



Positive childhood experiences in Utah

2026



Department of Health
& Human Services

Executive summary

Childhood experiences shape health and well-being. [Positive childhood experiences](#) (PCEs) — such as feeling safe, supported, and connected with family, school, and community — are associated with better emotional, social, and physical health in adulthood. PCEs can also buffer the effects of adversity. Integrating measures of PCEs into public health improves the understanding of factors that promote overall health and resilience.

This report uses **Utah Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data from 2022 and 2024** to describe how Utah adults remembered feelings of connectedness during childhood. Data from the Utah **Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS), from 2021 and 2023**, was used to describe the current feelings of connectedness identified by Utah students (9th–12th grades). By examining this data together, the report highlights patterns of connectedness across generations. We can also identify opportunities to strengthen environments that support children today and in the future.

Key findings from adult data (BRFSS):

- 96% of Utah adults reported experiencing at least 1 PCE during childhood, with 48% experiencing 6 or 7 (almost all or all) of the possible PCEs.
- A majority of Utah adults indicate experiencing each of the 7 PCEs, with the least common PCE being feeling able to talk to their family about feelings (57%).
- Utah adults report experiencing fewer PCEs than adults in other states that have used the PCE module.
- Utah adults are significantly less likely to report experiencing PCEs include LGBTQ adults, adults with disabilities, adults with lower income and less education, adults in racial and ethnic minorities, adults with no religious affiliation, and younger adults.

Key findings from youth data (YRBS):

- 83% of Utah students reported experiencing at least 1 PCE, with 29% experiencing all 3 possible PCEs included in the YRBS survey.
- A slight majority indicate experiencing each of the 3 PCEs, with feeling able to talk to an adult about feelings being the least commonly identified PCE.
- Utah youth significantly less likely to report experiencing PCEs include those who identify as LGBTQ, members of a racial and ethnic minority, and 10th and 11th-graders.

Implications for public health action:

- There are opportunities to further improve youth connectedness in Utah and to address existing gaps in feelings of connection.
- Efforts should be coordinated across families, schools, communities, and youth-serving organizations to ensure that every child has access to safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.
- By improving youth connectedness, we can prevent disease and abuse, improve health and education outcomes, and so much more.

What are positive childhood experiences (PCEs), and why are they important

Research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) started in the 1990s through a collaboration of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente. This landmark study showed exposure to childhood adversity such as abuse, domestic violence, household substance misuse, neglect, and parental incarceration was strongly associated with a wide range of negative health outcomes later in life. These negative health outcomes include chronic disease, depression, premature death, and substance misuse.

As evidence around ACEs grew, researchers and practitioners began to ask a question: what helps children thrive despite adversity? This led to the development of research on positive childhood experiences (PCEs). PCEs focus on supportive relationships, safe environments, and opportunities for belonging and growth. PCE research began as a hopeful counterbalance to ACEs by showing that positive experiences can promote resilience and buffer the effects of adversity (Figures 1–3). By ensuring every child feels connected and able to share their thoughts and feelings appropriately, we can create an environment that allows children to succeed even if they have experienced trauma.

How do we track PCEs

Utah adults and students (9th–12th grades) were surveyed to learn about their perceptions of meaningful connection as children.

Self-reported data on childhood connectedness are collected from adults via a 7-question version of the Positive Childhood Experiences questionnaire (Appendix A) in the Utah BRFSS survey. Youth data is collected via a 3-question version of the questionnaire included in the Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) survey (Appendix B). Adult prevalence looks back at the whole of a respondent's childhood (<18), while youth prevalence includes only the years lived by the child at the time of response.

Response options from both surveys were simplified into whether or not connectedness was a common experience (responses “often” or “very often” to the BRFSS questions and “most of the time” or “always”/“Strongly agree” or “Agree” to SHARP questions we coded as yes/present).

The responses are subjective; subjective reality seems to matter when considering the potential for long-term beneficial impacts.

Figure 1: Percentage of adult outcome by PCE score, Utah, BRFSS 2022–2024

PCEs are associated with lower levels of mental and physical health challenges, socioeconomic struggles, and life dissatisfaction in adulthood.

