



Parents Can Affect Adolescent Health and Well Being

The period of adolescence sets the behaviors, habits, and often the life-style—healthy or unhealthy—for adulthood. So it is critical for adolescents to develop healthy habits and make routine health services a part of their lives. The good news for parents is that most of the nation's nearly 42 million young people (aged 10-19) are healthy. However, there are still far too many adolescents who participate in risky behavior, develop unhealthy habits, are overweight or obese, have mental health problems, or have serious or chronic conditions that jeopardize their health.

Prevention, early intervention, and timely treatment can improve the health status for adolescents, prepare them for becoming healthy adults, and decrease the incidence of many chronic diseases in adulthood.

Parents and other adults play major roles in modeling and promoting healthy behavior and helping young people manage chronic conditions. They also are the ones who can provide adolescents access to the health services that can help prevent and treat disease and mental health conditions. Those health resources can also promote healthy behavior.

Even as adolescents become more independent, parents' words and actions affect their health and overall well-being and influence what health services they use. And involvement of families is an important component of most successful disease prevention programs. Young people without adequate family support are particularly vulnerable to risky behavior and poor health and often need non-family support in finding and using health services.

What Do Adolescents Say?

Many adolescents say that their parents are often involved in their health care, and they also say that they like this involvement. They want their parents to pay attention to

their physical and mental health and help them find quality health care and treatment.

But one concern of some adolescents is that their parents will find out things they do not want their parents to know. For these growing adolescents, having private conversations with health providers becomes increasingly important. If young people can not be assured of privacy, they may not seek needed health services—particularly in such sensitive areas as sexual behavior, reproductive health, mental health, and substance use. Health providers must constantly walk a fine line in determining how best to secure the trust of their adolescent patients while still involving parents. And parents similarly need to understand that fine line and figure out their role.



"A lot of people don't know about asthma, so they think it's just a 'condition,' but people can really die from this."

Marcus has asthma. His younger brother died of the disease. For years before his brother's death, his family dealt with the children's asthma by frequent use of the emergency department. Only after one son's death did Marcus' mother learn that her involvement in prevention and wellness services could make a difference for Marcus. Many providers and stakeholders worked together to help him — but the active participation by Marcus and his mother was key to Marcus' healthier new life.

What Can Parents Do?

Model Health Behavior: Parents are often the most influential people in their adolescents' lives. The healthy behaviors that an adolescent experiences in a family setting influence the adolescent's own life. Parents can "model" the behaviors and life-styles that they want their children to practice, such as not smoking, eating healthy foods, wearing seat belts, and driving carefully.

Increase Knowledge: In order to get young people actively involved in health promotion, prevention, and treatment services, parents need to understand the specific developmental and health issues of adolescence. The major health concerns for adolescents are related to oral health, sexual and reproductive health, eating and weight problems, psychological problems, substance use, sports medicine, and violence. Parents who understand these health concerns will be better prepared to assist their adolescent children in finding effective strategies for understanding risks, disease prevention, care coordination, treatment, and health promotion.

Be Aware of Risky Behavior: Parents' perception of adolescent behavior and adolescent reports of their own behavior frequently differ. Parents are not always aware of risky behaviors adolescents are engaging in, frequently do not believe their own child is at risk, and may not recognize signs of risky behavior. The three leading causes of death for adolescents are car accidents, suicide, and homicide. All of these are connected to risky behavior, and may be preventable if parents recognize them and intervene to change their children's behaviors.

Help with the Health Care System: Adolescents enter the health care system in many different ways and with many different kinds of providers—physicians, dentists, nurses, nutritionists, psychologists, social workers, and coaches, among others. Parents often need to help adolescents figure out how to get help within this multifaceted system.

Search for Resources: The nation's health services system is important in promoting healthful behavior, managing health conditions, and preventing disease among adolescents. Yet today's health services and settings in the United States are rarely designed to reach young people and their families during these critical years. Parents must actively seek out resources through national medical associations, school health centers, physicians, and online sites, among others.

Parents Are a Key Part of a Coordinated Effort

Although no one model of health services for adolescents has proved to achieve better results than others, many approaches can improve care for adolescents today. In particular, parents can advocate for and help to coordinate current health services for adolescents—which often consist of separate programs and services that are fragmented and delivered in many different public and private settings. A coordinated effort needs to involve well-trained health care providers, health organizations, community agencies, and funders to provide and support health care services for adolescents. Parents are a very important piece of this effort.

Key Facts

- Parental support is important for adolescents because they are particularly vulnerable to risky behavior.
- Parents can model and promote healthy behavior, help young people manage chronic conditions, and provide their adolescent children access to the health services that may help prevent disease, treat mental health conditions, and promote healthy behavior.
- Working with the whole family, and not just the adolescents, is an important component of most successful disease prevention programs.
- For some adolescents, the confidentiality of the information that adolescents give to and receive from health providers is very important. If privacy cannot be assured, they may forgo needed health services—particularly for such sensitive issues as sexual behavior, reproductive health, mental health, and substance use.

For More Information

This summary was prepared by the Institute of Medicine/ National Research Council, based on the report, *Adolescent Health Services: Missing Opportunities*, and the DVD produced in conjunction with that report, both of which were products of the Committee on Adolescent Health Services. Copies of the report are available for sale from the National Academies Press (NAP) at 888-624-8373 or 202-334-3313 or via the NAP homepage www.nap.edu. Full text of the report and a free PDF copy of the Summary are also available at www.nap.edu. The DVD can be viewed at www.bocycf.org/ahc.html.

The study that was the basis for the report was funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authoring committee and do not necessarily reflect those of the Atlantic Philanthropies.

This study is a project of the Board on Children, Youth, and Families (BCYF) of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine. For more information, contact the board at 202-334-1935 or www.bocycf.org.