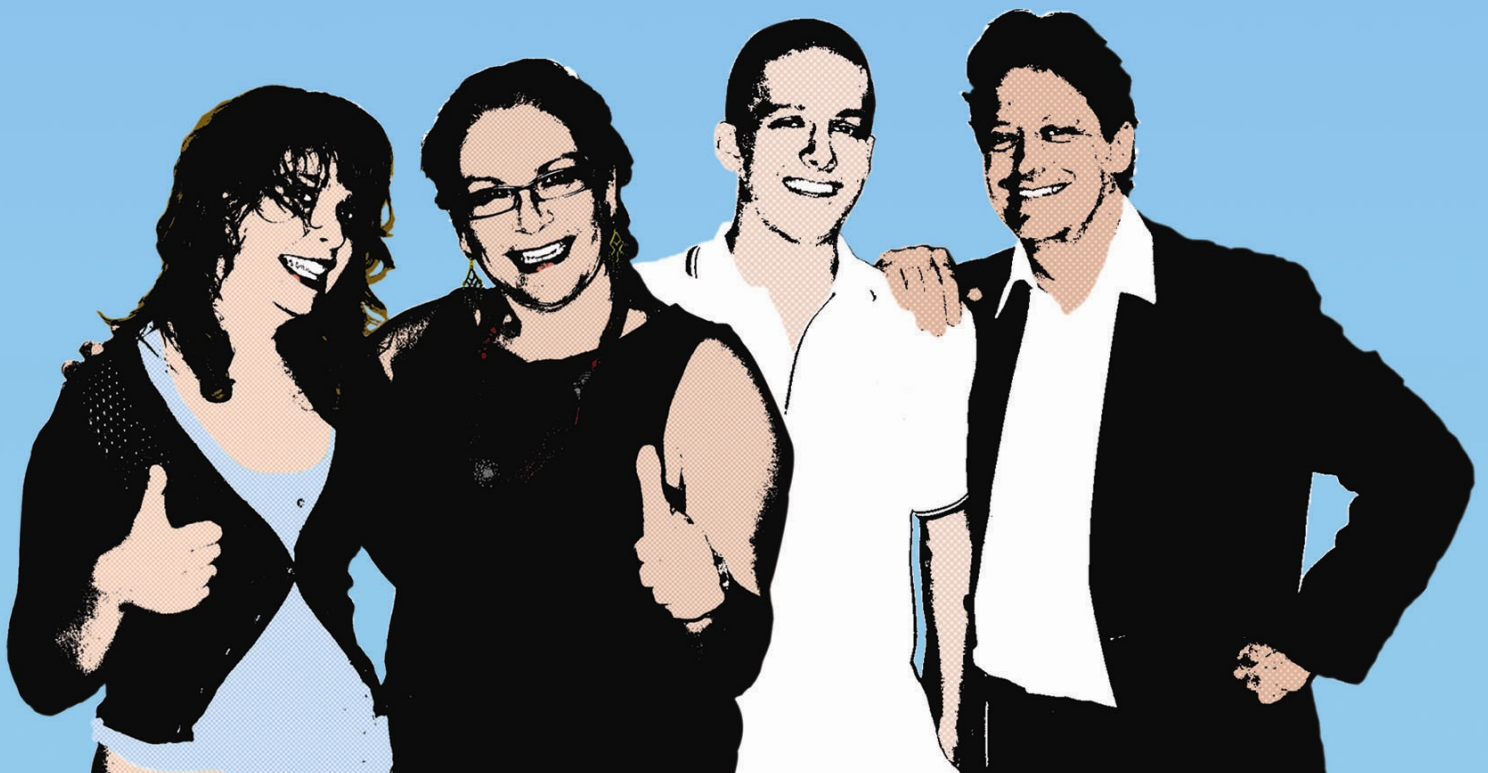




Helping Parents Support the Health of their Teenagers



Adolescence: the transition from childhood to adulthood

Identity: The transition between childhood and adulthood can be stressful for teenagers and parents. Teenagers face the big questions of life during their development: 'Am I normal?' 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?'

Developing Independence: Adolescence is a time of change, experimentation, and increasing independence. Physical, social and psychological changes occur at rapid and various rates so teenagers' moods and needs change. Teenagers valuing privacy, questioning previously accepted family values, voicing their own opinions and associating more with peers are all a normal part of this journey.

Feeling Connected: Young people want and need to feel a sense of belonging (i.e. connectedness) to their family, school, peer group and community. Feeling connected means feeling safe, valued and listened to.

Risk Factors: While most adolescents make a relatively smooth transition into adulthood, approximately 20% will have emotional, psychological or behavioural concerns that can affect their health and wellbeing.

Protective Factors: Young people develop good self-esteem and resistance to stress when they have:

- A good relationship with at least one significant adult role model in their life.
- perseverance and ability to learn from mistakes.
- A belief their lives have meaning and purpose.
- The knowledge they are good at something and can make a contribution.
- Adults in their lives who have positive expectations of them (e.g. Teachers/coaches and parents).

