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A Study on Pathways of Adolescent Mental Health Promotion from the Perspective of Ecosystem Theory

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Abstract: Adolescent mental health serves as an essential foundation for building a powerful country in education and advancing the Healthy China Initiative. To address the dynamic challenges arising from the increasing complexity of adolescent mental health issues and the continuous emergence of new influencing factors, this study adopts the perspective of ecological systems theory and examines three dimensions: school, family, and society. It focuses on identifying adolescent mental health problems, clarifying relevant influencing factors, illustrating the interactive relationship between the social environment and adolescent mental health, and exploring how different ecological subsystems influence adolescent mental health. Based on this analysis, it is essential to build a school-centered safeguarding system supplemented by out-of-school support and to explore practical pathways for adolescent psychological crisis intervention that fit China's national context. These efforts can strengthen the foundation for prevention, broaden intervention pathways, and provide continuous support for adolescent mental health, thereby improving adolescents' overall mental health.

Keywords: Adolescent; Mental health; Ecological systems theory; Pathways

Adolescence is a critical period for individual physical and mental development. Mental health issues among adolescents emerge frequently (McGrath et al., 2023), showing a high incidence rate and a trend toward younger onset (Ren et al., 2025; Dong et al., 2025). These issues have drawn significant attention from all sectors of society (Peng & Huang, 2023) and have become a major public health concern (Li & Song, 2025). China attaches great importance to adolescent mental health. The Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Issuing the “Ten Measures to Further Strengthen Mental Health Work for Primary and Secondary School Students” addresses the stage-specific characteristics and prominent issues in the mental health of these students. It emphasizes optimizing the campus mental health support environment, improving inter-departmental collaborative protection mechanisms, and it urges that mental health work be placed in a more prominent position. Grounded in the dynamic challenges arising from the increasing complexity of adolescent mental health issues and the continuous emergence of various new influencing factors, and drawing on ecological systems theory, this study proposes the construction of a mental health promotion framework for adolescents. This framework follows a research approach of “problem identification → problem analysis → system construction → pathway optimization,” providing a reference for proactive exploration aimed at improving adolescents’ mental health.

1. Problem Identification

Early identification of mental health issues among adolescents is a prerequisite for effective prevention and intervention. According to the “China National Mental Health Development Report (2023-2024)”, adolescents who have experienced being left-behind or lack parental care are at higher risk for depression and anxiety. Research indicates that anxiety disorders and depression have become core mental health concerns among adolescents (Li et al., 2022). These problems also show a high degree of comorbidity, posing greater challenges for prevention and intervention (Yuan et al., 2023).

The formal diagnosis of mental health problems requires complex and comprehensive clinical assessment procedures, making it difficult to conduct widespread screening across large populations. Therefore, in practice, the identification of adolescent mental health issues primarily relies on questionnaires or scales as screening tools. While this method facilitates large-scale screening, it relies heavily on the subjective judgments of respondents (adolescents or guardians), which is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. It is worth noting that current assessment of adolescent mental health status relies mainly on school-based mental health

surveys or scientific research in certain regions, and there is still a lack of a mental health monitoring system that features full geographic coverage, a well-established framework, and long-term sustainability.

2. Problem Analysis

Clarifying the factors that influence adolescent mental health is key to improving mental health outcomes (Yu et al., 2018). From the perspective of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), adolescent mental health is influenced by factors operating across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem includes adolescents' immediate relationships and settings, such as the quality of parent-child relationships (Wang et al., 2014), the school environment (Chapman et al., 2013), and peer relationships (Zhao et al., 2013). The mesosystem concerns interactions among these immediate settings, including parental involvement in school activities and home-school interaction (Rothon et al., 2012). The exosystem includes conditions that indirectly shape adolescents' development, such as school curriculum design, teacher training (Yu & Wang, 2015), the community environment (Masten, 2001), and family educational conditions such as parental educational attainment (Liu et al., 2012). The macrosystem encompasses broader social and cultural influences, including prevailing values and patterns of role-model selection (Yu & Wang, 2016). Although existing research has identified a complex array of influencing factors across these ecological levels, some potential factors remain underexplored. For example, relatively few studies have examined how natural and social environmental factors, such as green space, air pollution, and weight stigma, relate to adolescent mental health, and these relationships require further investigation and validation (Roberts et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2020; Fan & Che, 2023).