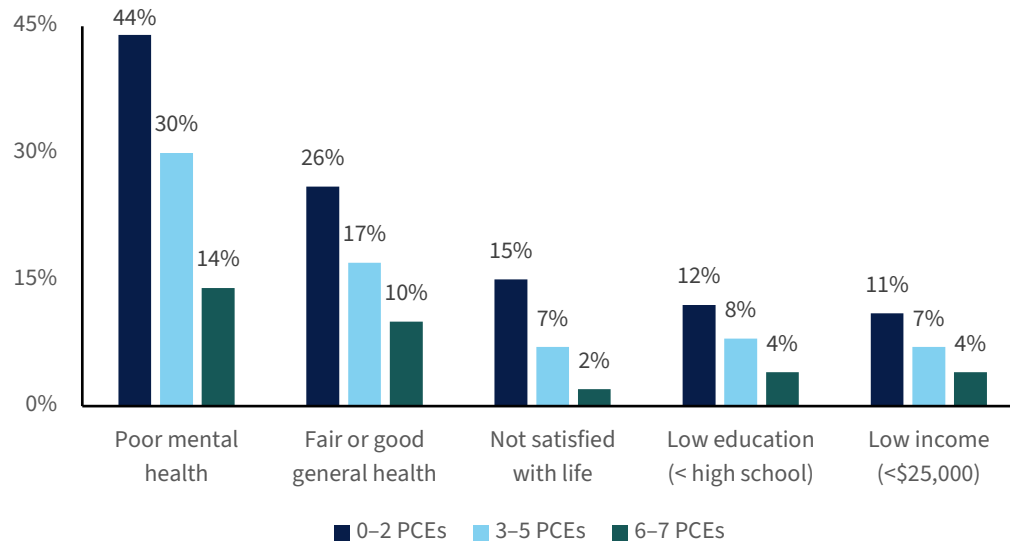


Figure 2: Percentage of poor mental health by PCE score and ACE score, Utah, BRFSS 2022

Higher PCEs are associated with lower levels of poor mental health independent of ACE scores.

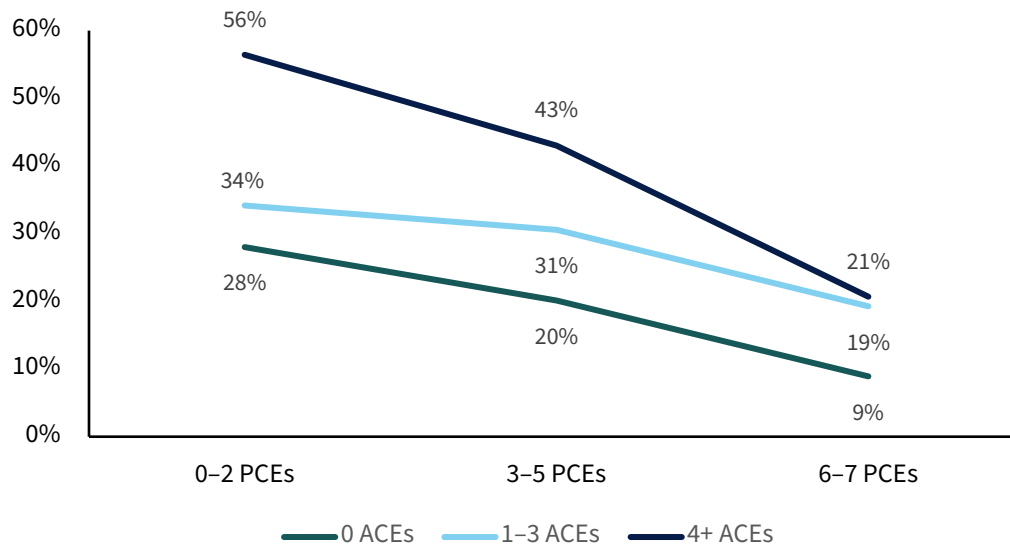
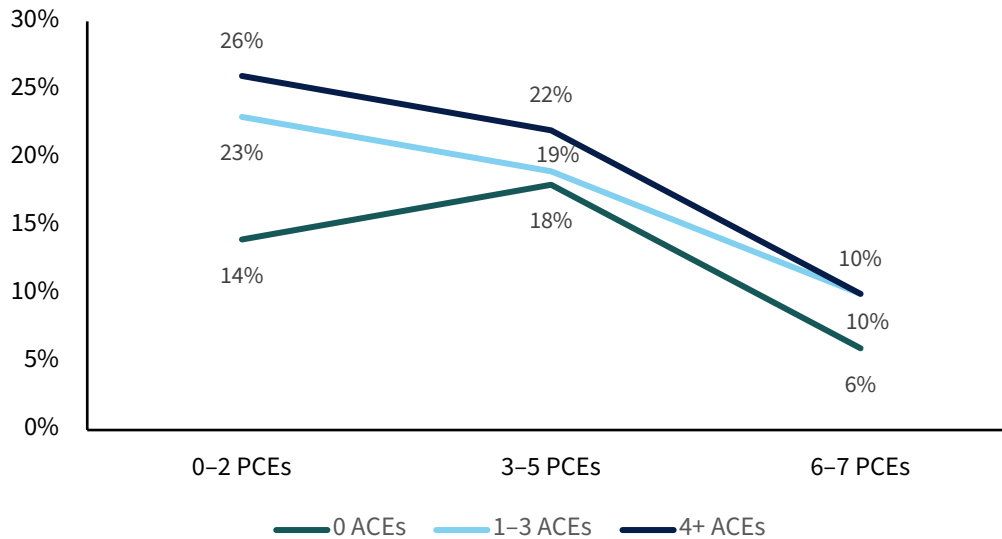


