trusted, Trained Teachers**

Teachers and other caring adults notice warning signs, encourage students to seek support, and facilitate referrals to care



# What Works: Integration and Youth-Responsive Health Care

## **School-based Health Services**

Locating services where adolescents spend most of their time removes critical barriers

## **Youth-Responsive Health Systems**

A continuum of care with comprehensive, screening (HEADSS), non-judgmental counseling and trauma-informed services improves efficiency and maximizes resources

## **Safe and healthier digital environments**

Design youth-centered digital health tools with safety, security, and privacy at its core



# Adolescent Health and Education Investments Yield Multiple Benefits

With an **additional \$5 billion** to scale up proven health and education interventions for girls in the five South-East Asian countries, we could:

Prevent **1.4 million** unintended pregnancies and **1.1 million** child marriages by 2030

Generate **\$13.4 billion** in economic benefits by 2050



**Thank You**

wong@unfpa.org