

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Working with Young People : Improving Family Relations

Adolescence is often seen as a phase that marks a transition from dependence to independence from family. The reality is, however, that adolescence usually marks a move to a more mature “interdependence”, where family relationships become more equal and reciprocal.

Strong adult relationships that can ride the difficult times in adolescence are important for future health and wellbeing. A good relationship with at least one significant adult who provides unconditional love and positive regard is a protective factor against adverse events in adolescence.¹

With young people who have complex needs, more than one of these relationships may need to be developed and nurtured, since the risk of ‘ruptures’ in a singular relationship in times of crisis is high.²

Addressing the connections that young people with complex needs have with family is important no matter what the current quality of those relationships is. Family connections can be built and rebuilt when both parties are receptive to the idea, at any time, even when parenting skills in the past have been poor.³

You have a limited role and timeline with a young person

Your role is important and your relationship with a young person can have a significant positive impact. Remember that as a worker, however, you have a specific and time-limited role with a young person. Part of your role needs to be encouraging and supporting the young person to build connections with others who will be there outside of business hours, for years to come.

- How might this happen more often?
- Do you think that they know you would like to spend more time with them? How could you let them know?
- You say you’ve lost contact with (insert name). How could we find them again? Could you write/ring/send a message to (insert name)?

See: **A simple guide to Genograms**

Talk to young person about the importance of connections with others

You may model and encourage young people to see that we all need the support of others at times. Discuss the changing role of relationships with family through adolescence, and how these connections may be facilitated or encouraged. The extent to which you can help them will depend on your role, but it is likely that even short, strengths-based discussions or comments about families may be helpful. For example:

- Start with identifying people in their past or present who they feel most comfortable with and/or supported by (use of an ecomap or genogram may help). Help the young person to think broadly about who constitutes family in their life e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, foster-parents, neighbours, sports coaches.
- How do they know that these particular people care about them? How do these people demonstrate care and concern?
- What do you enjoy, or what have you enjoyed, doing with (insert name)?

Help them to become discerning about relationships

Young people may need some help to recognise what characterises positive and negative relationships in their lives. This may include recognising the limits of some relationships. For example:

- I’m a bit confused and I need you to help me understand something. You say that (insert name) is your biggest support, but whenever you come here, he has upset you again. What do you make of this?
- I know you would like (insert name) to be around more for you. But at the moment it seems that she is really busy with work and parenting. Is there someone else who could help you out a bit more?

See: **When contact with Family is Harmful**

Help them to take responsibility for their own behaviour in relationships (if appropriate)

Explore how they are communicating and interacting with family members in detail: who said and did what, when. Help them to understand what they may be feeling, and

1. Rayner, M. & Montague, M. (2000) Resilient Children and Young People. Deakin University: Policy and Practice Research Unit
2. Seita, J. & Brendtro, L. (2003) Adversarial contests or respectful alliances. Reclaiming Children and Youth, 12 (1), 58-60.
3. Larson, S. & Brendtro, L. (2000) Reclaiming our Prodigal Sons and Daughters. US, Indiana: National Education Service

how their behaviour may have been 'received' and explore ways to express feelings and needs more appropriately to increase the likelihood of better outcomes. You may need to help them to learn to be assertive rather than aggressive.

Help them to recognise strengths in family relationships

Most family members will have strengths, which may be highlighted so that the young person is better able to appreciate their family members. Sometimes people get "stuck" in a way of thinking about their family, and need some help to consider their family relationships in a different way.

Help them to practice communication skills

Help young people understand effective communication, through modeling and guidance. For example:

- Encourage them to work out what they really want to express before they start to communicate with family members.
- Highlight the importance of body-language (including soft eye contact, low calm voice tone, relaxed body posture, no threatening gestures etc.)
- Using "I" language, taking responsibility for their own feelings and expressing these so that the other person understands and may be able to respond
- Properly listening to hear the other person's thoughts and feelings and checking you've heard right.
- If face-to-face communication is too difficult at this stage, maybe a letter, email or text message is easier until things improve.

Help them to practice other relationship skills

Try introducing your clients to the idea that good person-to-person skills are likely to improve relationships with others. Encourage them to try the following strategies:

- Practice putting yourself in the shoes of another person. Think about what the other person might be feeling or wanting.
- Try to assume goodwill in the other (for example, that they care as best they can and are trying to communicate as best they can)
- Negotiate for a situation where both sides are happy with decisions and outcomes, not just one side.
- Look at other ways to resolve conflicts, e.g. involving a third party
- Sometimes agree to disagree – no-one can get what they want all the time
- Try to show signs to the other of wanting to work it out



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- Family connections can be built and rebuilt when both parties are receptive to the idea, at any time, even when parenting skills in the past have been poor.
- Your role with a young person is limited. Building more long-term connections is critical.
- Even short, strengths-based discussions around family can be helpful, if your role cannot offer more.
- Young people may need help to discern good and bad qualities of relationships.
- Help young people to take responsibility for their own behaviour in relationships.
- Help them to practice good communication and relationship skills.
- Facilitate connections directly when you can.



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- Simple Guide to Genograms
- Dealing with "Black & White" Thinking
- Reframing Feelings About Family
- When Contact with Family is Harmful
- Confidentiality and Duty of Care Issues

Parent Help Sheets

- Family Dynamics
- Building Our Relationship
- Improving Communication
- Dealing with Conflict

and continue the relationship where possible

- Try to be honest and reliable with others where possible, to build trust
- Find things in common to talk about, laugh about, or do together
- Be willing to give and receive help from others – everyone needs to do this
- Encourage the young person to do tasks between your sessions, for example, to contact someone significant to them, or to try out one of the above strategies.

Facilitate connections directly where you are able to

Direct assistance from you to help build connections with others is likely to benefit young people greatly. In particular, with re-connections, support may be needed for both young person and their family. This may involve:

- Meeting with the family member prior to the young person meeting with them (so long as you have the young person's consent)
- Facilitating/mediating understanding between young person and family members
- Providing information to family members
- Referral to family mediation or counselling where appropriate



Useful Links

Website for Young People

- **www.thesource.gov.au**
(Search for 'relationships' > Life > Relationships)
This brings up a list of youth friendly websites with resources regarding family relationships. A number of these websites are very useful, for example:
 - Reach Out Central > Sorting Stuff Out
 - Child and Youth Health
 - When Love Hurts
 - Relationships Australia > Building Better Relationships
 - Bursting the Bubble
- **www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au**
(>Health & Relationships > Family & Friends)



Suggested Reading

- Fuller, A. (1998) From Surviving to Thriving: Promoting Mental Health in Young People, ACER Press, Melbourne.
- Selekman, M., D. (1997) Solution-Focused Therapy with Children: Harnessing Family Strengths for Systemic Change, Guilford, New York