Figure 3: Percentage of fair to poor mental health by PCE score and ACE score, Utah, BRFSS 2022

Higher PCEs are associated with lower levels of fair/poor general health independent of ACE score.



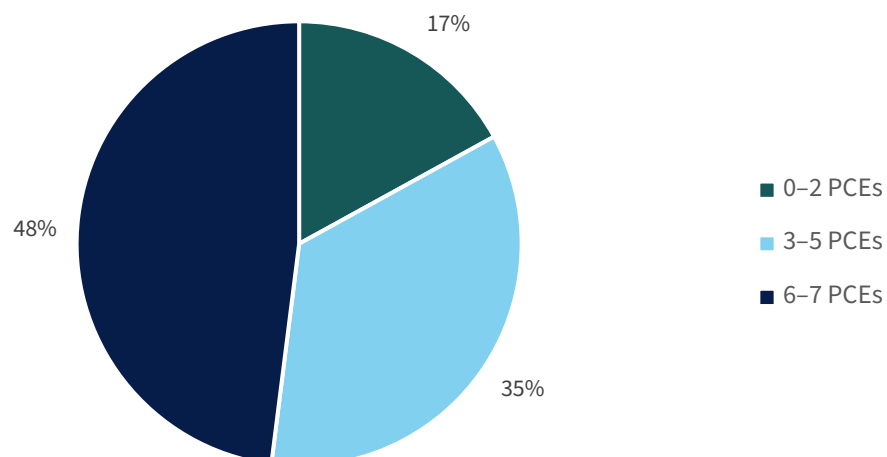
Adult retrospective data (BRFSS)

PCEs score

In Utah, 96% of adults reported experiencing at least 1 PCE during childhood, with 48% experiencing 6 or 7 of the possible PCEs in the BRFSS. (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of PCE score frequency, Utah BRFSS 2022 and 2024

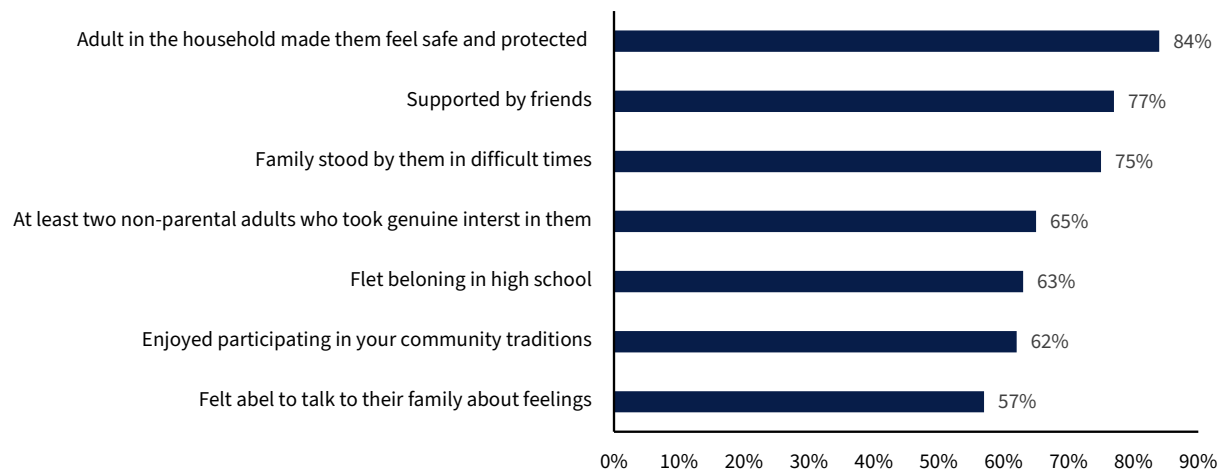
Nearly half of Utah adults indicate experiencing 6 or 7 (“all” or “almost all”) of the possible PCEs.



