A Practice Guide for Promoting Youth Mental Health and Sexual and Reproductive Health as a Supportive Adult

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Safe, supportive relationships are critical for helping young people thrive. These can—and ideally should—include positive relationships with peers and family members. However, they can also include relationships with supportive adults outside the family, including youth-supporting professionals. Research suggests that young people who have supportive adults in their lives benefit greatly from these relationships. For example, young people who have supportive non-parental adults in their lives tend to experience better sexual and reproductive health outcomes,[1,2] have better social and emotional development,[3] and develop fewer depressive symptoms.[4]

This guide offers research-informed strategies for youth-supporting professionals to actively and intentionally promote young people's mental health and help prevent unintended teen pregnancy and negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. It is relevant to all youth-supporting professionals, including those who support youth who experience homelessness, the child welfare system, the justice system, and/or disconnection from school and work. Young people with these experiences are more likely to face challenges accessing mental health and sexual and reproductive health resources.[5,6,7,8]

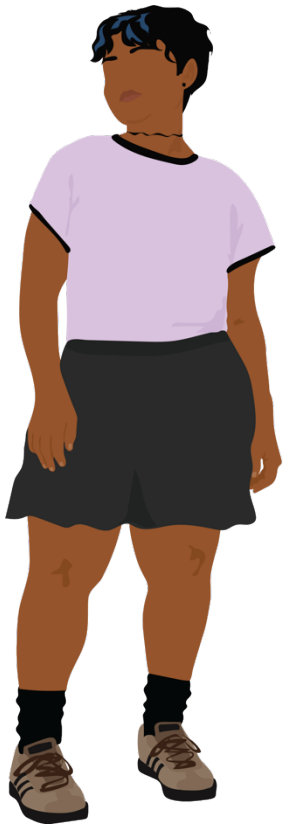
This guide:

- Describes research-informed ways of being a supportive adult to young people
- Presents common challenges young people may face and explains how supportive adults can help address them
- Provides high-level guidance for being a supportive adult

Importantly:

- Some young people may have had negative or even traumatic experiences with systems and youth-supporting professionals.
- Youth-supporting professionals and young people may have differing values, perceptions, and definitions related to "safety" and "support."
- Young people may need time before they perceive youth-supporting professionals as safe and supportive adults.

Activate: The Center to Bring Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Research to Youth-Supporting Professionals bridges the gap between research and practice in support of the Office of Population Affairs' aims to promote adolescent health and prevent unintended teen pregnancy. Activate translates research and creates research-based resources for professionals who support young people experiencing the child welfare or justice system, homelessness, or disconnection from school and work (i.e., opportunity youth).



Tips for Being a Supportive Adult

The ways adults engage with young people are critical for helping to promote positive outcomes.[9] Applying practices aligned with trauma-informed, strengths-based approaches to working with young people is helpful for building engagement and promoting well-being.[10,11] Below are five research-informed tips on how to be a supportive adult for young people, with "dos," "don'ts," and reminders for each tip.

Listen to young people.

Young people appreciate being listened to more than being lectured to.

Don't:	Make assumptions about young people's lives, experiences, or perspectives. Instead, go by what they have chosen to share with you. Don't assume or dictate how a conversation will unfold.
Do:	Demonstrate that you want to build a collaborative relationship in which the young person has a voice. Pause and ask young people if they want to hear your thoughts or suggestions before offering advice. Be open to learning from young people and their insights.
Keep in mind:	A young person's experience with you has the potential to change how they view other youth-supporting professionals or their willingness to seek help and support in the future. By listening nonjudgmentally, you can serve as a positive example of youth-supporting professionals and represent the field well.

Respect young people's priorities.

Although you bring personal and professional experience to your relationships with young people, they may want support in different areas than you initially assumed. Approaching with humility and not assuming that you always "know best" are critical for successful relationships.

Don't:	Steer young people toward your priorities while disregarding their priorities, which can suggest that you don't trust young people as the experts and drivers of their own lives.
Do:	Ask young people about the things that are important to them and their well-being-related goals. Prioritize these in your work and, over time, develop a shared understanding of how you can best support the young person's well-being.
Keep in mind:	Sometimes adults' values or opinions influence their reactions and suggestions to young people. In turn, these reactions may make a young person feel like their autonomy isn't being prioritized.

Be open and invite tough conversations.

Let young people know that they can talk to you about anything, including their mental health or their sexual and reproductive health. Even if you don't have the perfect response or immediate on-site services in these areas, a young person may not have the opportunity to get connected with needed services unless you ask. At the same time, respect young people's boundaries related to the information they choose to share with you at a specific time.

Don't:	Let worries about how to respond prevent you from asking about these topics.
Do:	Ask if they would like to discuss sexual and reproductive health or mental health topics at this time—or later, if they would prefer. Use non-stigmatizing, welcoming language (e.g., "A lot of young people wonder about this"). Offer to find and share more information or resources related to the topics young people raise.
Keep in mind:	If you are a mandated reporter, explain this early on. Include what kinds of situations you are, and are not, required to report. Explain who the young person can talk to (e.g., therapists, advocacy agency staff), what information is legally required to remain confidential, and what may have to be reported.