If only it was that easy!



Signs that your teenager might need help

Many teenagers have emotional ups and downs and 1 in 4 will suffer from a mental health problem such as depression or anxiety. If an adolescent's behaviour suddenly changes it is important that you seek advice, particularly if they show some of the following signs:

- Sleeping too much or not enough.
- Irritable, erratic, moody or irrational behaviour.
- They start to seriously disrupt family life and there is escalating conflict.
- Their school work gets worse suddenly.
- They start to use drugs and alcohol and this becomes a problem.
- They complain of lots of physical problems.
- They become aggressive or secretive and start getting into trouble, like skipping school or stealing.
- Eating too much or not enough.
- They become worried about their weight without actually being overweight.
- They become low in mood, socially withdrawn, over-anxious, or cannot enjoy anything for two weeks or more.

How Parents Can Support Teenagers

Support Increasingly Independent Help Seeking Behaviour:

Teenagers may have sensitive or embarrassing health concerns or questions they prefer to discuss with friends or someone neutral outside the family. However, they may not know how or where to get help. It is ideal if teenagers receive information from a reputable source, such as local doctors or nurses, or visiting credible websites (see back page). Parents can support their teenager's increasing independence in seeking health care by helping them to:

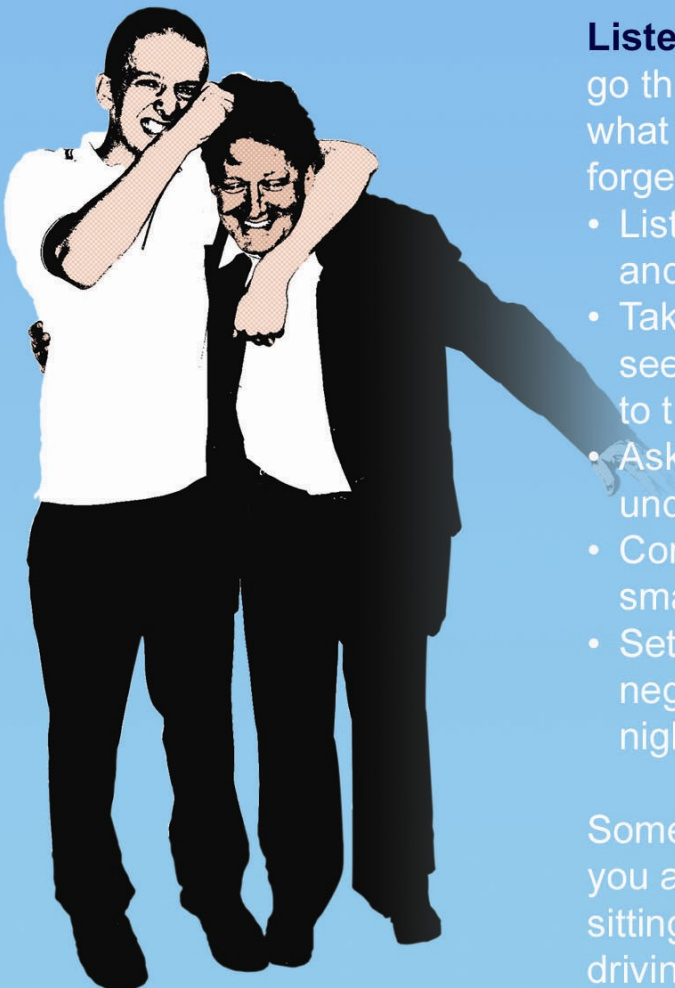
- Understand Medicare and apply for their own Medicare card.
- Find a GP that they feel comfortable talking with.
- Spend part or all of their consultation time alone with a health professional to help them develop confidence and skills in expressing their concerns independently.



Listen More and be Available: Teenagers may go through a whole day where adults tell them what to do (e.g. "do your homework."; "don't forget to clean your room"). Make time to:

- Listen to your teenager's concerns, thoughts and feelings, **without judging them**.
- Take their concerns seriously even if you don't see them as serious as they will be important to them.
- Ask open questions that will help you understand them better.
- Compliment their achievements large and small.
- Set appropriate boundaries that you have negotiated with them (e.g. when to be home at night or when to call to say they will be late).

Sometimes conversations happen best when you are both involved in an activity rather than sitting face to face for a 'big chat' (e.g. While driving to a sporting event or shopping).



Discuss sensitive issues such as Sex and Drugs: Teenagers need information on these topics and on where they can go for advice and help. Talking to young people about sensitive issues doesn't mean you are encouraging or condoning certain behaviours. There are often stories in the media about sex and drugs that you can use as a talking point. If you are concerned about their behaviour, try to be supportive and assist them to find solutions and seek professional help.

Support Connectedness: Parents can promote resilience and connectedness by giving teenagers opportunities to learn and use new skills that are meaningful to them and that they receive recognition for. Giving teenagers a role within the family for which they are responsible and valued can be helpful.