With the continuous evolution of the social environment and lifestyles, mental health risks among adolescents have taken on characteristics of multiplicity, causal complexity, and constant change. In the digital age, factors such as digital stress, short-video addiction, screen time, and the social-media-driven popularity and frequent consumption of milk-tea beverages ("milk tea culture") have emerged as new risk factors; meanwhile, digital resilience, social-emotional learning abilities, and a growth mindset have emerged as new protective factors. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need to integrate multi-source evidence including monitoring data, in-depth interviews, and research reviews on adolescent mental health, and, by focusing on the subsystems of ecological systems theory, identify core variables such as psychological resilience

and social media that possess both high influence and operational feasibility from the diverse and intertwined influencing factors. Based on this, a multi-dimensional intervention priority list and systematic intervention pathways should be developed, thereby providing a solid foundation for adolescent mental health promotion.

3. System Construction

Adverse events experienced by adolescents are a major cause of their mental health issues. Therefore, drawing on the ecological systems theory framework, it is essential to clarify the underlying mechanisms through which social environments influence adolescent mental health and to examine how its subsystems operate in shaping adolescent mental health.

First, we construct the central system: the microsystem for promoting adolescent mental health. As the foundation of adolescent mental health, the microsystem consists of interconnected and interdependent units that form an organically integrated whole. Research indicates that the family is a tightly interdependent network of interpersonal relationships and exerts an irreplaceable influence compared to other external environments. Specifically, a higher family economic status, positive parenting styles, and a harmonious family atmosphere can enhance adolescents' perceived sense of well-being, promote the development of their autonomy, and further improve their mental health. Beyond the family, establishing healthy peer relationships and being exposed to positive environmental influences can foster the development of adolescents' self-identity and help them actively cope with external pressures. Therefore, to effectively safeguard and promote adolescent mental health development, it is essential to ensure that all components within the microsystem function in an orderly manner and develop in a healthy direction; damage to any single component will give rise to adverse effects.

Second, construct the hub system: the mesosystem and exosystem for promoting adolescents' mental health. Within this hub system, home-school interaction, neighborhood relationships, family resources, and social resources are particularly important. Positive home-school interaction helps create a high-quality educational environment, optimizes teacher-student interactions patterns, and further enhances adolescents' positive behavior at school. A harmonious community culture and neighbourhood relationships can support the functioning of the family, foster positive peer interactions, and improve adolescents' interpersonal skills. Family and social resources serve to meet adolescents' psychological, emotional, and material needs. Therefore, it is essential to give full play to the bridging role of the hub system so as to promote the development of adolescents' mental health.

Third, establish the extended system: the macrosystem for promoting adolescent mental health. Adolescent mental health is influenced by macrosystem environmental factors such as values, education, and science, and it gradually changes along with the events they experience. As a broad cultural context for adolescent development, the macrosystem interacts with life experiences such as having multiple siblings, academic ranking, and parental migration for work, which can contribute to diverse behavioral and emotional experiences. Therefore, by integrating mainstream culture of the broader environment, adolescent mental health education should be strengthened in conjunction with the strategy of building a powerful country in education and ideological and political education, so as to help adolescents form a solid and stable sense of identity, explore protective support systems for mental health, and further safeguard their mental health. On this basis, pathway optimization should translate the functions of these ecological systems into coordinated actions across schools, families, communities, healthcare services, government agencies, and social organizations, so that theoretical analysis is directly connected to practical mental health promotion.

4. Pathway Optimization

Mental health education for adolescents is a systematic endeavor that requires the collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders, including teachers, parents, society, and all students. Drawing on ecological systems theory, this study argues that it is essential to establish a primary school-based support system and a supplementary off-campus support system, explore practical approaches to mental health crisis intervention for adolescents that are tailored to China's national context, and thereby lay a solid foundation, break new ground, and provide comprehensive protection for the mental health of adolescents.

