Tips for Health Care Providers: Helping Teens and Parents with Sexual Health Needs

Many health practitioners have approached Advocates for Youth over the years to ask, “How can I be more helpful, more open, more sensitive to the sexual health needs of my patients, especially teens and their parents?” Health care providers play an essential role in promoting the sexual health of teens and in helping parents address the sexual health of their teens in a positive, affirming, and healthy way.

What Health Care Professionals Can Do For Teens and Parents

• In your waiting and exam rooms, offer materials (geared to all understanding levels) about the sexual health of children, adolescents, and adults.
• Become a sex educator. Get training so you are comfortable with discussing sexual health issues.
• Avoid language that implies that everyone is heterosexual.
• Be honest—admit when you don’t know something and refer your clients to other experts, when appropriate.

What Health Care Professionals Can Do For Teens

• Post confidentiality statements in your brochures and waiting and exam rooms. Reinforce to staff that client confidentiality is a right that must be respected without exception. Provide training to improve staff’s communication skills.
• When teenage women come for contraceptive services, offer them the option of delaying the pelvic exam.
• Do not call or send anything to a teenage client’s address without his/her permission.
• Learn about adolescent development and adolescent sexuality.
• Recognize that teens may find it hard to keep an appointment before 3:30 pm. Offer late hours for teens at least one day a week and/or hours on Saturday.
• Many teens may be engaging in oral and/or anal sex to remain “virgins,” to avoid pregnancy, or because they don’t realize these are forms of sexual intercourse. Be precise when you ask whether teens are having sex and make sure teens understand that vaginal, oral, and anal intercourse carry risks for STIs, including HIV.
• Inquire about teens’ sex education. Don’t assume they know about safer sex or reproduction. The current public school climate is often one of censorship. Teens may have learned only exaggerated failure rates of condoms and other contraceptive methods and misinformation about side effects, relationship to cancer, and fertility problems.
• Ask every young woman of childbearing age if she knows about emergency contraception (EC) and how it works. Offer every young woman a prescription for EC. Put up posters about EC and have brochures available.
• Don’t require an office visit for an EC prescription. Train staff to respond quickly to a request for EC—a matter of hours can make a difference! Share with clients which pharmacies (such as Wal-Mart) refuse to fill prescriptions for EC and which pharmacies stock Plan B and Preven (many do not). If obtaining EC would be difficult or embarrassing for teens, teach them how to use a monthly pack of birth control pills.
• Offer teen clients the options of anonymous or confidential HIV and STI testing, either in your office or by referral. Educate teens about the difference between confidential and anonymous testing.

What Health Care Professionals Can Do For Parents
• Ask if clients need help talking to their children or if they have tough issues that are hard to discuss.
• Educate parents about emergency contraception and encourage them to share this information with their teens.
• Educate parents about the importance of confidentiality in treating adolescents. Make sure parents understand that many teens will avoid getting vital testing and treatment if their parents might discover it. Help parents to clarify the relative importance of parents’ awareness and teens’ health.
• Encourage parents to have for their children age-appropriate books, videos, and pamphlets about growth, development, and sexual health. Explore with parents how to utilize “teachable moments” to talk about sex. These moments might include a relative’s pregnancy, a show about sexual harassment, jokes, or remarks teens have overheard.