Most adults indicate experiencing each of the 7 PCEs. The most common PCE reported was “an adult in the home who made them feel safe and protected” (84%). The least common PCE reported was “the ability to talk to family about their feelings” (57%).

Figure 5: Percentage of each PCE prevalence, Utah BRFSS 2022 and 2024

A majority of adults indicate experiencing each of the 7 PCEs.



How does Utah compare

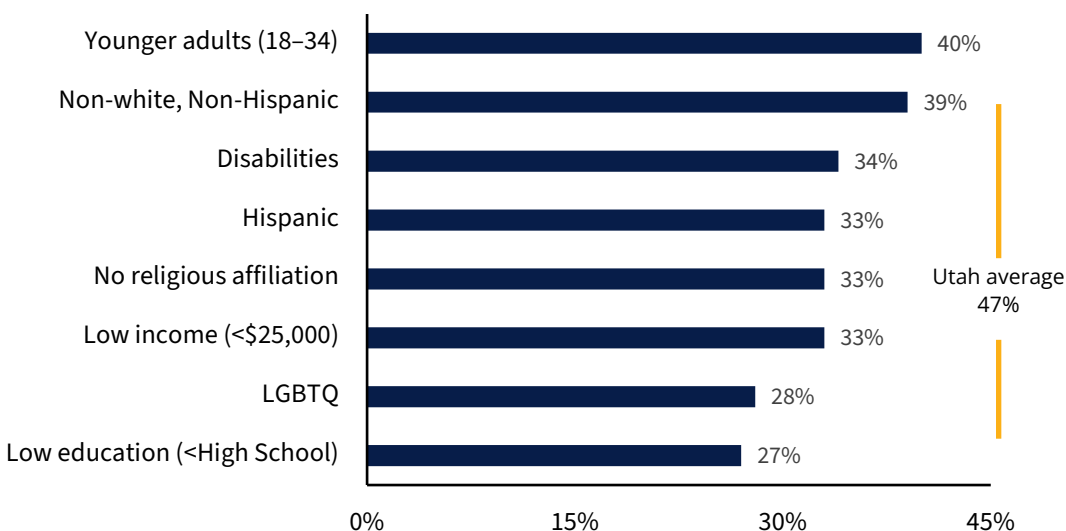
Utah adults indicate experiencing fewer PCEs than adults in several other states. The PCE questionnaire has been utilized by only a handful of states. A recent study, [Prevalence of PCE among adults](#), of 4 states showed increased prevalence of PCE scores 6 or 7 in each of those states compared to Utah (Kansas: 55%; South Carolina: 54%; Wisconsin: 52%; Montana: 50%; Utah: 47%).

PCEs by demographic characteristic

PCEs are common, yet some groups are more likely to indicate experiencing fewer PCEs.

Figure 6: Groups least likely to indicate high PCE scores 6–7 compared to the state (47%), Utah, BRFSS 2022 and 2024

Each of the following groups were significantly less likely to indicate a high PCE score compared to the Utah overall.



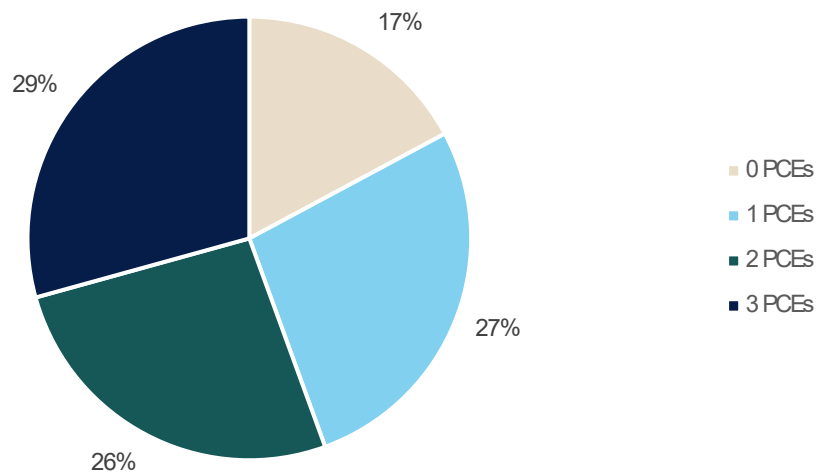
Youth data (YRBS)

