

# Overview of TOP Curriculum

The TOP Curriculum is informed by research in adolescent development and best practices in positive youth development. Given what we know about how to develop teens' competencies and pave the way for a successful transition into adulthood, the curriculum focuses on three core content areas that work together as protective factors, reducing the impact of risk and promoting positive youth development: skill-building, developing a sense of self and making connections.

Research shows that supporting teens in these areas leads to a variety of positive outcomes, including increased pro-social behavior, lower levels of problem behaviors and emotional distress, and improved academic performance. From adolescent brain research, we also know that these competencies addressed in the TOP Curriculum are malleable well into young adulthood, particularly when teens are given opportunities to practice emerging skills within safe and supportive environments guided by adults who are caring, responsive and knowledgeable.

The curriculum is divided into three books and the lessons within each book have been designed to promote teens' social and emotional learning (SEL)—defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions.” Within the context of TOP, SEL is supported through explicit instruction, responsive staff practices and project-based learning. The TOP Curriculum was also informed by and is in alignment with practices that promote social and emotional learning as highlighted in the Susan Crown Exchange SEL Field Guide ([www.selpractices.org](http://www.selpractices.org)) and the Youth Thrive Foundation's principles of highly effective youth service organizations.

## Building My Skills (BMS)

Successful navigation of the transition to adulthood is strengthened when adolescents are able to manage their emotions, set goals, solve problems and make healthy decisions. Social and emotional and life skills are important for coping successfully with life's demands, responsibilities and interpersonal interactions. Growth in these skills during adolescence prepares the young person for carrying out adult relationships and roles, including building leadership capacity.

In *Building My Skills*, teens' skill development is supported by lessons focused on:

### Emotion Management

Engaging participants in becoming aware of and reflecting on their emotions, considering the causes and effects of emotions and learning and practicing strategies for coping with strong emotions.

### **Decision-Making**

Developing skills to recognize choices and consequences and exploring strategies for making decisions, particularly in challenging situations.

### **Problem-Solving**

Strengthening participants' ability to develop creative solutions to challenges, persist through setbacks and practice resilience.

### **Goal-Setting**

Developing skills to set realistic short- and long-term goals, identify future goals and develop strategies for overcoming barriers to attaining goals.

When adolescents have opportunities to learn new skills and practice them in an emotionally safe and supportive setting like TOP, they are more likely to draw upon these skills in their daily lives. Teens who are able to effectively manage their emotions are better able to maintain healthy relationships, do well in school and work and have greater overall emotional well-being. Teens who are able to problem-solve can better navigate the complexities of daily life, including the need to deal with uncertainty and change. Teens who set and achieve their goals are more likely to feel capable, confident and positive about their futures. Teens who are effective at making decisions are less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior or substance use and more likely to make positive choices, such as staying in school.

## **Learning About Myself (LAM)**

Successful navigation of the transition to adulthood is strengthened when adolescents have a clear, positive identity. A firmly established identity provides a sense of uniqueness as a person and is related to positive outcomes such as academic competence and greater overall well-being. Identity development is a dynamic process which involves youth actively engaging in the process of self-exploration and discovery. Healthy identity formation in adolescence is closely linked to the exploration and acquisition of a sense of purpose in life.

In *Learning About Myself*, teens' developing sense of self is supported by lessons focused on:

### **Self Understanding**

Fostering exploration of personal traits and values to support teens' developing sense of self-awareness.

### **Social Identity**

Supporting teens' exploration of aspects of their own identity as well as the impact of media messages and stereotyping.

### **Health and Wellness**

Promoting teens' developing understanding of their own physical and sexual development, including strategies that promote overall health and well-being.

Within the context of an emotionally safe and supportive setting like TOP, adolescents can develop self-awareness and understanding of their own development, values, traits and social identity, as well as strategies for taking care of their health and well-being. Armed with knowledge of who they are, what they value and how they'd like to contribute to their world, teens will be better prepared to make independent, healthy and safe decisions that positively impact their futures.

### Connecting With Others (CWO)

Successful navigation of the transition to adulthood is strengthened when adolescents have supportive relationships fostered by strong communication and empathy skills. Making connections with others involves developing supportive relationships with peers and significant adults as well as being engaged with one's school and community. Strong social connections are important, as they buffer stressors in teens' lives and play a critical role in promoting positive growth, including overall well-being, academic competence and avoidance of risky behavior. Relationships grounded in trust help teens develop the confidence they need to achieve their goals.

In *Connecting With Others*, fostering teens' social connections is supported by lessons focused on:

#### Relationships

Increasing understanding of the qualities of healthy relationships and strategies for developing and maintaining relationships.

#### Communication

Supporting participants in learning the qualities of clear, assertive communication and learning how to engage in effective communication with others.

#### Empathy

Fostering teens' ability to be sensitive to the emotions and experiences of others and to respond in a caring, supportive way.

#### Community

Enhancing teens' sense of connectedness to the communities to which they belong and their sense of responsibility toward these communities.

When adolescents have opportunities to develop empathy, communication and a sense of connectedness in an emotionally safe and supportive setting like TOP, they are more likely to draw upon these resources in their daily lives. Teens with a sense of connectedness feel that they belong, that they are valued and cared about and that when faced with challenges, they know who or where to go to for help. In turn, teens make healthier and safer decisions and enter adulthood with a strong social network.

# TOP Curriculum's Developmental Levels

To help ensure TOP Curriculum meets the varying developmental needs of participants, each content section across the three curriculum books includes lessons in three developmental levels. These developmental levels are based on typical adolescent development, with progression in content and structure from Foundational to Intermediate to Advanced lessons.

## Foundational Level Lessons

- Include introduction of basic concepts and ideas
- Are appropriate for participants who are concrete thinkers, have short attention spans and who may struggle with patience and self-regulation
- Require less ability to engage in discussion with peers than intermediate and advanced lessons
- Support early development in participants' sense of self
- May be most appropriate for teens in 6th-8th grades (approximately 12–14 years old)

## Intermediate Level Lessons

- Build upon basic concepts and ideas and include opportunities to explore these more deeply
- Are appropriate for participants with mid-level attention spans who are developing the ability to self-regulate during group activities and discussion
- Are appropriate for participants who are beginning to develop abstract thought, including the ability to think critically and explore new perspectives
- Support participants' growing sense of self
- May be most appropriate for teens in 8th–10th grades (approximately 14–16 years old)

## Advanced Level Lessons

- Include discussion of advanced concepts and content, including content and scenarios specific to the transition to adulthood
- Are structured to support a high level of peer interaction and require participants to actively dialogue with one another
- Are appropriate for participants with longer attention spans who are developing abstract thought, including the ability to think critically and explore new perspectives
- Support participants' deepening sense of self
- May be most appropriate for teens in 10th–12th grades (approximately 16–19 years old)