Connect young people to concrete resources.

To demonstrate your commitment to young people's well-being in a different way, leverage your organization's resources or your ability to navigate systems to help provide material support. Young people may be interested in a variety of resources, such as connections to other services, transportation assistance, or food support.

Don't:	Allow uncertainty about whether you can provide the help a young person needs to stop you from asking about what would be helpful. On the other hand, don't make empty promises or ask about needs without following through on offers to help identify resources.
Do:	Share how you plan to identify a resource (e.g., "I'm going to ask my team at our meeting this afternoon about who in our network can set you up with that"). Provide clear and timely updates on progress toward connecting young people with the assistance they need.
Keep in mind:	Young people may have preferences about the types of resources they use. For example, they may prefer resources located near their home for convenience, or outside their neighborhood due to concerns of stigma or shame about accessing resources. Ask about young people's preferences and try to honor them as you make connections.

Cultivate meaningful relationships with clear expectations.

Don't:	Apply these tips early on, then inconsistently afterward. Try to follow these tips in every interaction, not just when you're first establishing rapport.
Do:	Set expectations early on regarding how long you might be working with that young person, especially if your interactions will be time-limited. Openly discuss expectations and opportunities related to maintaining contact or transitioning the relationship to an informal relationship (if appropriate and desired), once your professional role in that young person's life is over.
Keep in mind:	Working with young people involves balancing both building rapport and maintaining professional boundaries. Youth-supporting professionals are responsible for guarding against inappropriate interactions or blurred boundaries with young adult clients. Consult organizational policies, supervisors, professional networks, and your profession's ethical principles to identify specific best practices for navigating this balance.

Ways Supportive Adults Can Help Youth Address Challenges

While these tips can support work with all young people, some young people face challenges that can increase their risk for both poor mental health as well as unintended pregnancy and related reproductive health outcomes. Supportive adults cannot solve all challenges. However, they can play key roles in addressing challenges by: 1) noticing warning signs, 2) talking with young people about their experiences, and 3) encouraging decisions that promote safety and well-being.

Example of challenge	Noticing warning signs	Talking with young people about their experiences	Encouraging decisions that promote safety and well-being
	What you might notice:	*How to bring it up:*	*How you can respond:*
Unsafe or unhealthy romantic relationships[12,13]	Frequent fights or breakups; isolation from others; fear of partner's emotions or responses; repeatedly shifting blame for conflict to themselves	"What feels good about the relationship, and what feels hard?" "Would you say that your relationship feels the way you want it to?" "Would it be helpful if I shared a few websites about different dynamics in teen relationships?"	*Meet young people where they are:* In general, follow young people's lead in terms of how they describe and label their relationships, rather than telling them that their relationship is unhealthy. *Identify resources:* Offer to connect them with community and online resources; share information about healthy relationships and boundaries. Offer young people contact information for domestic violence resources if needed. *Build strengths:* When appropriate and with the young person's knowledge, help identify safe adults or services for additional support.
Bullying victimization and associated psychological distress or sexual and reproductive health outcomes[14,15,16]	Reluctance to attend school or other settings with peers; references to having issues on social media	"Has anybody been giving you trouble at school—students or staff? How about online?" "Is there a teacher or other adult at school who you trust?" "What is something you wish you could change or improve about what it's like at your school?"	*Help create a safer network:* When appropriate, discuss options for involving school staff or other trusted adults; discuss how young people can use location or privacy settings to protect themselves online. *Build strengths:* Ask about supportive online and real-life peers. Create or connect young people with spaces to socialize with peers (e.g., after-school program partners).

Example of challenge	Noticing warning signs	Talking with young people about their experiences	Encouraging decisions that promote safety and well-being
	What you might notice:	*How to bring it up:*	*How you can respond:*
Barriers to accessing physical or mental health care services[17,18,19]	Missed appointments; reluctance to seek care; concerns about cost; uncertainty about how to find an appropriate provider; worries that a parent or caregiver will not allow them to seek care or will be upset if they seek care	"Is there anything that makes it hard for you to get to your appointments?" "Would you like to brainstorm options for getting you to your next appointment?" "Do you want to know more about how therapy works?"	*Offer practical help:* When appropriate, assist with transportation or scheduling; provide information about community resources; help young people with disabilities find needed accommodations. *Build strengths:* If desired, work with young people before appointments to help build confidence and self-advocacy; debrief after appointments to ensure needs are met.

Concluding Guidelines

Being a supportive adult for a young person does not require you to solve all the challenges young people are facing. Supportive adults can make a difference for young people by:

- Checking in
- Creating safe and supportive spaces for open conversation
- Providing reassurance and accurate information
- Making connections to resources and support
- Consistently recognizing and building on young people's strengths

Find more resources to help with each of these on Activate's website.

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