PCEs score

In Utah, 83% of 9th–12th graders reported experiencing at least 1 PCE, with 29% experiencing all 3 possible PCEs in the YRBS. (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Percentage of each PCE score prevalence, Utah, YRBS 2021 and 2023

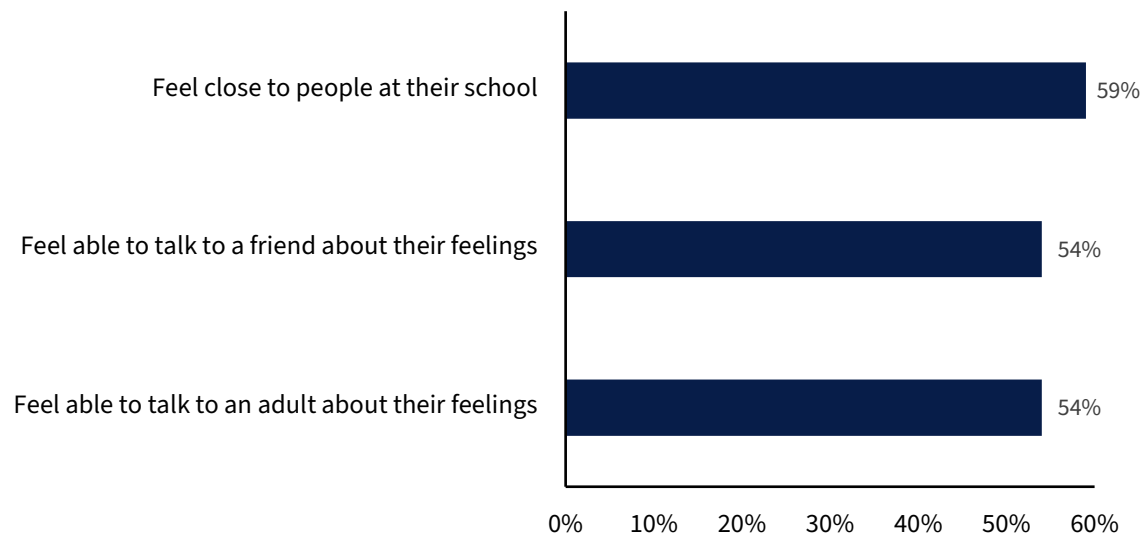
Less than 1/3 of youth indicated experiencing all 3 possible PCEs.



Most 9th–12th graders indicate experiencing each of the PCEs. The most common PCE youth report was feeling close to people in their school (59%). The least common PCE reported was the ability to talk to an adult about their feelings (57%).

Figure 8: Percentage of each PCE prevalence, Utah, YRBS 2021 and 2023

A slight majority of youth indicated experiencing each of the 3 PCEs.

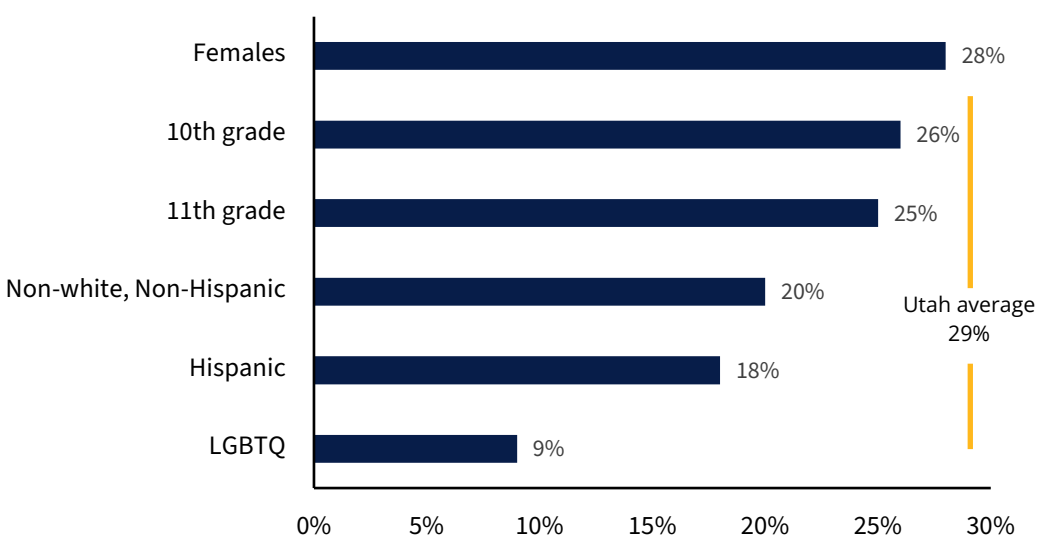


PCEs by demographic characteristic

While it is essential to ensure that every child no matter the demographic has access to PCEs, the data indicate that there are specific groups that are less likely to indicate experiencing PCEs where focused efforts can be made. Targeted programs to improve access to PCEs would benefit these groups.