Support for parents

Many families experience difficult times when adjusting to changes that life with a teenager brings. Talking to friends, family or a health professional you trust can help. There are many excellent books on parenting teenagers. (e.g. "What to do when your children turn into teenagers" by Dr David Bennett and Dr Leanne Rowe; "Adolescence: a guide for parents" by Dr Michael Carr-Gregg and Erin Shale).

Even teenagers who have a close relationship with their parents can feel uncomfortable talking about sensitive issues or difficult situations. Don't take it personally if you are not the first person your teenager turns to for help as she/he may be embarrassed or fearful of disappointing you. What's important is that teenagers get accurate information and the help they need, when they need it. The family doctor/nurse is a professional who can provide appropriate help.



Young People and General Practice

Young people in Australia visit a general practitioner at least once a year, usually for physical reasons, like respiratory and skin problems. However, the biggest cause of ill-health for young people (14-24 years) is actually mental health concerns and health risk behaviours, such as: unsafe driving; cigarette, alcohol and substance use; and unprotected sexual activity. Young people reluctantly visit their doctor/nurse for these health issues, sometimes because of embarrassment, confidentiality concerns, fear of judgement, cost of a consultation, lack of transport and/or not realizing the family doctor/nurse can help them. Young peoples' problems can therefore remain **hidden**. The result is that many young people miss out on getting the help they need before the problem gets worse. This is why doctors/nurses are advised to talk to **ALL** young people about their mental health and lifestyle risks when they visit regardless of why they originally came to see the doctor/nurse.

The youth friendly practice:

Some important ways general practice can support young people to be more comfortable speaking to their doctors/nurses about their mental health and health risk behaviours include:

- 1) Having magazines, brochures and health information posters appealing to young people in the waiting room and **approachable, supportive and well trained reception staff** who understand young people.
- 2) Having **time alone in the consultation** with the doctor/nurse without parents/guardians present. Young people can feel reluctant to discuss personal problems in front of their parents, even when they have a good relationship. Once the doctor/nurse has gained the young person's trust and understands his/her problems, they can help the young person share these problems with parents/others who can best support them.
- 3) Having the doctor/nurse explain that the **consultation will be confidential**. As in consultations with adults, a doctor must legally keep all information confidential unless the adolescent permits them to disclose what was discussed. There are some important exceptions to this duty of confidentiality. (see below).

Important exceptions to confidentiality. If the young person is at serious risk of harming themselves or someone else, or is at serious risk of harm from other people, a doctor must talk to parents or other guardians who can protect the young person. When a young person is judged to be immature and unlikely to make informed decisions, doctors are also required to inform their guardians of any health risk or treatments. In uncommon circumstances, the doctor may be required to release information if subpoenaed by a court of law.

- 4) **Asking the young person sensitively and directly about their health and lifestyle**, including: home; school or work life; eating and exercise habits; friends and activities; cigarette, alcohol and other drug use; driving safety; sexual health; and mental and emotional health. Some practices may give the young person a confidential lifestyle questionnaire to complete highlighting areas of concern they can discuss during their consultation.
- 5) Having **resources to assist** the young person with any problems raised and provide advice or referral as appropriate. If a young person prefers not to discuss an aspect of their life this must also be respected.
- 6) **Minimising cost of care** by assisting the young person to **get or use their own Medicare card** and having practice policies to minimise costs to young people.
- 7) Many practices who want to reduce youth barriers to access may also ask young people for their views on how clinic processes can be improved.

Teenagers can get their own Medicare card from age 15. Further information about the application process, advice on eligible documentation and a downloadable application form, can be found on the Medicare Australia website at: <http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au>. Young people can also phone the Medicare Australia toll free phone number on 13 20 11.



Resources

beyondblue - www.youthbeyondblue.com

Young People's Health Service - Phone: 9611 2409

The National Domestic Violence Helpline - Phone: 1800 200 526

CASA: Centres Against Sexual Assault - www.casa.org.au

Phone: 1800 806 292

The Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre -

www.counsellingonline.org.au Phone: 1800 888 236

Family Planning Victoria - www.fpv.org.au

Reach Out (Info on Tough Times) - www.reachout.com.au

Emergency Services (Police/Fire/Ambulance) - Phone: 000

Kids Help Line - www.kidshelp.com.au Phone: 1800 55 1800

Lifeline - www.lifeline.org.au Phone: 13 1114

Relationships Australia - www.relationships.com.au

The Action Centre for Young People (Sexual Health Centre) -

www.sexlife.net.au Phone: 1800 013 952

Suicide Helpline Victoria - www.suicidehelpline.org.au

Phone: 1300 651 251

Knowing where to go for help and independently accessing health services is an important life skill and rite of passage for young people. Many young people don't know that doctors can help them with both physical and emotional issues. Parents can help young people by teaching them about the Medicare system, and support them to gain confidence in making appointments and speaking to health professionals. By helping young people take responsibility for their health, parents can help them establish positive help-seeking behaviours.

