Purpose: The Institute of Medicine defines patient-centeredness as an established partnership between patients and the health care system that “respects patients’ wants, needs, and preferences.” Patient-centered care has been touted as essential to effective and coordinated health care delivery, and is integral to health care reform within the Affordable Care Act (ACA). However, little is known about adolescent perceptions of patient-centered health care. Without a strong understanding of patient-centered care for adolescents, the current health care system may be missing opportunities to engage adolescents by failing to respond to the unique developmental and contextual factors that influence their wants, needs, and preferences. We aim to identify common characteristics of patient-centered care according to adolescent patients who access care in multiple settings, including school-based health centers (SBHCs), in order to better understand and define adolescent-centered care.

Methods: We performed a secondary analysis of qualitative data from 12 adolescent focus groups (6 male and 6 female, ages 14-19 years old) conducted in Connecticut, New Mexico, and New York. Through a thematic analysis of the de-identified transcripts, we coded and analyzed the focus group transcripts to identify adolescent priorities in health care.

Results: Adolescents consistently identified eight characteristics of care delivery that drive their engagement with the health care system. They described the four core pillars of primary care—convenient access, continuity with providers, on-site comprehensive services, and coordination between health care providers. Adolescents emphasized four additional qualities that influence their engagement with the health care system: confidentiality, personal autonomy, relatability with health care providers, and use of technology for communication about their health.

Conclusions: Similar to previous research on patient-centered care among younger children and adults, adolescents conveyed the value of accessible, continuous, comprehensive, and coordinated care. Distinctive to adolescent care delivery, the need for confidentiality, personal autonomy, relatability to providers, and use of technology are further defining characteristics of adolescent patient-centered care. A clearer definition of adolescent-centered care may aid in targeted delivery models to address the health care needs of this unique population and facilitate better engagement with the health care system.

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