

Talking about sexual health

Guide



Youth workers are trusted as a source of information on sexual health by young people. They may want to talk to you about their relationships and sexual concerns, but want you to raise the subject first. So how do you start the conversation?

The *Talking About Sexual Health* tool is a great approach to facilitate conversation with young people about sexual health. This resource can assist you to understand what their thoughts and concerns might be, and how you can support and assist them in making informed decisions in relation to their sexual health.

This guide has been developed to provide:

- some key messages about sexual health,
- suggestions and ideas for building a supportive and positive environment to talk about sexual health,
- examples for starting the conversation with young people and building upon it.

The tool is designed to jog your memory – with a quick glance you will be able to start the conversation and keep it on track. Adapt the tool as necessary for the young people you work with. The key steps of the conversation will generally be the same, however, the language you use or the opportunity to start the conversation will always be slightly different. This will depend on your service, the young person you are talking with, and the amount of time you have.

We hope you find this tool and guide helpful in enabling conversations about sexual health with the young people you work with and creating an approachable environment.

Your role as a health worker

Talking about sex, sexuality and sexual health with young people is an important area of work for youth workers.

You are in an ideal position to have these conversations with them, and your role is to provide an opportunity for discussion and reflection on the importance of sexual health in a respectful and thoughtful way.

It's important you let the young person direct the conversation, and allow them to ask the questions they want to ask. You may not have all the answers, and that's ok – you're not expected to be an expert on sexual health!

Be mindful of cultural, sexual and/or gender diversity – use appropriate terms where you can and be aware that your body language is respectful and approachable.

Listen to the young person - try to understand their concerns so you can help discuss their needs, direct them to the right information, and help support them in making their own informed choices about their sexual health.

Be honest with yourself and the young person about what you do and don't know. When you don't know the answers, find them together or refer the young person on to the appropriate source.

These are positive strategies to promote and facilitate ongoing conversations with young people to help and support them in achieving healthy relationships and good sexual health.

Why is sexual health important?

Providing young people with access to information and support can help them make safe and informed decisions about their sexual health.

It can reduce their risk of being in an unhealthy relationship, experiencing unwanted sex or unintended pregnancy, or getting a sexually transmissible infection (STI).

Encouraging young people to talk with their partner/s about sexual health can be a positive step for them in forming healthy relationships.

Note: Providing condoms, lube, dams or sexual health information does not mean you are assisting or encouraging a young person to have sex, as long as the ultimate decision rests with the young person. *Taken from the Shopfront Youth Legal Centre, Age of consent: issues for youth workers Factsheet, 2012.*

Key sexual health messages

It is important to include these core messages in your conversations.

| Core message | Example statements |
|---|---|
| Talk with your partner/s about sexual health. | <p><i>"Talking about sexual health with your partner is an important part of a healthy and respectful relationship."</i></p> <p><i>"Talk with your partner about sexual health checks. Ask if they've had one before. You could suggest making an appointment for one together."</i></p> |
| Consent can be given and taken away at any time. | <p><i>"Just because you agree to going out with someone, doesn't mean you have to have sex. It can take time before you, or your partner, feel ready."</i></p> <p><i>"You may consent to sexual activities, but you can still change your mind at any time, for whatever reason, and your partner must respect your decision."</i></p> |
| Use contraception to prevent unintended pregnancy. | <p><i>"Contraception is the best protection against unintended pregnancy."</i></p> <p><i>"There are many different types of contraception available. Talk with your GP about which would suit you best."</i></p> |
| Use condoms to protect against STIs. | <p><i>"Condoms are the best protection against STIs."</i></p> <p><i>"Take condoms with you when you go on a date, whether or not you think you might need them."</i></p> |
| Have regular sexual health checks. | <p><i>"Regular sexual health checks are simple and usually only require a urine sample and sometimes a blood test."</i></p> <p><i>"Most STIs can be easily treated with a short dose of medication."</i></p> <p><i>"If you're sexually active, have a sexual health check once a year or every time you change partners."</i></p> <p><i>"STIs often have no symptoms so people may not know if they have one. If left untreated, STIs can lead to health problems."</i></p> |
| Each person is unique and has a right to feel comfortable with who they are. | <p><i>"Sometimes it takes time to work out your sexual and/or gender identity and that's ok."</i></p> <p><i>"Your sexuality is about what feels right for you and what makes you happy – you don't need to conform to other's expectations."</i></p> <p><i>"No matter what your sexual and/or gender identity is, you need to look after your sexual health."</i></p> |

Youth workers checklist

Before you start a conversation about sexual health with a young person, check you have:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Knowledge of your workplace confidentiality policies and procedures. | ✓ X |
| An open mind; remain non-judgmental. | ✓ X |
| No assumptions about a person's sexual identity or their sexual behaviour. | ✓ X |
| An understanding of the key sexual health messages. | ✓ X |
| Knowledge of referrals for access to further information or services. | ✓ X |

Environment

The service environment can communicate positive messages about sexual health and that it's OK to talk about sexual health issues for young people.