Figure 9: Percentage of youth groups least likely to indicate all PCEs compared to the state (29%), Utah, YRBS 2021 and 2023

Each of the following groups were significantly less likely to report experiencing PCEs compared to the state, except females.



Implications and recommendations for public health action

The data presented in this report show that most Utah adults and youth report experiencing at least one positive childhood experience (PCE). However, the findings also highlight important opportunities to strengthen youth connectedness and address disparities across populations. Because positive childhood experiences are associated with improved mental health, lower risk of substance use, reduced chronic disease, and better educational outcomes, increasing these experiences is an important public health priority.

Help families build stronger connections in the home

Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping children feel supported and understood, but the least common PCE reported by Utah youth and adults was feeling able to talk openly with family members or other trusted adults about their feelings. Encouraging families to prioritize time for talking, listening, and sharing experiences can strengthen trust and communication. Programs that help parents learn simple ways to connect with their children can make a meaningful difference (examples: regular family meals and shared hobbies that provide spaces for 1-on-1 conversations).

Statewide efforts, such as [Utah's CHAT: Family Connection for Healthy Futures campaign](#), aim to help parents prioritize daily connections with their children.

Support belonging at school and in the community

Schools, youth programs, and community organizations also play a key role in helping young people feel connected. When students feel that they belong at school and have supportive friends and adults around them, they are more likely to succeed academically and emotionally.

Communities can support positive childhood experiences by creating safe places for youth, encouraging mentorship, and providing opportunities for young people to participate in activities, traditions, and community life.

Make sure all youth feel included and supported

Some groups of youth report fewer positive childhood experiences than others. This shows the importance of creating environments where all young people feel welcome, respected, and supported.

Schools, community organizations, and youth programs can help by promoting inclusion, building supportive relationships with youth, and making sure resources are available to all families.

Use data to guide future efforts

Utah collects important information about youth well-being through surveys such as the [Student Health and Risk Prevention \(SHARP\) survey](#) and the [Utah School Climate Survey](#). These data help leaders and parents understand how youth are doing and where more support may be needed. Continuing to track positive childhood experiences and other connectedness indicators will help Utah identify areas for improvement and measure progress over time.

Looking ahead

Everyone can find or create a community and be an example to the youth in their lives by modeling healthy connectedness ([CDC](#)). Small actions, like listening, spending time together, and showing genuine interest in a person, can make a lasting difference. Positive childhood experiences help children grow into healthy and resilient adults. By strengthening relationships within families, schools, and communities, Utah can help ensure that every child has the support and connections they need to thrive.

Other resources

- [Utah's youth connectedness toolkit](#)



Appendix A - BRFSS Positive Childhood Experiences Module

Prologue: I'd like to ask you some questions about events that happened during your childhood. This information will allow us to better understand experiences, positive and negative, that may occur early in life, and may help others in the future. Some questions include sensitive topics, and some people may feel uncomfortable with these questions. At the end of this section, I will give you a phone number for an organization that can provide information and referral for these issues. Please keep in mind that you can ask me to skip any question you do not want to answer.

All questions refer to the time period before you were 18 years of age. Now, looking back before you were 18 years of age...

1. How often did you feel your family stood by you during difficult times? Would you say...
2. How often did you feel that you were able to talk to your family about your feelings? Would you say...
3. For how much of your childhood was there an adult in your household who made you feel safe and protected? Would you say...
4. How often did you enjoy participating in your community's traditions? Would you say...
5. How often did you feel that you belonged at your high school? Would you say...
6. How often did you feel supported by your friends? Would you say...
7. How often were there at least two adults, other than your parents, who took a genuine interest in you? Would you say...

Response options: never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often

Appendix B – Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System Positive Childhood Experiences questions

The next questions ask about other experiences you may have had during your life.

1. During your life, how often have you felt that you were able to talk to an adult in your family or another caring adult about your feelings?
2. During your life, how often have you felt that you were able to talk to a friend about your feelings?
3. Do you agree or disagree that you feel close to people at your school?

Response options for questions 1 and 2: never, rarely, sometimes, most of the time, always

Response options for question 3: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree