

Talking to Young People about Sexual Health

Intended for peer workers, counsellors, psychologists, case workers, youth workers and other allied health or support staff.

This resource was developed in collaboration with headspace, the National Youth Mental Health Foundation.



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Sexual health is a core part of overall wellbeing especially for young people who are going through physical, emotional and social changes. Young people may feel uncomfortable talking about their sexual health because of stigma, shame, identity concerns, trauma, or fear of judgment. Creating a safe, culturally responsive space for young people to ask questions and explore concerns supports informed choice, autonomy and lifelong wellbeing.

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY	EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING	CONSENT AND RESPECT	ACCURATE INFORMATION	SHORT- AND LONG-TERM LIFE OUTCOMES
Prevent sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies	Sex and relationships can affect self-esteem, identity and emotional regulation	Keep young people informed about their rights and responsibilities, encourage safe, healthy and enjoyable relationships	Counter misinformation from social media, pornography, and peers, to support informed and responsible decisions	Early intervention prevents long-term effects on education, career and future goals and gives a young person autonomy

- 15-29 year olds have the highest STI rates of any age group in Australia, accounting for 56% of cases in 2025.¹
- Many STIs don't have any symptoms but if left untreated can cause severe long-term damage.²

REFERENCES:

1. Australian Centre for Disease Control. (n.d.). *National notifiable disease dashboard* [Data set]. Retrieved 22 May, 2026, from <https://nindss.health.gov.au/pbi-dashboard/>
2. World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Sexually transmitted infections*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexually-transmitted-infections#tab=tab_1



WHAT'S MY ROLE?

When working with young people, a relational and developmentally responsive approach helps build trust, support engagement, and encourage ongoing help-seeking.

PROVIDE:

- a respectful, safe and non-judgmental space for discussion
- accurate, developmentally appropriate information and support
- guided access to sexual and reproductive health services and support pathways
- collaboration with team members (e.g. GPs, nurses, clinicians and peer workers) to support coordinated care and referrals

FEEL CONFIDENT TO initiate or respond to conversations about sexual health as part of integrated and holistic care

SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND:

- sexual health as an integrated part of overall wellbeing and health
- that experimentation is normal and the priority is protecting their health
- that regular STI testing (including for HIV and syphilis) is part of looking after their wellbeing
- that sexual health involves relationships, values, decision-making, and pleasure
- how to make decisions that reflect their values, relationships and goals

"Some young people find that relationships, sex or sexual health can affect how they're feeling. Is that something you'd like to talk about?"

"How do you keep yourself safe from STIs?"

In seeking health advice and care, feeling protected, empowered and culturally safe is especially important for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For LGBTQIA+ young people, avoiding assumptions about partners, gender and sexuality, using inclusive language and providing a safe space is essential.





TIPS FOR RESPECTFUL AND EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

Address Confidentiality

- Let the young person know they are in control of what they share, and that the space is safe, non-judgmental, and private
- Explain how your service manages health records and privacy, and be transparent about your legal obligations
- Explain confidentiality and its limits in a clear, youth-friendly way, supporting informed consent

Build Rapport:

- Consider the young person's preference for a worker of a particular gender or cultural background. In some cultures, it may be inappropriate to discuss sex and relationships in a mixed gender environment
- Ask about and use the young person's preferred name, pronouns, and terminology when referring to their sexuality and gender identity
- Take time to build rapport and avoid rushing. "Yarning" can be an important communication style for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Ask permission before asking sensitive questions:

"I'd like to ask you some personal questions about relationships, physical and sexual health as part of a general health checkup. You don't have to answer anything that you don't want to. Is it OK if I go ahead?"

Consider Context:

- Reaffirm young people when they are feeling reluctant or embarrassed
- Be mindful that past negative experiences with the healthcare system may impact trust and engagement
- Consider framing the conversation as "men's/women's health" rather than "sexual health" where culturally appropriate
- Consider the context of the young person's family/kinship, faith, and culture, while respecting their developing identity and independence
- Recognise these aspects may also influence their decision-making

"Thanks for trusting me with that, I know it can feel awkward to talk about but it's totally normal."

Navigate the Conversation:

- Avoid assumptions about the young person's sexuality or sexual history and remain curious
- Address the whole person and their developing relationships with other people rather than focusing only on the prevention of STIs and unintended pregnancy
- Recognise the impact of past experiences on trust, engagement and disclosure

"A lot of young people have questions about sexual health, relationships or STI testing. If that ever comes up for you, this is a safe space to talk about it."

Offer Support:

- Ask instead of assuming what supports would improve safety and comfort for the young person
- If appropriate, offer involvement of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Worker where available
- Support access to culturally appropriate, peer and clinical supports as needed
- Storytelling, visual, and interactive activities can also be useful



FURTHER RESOURCES

You don't have to be an expert and it's okay to admit you don't know an answer!

"I'm not sure but I know a trusted website where we can find the answer."

NSW Health Youth Health Resource Kit

(For skills and practical steps workers can use to respond to youth health needs.)

NSW PlaySafe Pro

(For information about STIs and sexual health checks.)

Young Deadly Free

(For resources about STIs and BBVs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples.)

Queensland Health Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescent sexual health guideline

Sexual health promotion with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse young people

ASHM Australian STI Management Guidelines

Sexual and Reproductive Health Australia

(For access to sexual and reproductive health care services.)

Ask Izzy

(For young people in need of support services.)

True Relationships & Reproductive Health QLD

Your Sexual Health Information Hub at Taplink

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