Do you provide a service like this?

| Service environment | Suggestion |
|---|--|
| Have free condoms available at your service. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Make sure that condoms are available at your service and promote their availability.■ Sign your service up to the Condom Credit Card¹ program. |
| Be holistic. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Where possible, intake assessments should include sexual health, along with other areas of a young person's life, as part of their general health assessment. |
| Promote sexual health services and information seeking behaviour. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Link your agency website to recommended sexual health websites, like Play Safe. |
| Ensure confidentiality – it is crucial for young people to feel comfortable to talk about sex and relationship issues. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Display your service's confidentiality guidelines so they are easily visible to young people.■ Display confidentiality posters such as the "We Keep It Zipped" poster by NSW Kids and Families². |
| Create privacy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Create a comfortable space where the young person can talk privately and openly. |
| Display posters that promote sexual health. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Display posters that invite discussion about sexual health, e.g. "We have free condoms available here. Just ask us!" or "You can talk to us about relationships and sexual health" or the Condom Credit Card poster. |

Openers and opportunities

These are some handy tips for creating opportunities and opening up a conversation about relationships or sexual health with a young person, or a group of young people.

| Openers and opportunities | Example |
|---|--|
| Use globalising or depersonalising statements. | <i>"A lot of young people have questions or worries about relationships and sexual health. We have some great info, resources and websites here that other young people have found useful. Would you like to see them?"</i> |
| Ask the young person for their insights. | <i>"It's really confusing all these different messages about sex, like in movies, on TV, online, from parents, different cultures and religions, and from other young people. How do you work out what's right for you?"</i> |
| Use current or relevant culture as a way to open up a conversation. Refer to celebrity magazines, social media, television or movies with introductory statements. | <i>"Gee, one week it's 'She's too skinny', then it's 'She's too fat!' It's hard to know what it's OK to be these days, isn't it?"</i> |
| Take advantage of sexual health resources like 'Dolly Doctor' or 'Nurse Nettie' (Play Safe) articles. | <i>"Did you see what it says here about... (chlamydia, oral sex, teen pregnancy, etc.)? What do you think about that?"</i> |
| Discuss the place of new technology and the internet in young people's life, without judgement. | <i>"Is it still common these days to send nudes or sexy selfies? Does that happen in your school/ group? What do you think about it?" <i>"Have any of your friends had funny or bad experiences using social media? What would you do if that happened to you?"</i></i> |

Building on the conversation

Use these approaches to build on the conversation – remember it's about opening up the conversation and not simply providing information that might shut the conversation down!

Be mindful to maintain professional boundaries and avoid disclosing your own personal stories and experiences. Keep the focus on the young person and their needs.

Remember, as long as we are showing respect it is OK to have a laugh together! Monitor your body language to make sure young people don't feel judged about their knowledge, sexuality or behaviour.

| Building on the conversation | Example |
|--|---|
| Use hypothetical situations to encourage a young person, or a group, to reflect on an issue. | <i>"What if you (or a friend of yours) got an STI? How would you react?"</i> |
| Invite a young person, or group, to give their opinion on a recommended sexual health website or game. Use opportunities to open up discussion further where possible. | <i>"What do you think of this? Do you think it would be useful for young people?"</i> |
| Know your local services and endorse them to young people. Organise a regular visit to a youth-friendly sexual health or community service - or arrange a visit from clinic staff. This can encourage health-seeking behaviour and develop a positive relationship with clinic staff. | <i>"The workers down at..... ..are really nice. Have you met them?"</i> |
| Use the strategy of modeling 'info-seeking' behaviour. | <i>"I don't know the answer to that. Let's see if we can find out".</i> |
| Let the young person be the expert. | <i>"Can you help me find this website/ info?"</i> |
| Always make sure you check back in with the young person later to see how the interaction went for them. | <i>"Was that chat we had helpful the other day? Has it changed your mind about anything? Would you like to chat about anything else?"</i> |

Who can I contact

| You're not alone!

Sexual health services are here to support you too, so call their info lines and ask questions over the phone; visit local services in person; sign up to any training offered; and gather resources to assist in promoting sexual health to the young people at your service. Young people are more likely to want to check out services if they're recommended by you.

If you have questions about young people and reproductive and sexual health, or to help you find services that are available in your local area, contact:

- **Sexual Health Infolink:**
1800 451 624
- **Family Planning NSW Talkline:**
1300 658 886

For information and advice around mandatory reporting requirements, please see the Keep Them Safe website: www.KeepThemSafe.nsw.gov.au

For legal information regarding young people – including age of consent, and confidentiality and privacy for youth workers – see The Shopfront Youth Legal centre website: www.theshopfront.org

More information

Play Safe: www.playsafe.health.nsw.gov.au

For information about STIs and sexual health checks.

Body Talk: www.bodytalk.org.au

For information about puberty, relationships, contraception and STIs.

ReachOut.com: www.au.reachout.com

For information and fact sheets for young people.

Twenty10: www.twenty10.org.au

For information to support young people of diverse sexualities, sexes and genders.

ACON: www.acon.org.au

For same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse health information.

REFERENCES:

Janssen, M. and Davis, J. (2009) The youth worker's role in young people's sexual health: A practical framework. *Youth Studies Australia* v.28, n.4.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 Find more information about the Condom Credit Card at www.bodytalk.org.au/ccc or email: ccc@fpnsw.org.au
- 2 Find the We Keep it Zipped poster by NSW Kids and Families at: www.kidsfamilies.health.nsw.gov.au/publications/youth-friendly-confidentiality-resources/

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