4.1 Prioritizing Mental Health Education in Schools

First, school administrators should take the initiative to coordinate efforts. Relying on institutional safeguards, mass mobilization, methodological guidance, and other multifaceted measures, school administrators should encourage all faculty and staff to firmly establish a "student-centered" philosophy. By aligning with the psychological characteristics and developmental patterns of adolescents, they should scientifically carry out mental health education to comprehensively enhance its effectiveness and value.

Second, strengthen the quality and effectiveness of the teaching workforce. Teachers are the practitioners responsible for safeguarding adolescents' mental health and the decisive force

in nurturing talent. Building a team of high-quality teachers (described in current Chinese education discourse as “gold-standard teachers”) who possess strong professional ethics, a forward-looking educational perspective, a broad outlook, and solid professional skills is an important basis for developing high-quality mental health education courses (“gold-standard courses”). To achieve quality and efficiency improvements in safeguarding adolescents’ mental health, it is necessary to establish a systematic support mechanism centered on school leaders, mental health teachers, homeroom teachers, and other relevant personnel, thereby optimizing teacher management mechanisms.

Third, enhance adolescents’ perception of support. Strengthening adolescents’ perception of mental health support is the core objective of mental health education in the new era. Through collaboration among diverse stakeholders, the establishment of scientific mechanisms, and the provision of high-quality resources, adolescents should tangibly feel the mental health support from their families, schools, and society, thereby enhancing their own psychological adjustment.

4.2 Extending to Family Mental Health Education

First, establish a scientific perspective on family education. As a crucial setting for adolescents’ growth, parents bear a vital educational responsibility; their educational beliefs and interaction patterns are internalized by adolescents as self-representations through daily micro-interactions. Therefore, parents must adopt a scientific approach on education and use professional methods in raising their children. They must recognize that they themselves must become learners and guides, grounding their efforts in active learning. By leveraging modern technology and information resources to acquire knowledge about family education, participating in training programs organized by the government and relevant departments, and systematically incorporating advanced educational concepts, they can effectively fulfill their role.

Second, enhance parents’ understanding of mental health. The family is the “primary arena” for adolescent mental health. Parents must master basic psychological knowledge to decipher the “code” of their children’s emotions, replacing blame and anxiety with acceptance and empathy to reduce the intensity of parent-child conflicts. By identifying critical developmental periods, parents can replace excessive, achievement-oriented parenting—colloquially described in China as “chicken parenting”—with rational expectations to prevent risks such as depression and school aversion; and apply evidence-based techniques

such as positive discipline and emotional coaching to foster adolescents' self-esteem and self-control.

4.3 Leveraging Social and Mental Health Education

First, strengthen government oversight. Strengthening government oversight is key to ensuring that policies aimed at safeguarding adolescents' mental health are effectively implemented. By increasing both human and financial resources, a comprehensive oversight system can be established with designated personnel, guaranteed funding, clear standards, and measurable outcomes, thereby supporting high-quality and sustainable mental health education and safeguarding adolescents' mental well-being.

Second, optimize intervention processes within the healthcare system. From a healthcare perspective, address the pain points adolescents face when seeking mental health care by including mental health-related expenses for adolescents in the medical insurance reimbursement catalog, refining the system of biological indicators for mental health screening, and advancing the prevention of mental health disorders at their source to accelerate and enhance the effectiveness of mental health diagnosis and treatment.

Third, enhance the service capacity of social organizations. Guided by the needs for mental health crisis intervention among adolescents, establish service centers at various levels including provincial, municipal, and county in accordance with national policies. By leveraging multi-stakeholder collaboration to break down service barriers, we will expand the coverage and precision of mental health services. We will provide periodic psychological supervision to service personnel each year to continuously strengthen specialized capabilities in adolescent mental health services, solidify the professional foundation for adolescents' healthy psychological development, and foster a diverse and collaborative service ecosystem that delivers high-quality, effective mental health services to adolescents.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yang Zhong: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, and Supervision.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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