



CCHI

Connected Communities
Health Initiative

YOUTH-CENTERED HEALTH CARE:

PRACTICAL & MODERN STRATEGIES FOR MEETING THE NEEDS OF ADOLESCENT AND YOUNG ADULT PATIENTS

A Tip Sheet for Community Health Centers



Background

Adolescents and young adults (i.e., youth ages 12-24 years) face a wide range of challenges that can affect health care access, current well-being, and long-term health outcomes. A range of factors can converge to create stressful conditions at critical developmental stages. Acute and chronic experiences of housing instability, food insecurity, and family-related stressors can especially have major negative impacts on the physical, behavioral, and mental health of youth.¹

Health centers are uniquely positioned to identify and address issues that adversely affect the health outcomes of adolescents and young adults. In this [Tip Sheet](#), we present examples of strategies and models that health centers can adopt to positively influence the health and wellness of youth.



Youth who may especially benefit from these supportive strategies include:

- Youth experiencing *homelessness* (these youth often experience chronic stress and illness related to hunger and sleep deprivation).
- Youth *in the foster system* or being *raised by grandparents or other non-parental family members* (these youth are more likely to have experienced neglect, instability, or the loss of a parent).
- Youth with *physical or developmental health needs* (these youth are more likely to be socially isolated and bullied).

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Health and Medicine Division; Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education; Board on Children, Youth, and Families; Committee on the Neurobiological and Socio-behavioral Science of Adolescent Development and Its Applications, Backes, E. P., & Bonnie, R. J. (Eds.). (2019). *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*. National Academies Press (US).

Strategies and Resources



Tip 1: Collect Data on Social and Economic Factors

Social and economic conditions, such as decreased access to housing, food, and transportation, can increase the risk for a range of physical and mental health issues among youth. Exposure to violence and neglect can also adversely impact health.² To better understand the context of patient lives and provide quality care, it is important to routinely use standardized tools to assess for and track social and economic factors that influence health outcomes.³

Recommended Actions

- **Use validated screening tools:** Routinely use standardized instruments to assess family dynamics, economic resources, and social and emotional health. The [Protocol for Responding to and Assessing Patients' Assets, Risks, and Experiences](#) (PRAPARE®) is widely used in health centers and, while originally designed for adults, has been adapted for pediatric and adolescent populations (see example [here](#)).² Other validated tools include the Hunger Vital Sign™, a 2-item food insecurity screener developed by Children's HealthWatch and endorsed by the AAP, and the CMS [Accountable Health Communities Health-Related Social Needs screening tool](#).
- **Document in electronic health records:** Document and track social and economic factors using ICD-10 Z-codes (Z55-Z65).
- **Screen for adverse childhood experiences⁴:** Screen to identify youth at risk for toxic stress.
- **Refer and provide resources:** Use the findings from screening to connect youth with well-vetted resources and referrals.
- **Develop policies:** Create organization-wide policies on data collection, analysis, and sharing that are periodically reviewed, updated, and approved based in part on feedback from staff and patients.
- **Develop processes:** Ensure your organization has processes that explain how data flows across the organization, how it is used by staff, and how it is secured and protected.

² Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., Jones, L., & Dunne, M. P. (2017). The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet. Public health*, 2(8), e356–e366. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(17\)30118-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(17)30118-4)

³ Cruz, D., Lichten, M., Berg, K., & George, P. (2022). Developmental trauma: Conceptual framework, associated risks and comorbidities, and evaluation and treatment. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 13, 800687. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.800687>

⁴ ACEs Aware. (n.d.). Screening tools. <https://www.acesaware.org/learn-about-screening/screening-tools/>

- **Communicate processes with patients:** When collecting data from patients, explain how their data will be used and protected. Provide options for controlling who can see the data.

Tip 2. Focus on Trust-Building

Youth who have experienced material and emotional deprivation can find it challenging to trust their health care providers.⁵ It is therefore important for health center care teams to focus on building trusting relationships with these patients.

Recommended Actions:

- **Connect first:** Invest time for building authentic relationships *before* diving into treatment and interventions. Practice honesty, respect, and empathy.⁵
- **Listen actively:** Listen to, validate, and prioritize the concerns of youth patients in addition to any concern you may have.⁵
- **Explain confidentiality.** Let patients know about the goals and limits of patient-provider confidentiality, depending on the age of the patient and local laws.
- **Share in decision-making:** Practice shared decision-making by ensuring that the patient's self-directed goals and preferences are used to guide decisions.⁶

Tip 3. Use Healing-Centered Engagement Practices

Healing-centered engagement is an approach developed specifically for engaging youth who have adverse life experiences. By focusing on assets and strengths rather than weaknesses and negative behaviors, this approach helps to foster resilience while supporting healthy outcomes.⁷

⁵ Hardin, H. K., Bender, A. E., Hermann, C. P., & Speck, B. J. (2021). An integrative review of adolescent trust in the healthcare provider relationship. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 77(4), 1645–1655. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.14674>

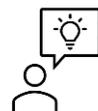
⁶ Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (n.d.). Strategy 6I: Shared decision-making. <https://www.ahrq.gov/patient-safety/reports/strategies/shared-decision-making.html>

⁷ Ginwright, S. (n.d.). What is Healing Centered Engagement? Flourish Agenda. <https://flourishagenda.com/healing-centered-engagement-certification/#:~:text=What%20is%20Healing%20Centered%20Engagement%3F>

Recommended Actions:

- **Separate the behaviors from the person:** Recognize that disruptive, dangerous, and unhealthy behaviors in youth are often maladaptive responses to stressful situations.⁸
- **Understand the behaviors:** Consider the behaviors from a place of curiosity rather than assumptions. Take time to routinely reflect both individually and with patients, asking: *What went well? What could have gone better? What should we continue doing? What should we look at doing differently?*⁹
- **Standardize responses:** Develop universal protocols for responding to behaviors and train staff in following the protocols.⁹
- **Focus on patient assets:** Help patients identify their individual and community strengths and assets and leverage these assets to support their growth and health. Celebrate all milestones, small and large.⁷

Tip 4: Support Youth Autonomy and Decision-Making



Adolescents and young adults want and need to become skilled decision-makers and autonomous managers of their health care. Health centers can develop protocols and resources for helping youth learn to become independent and confident with their ability to manage their health care.^{10,11}

Recommended Actions:

Create resources to help youth:

- **Navigate the health care system**—for example, schedule appointments, follow through on referrals, use patient portals, manage insurance enrollment and payments, and know when to visit a health center versus an emergency room.

⁸ Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2020). A systematic review: The influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 79–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851>

⁹ Brener, N. D., Mpfu, J. J., Krause, K. H., Everett Jones, S., Thornton, J. E., Myles, Z., Harris, W. A., Chyen, D., Lim, C., Arrey, L., Mbaka, C. K., Trujillo, L., Shanklin, S. L., Smith-Grant, J., Whittle, L., McKinnon, I. I., Washington, M., Queen, B. E., & Roberts, A. M. (2024). Overview and Methods for the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System - United States, 2023. *MMWR supplements*, 73(4), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7304a1>

¹⁰ AIR. (2021). Youth engagement in practice. <https://www.air.org/resource/brief/youth-engagement-practice>

¹¹ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019). A framework for effectively partnering with young people. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-framework-for-effectively-partnering-with-young-people>

- **Proactively manage their health needs**—for example, track their prescription refills, take medications as prescribed, schedule preventive checkups, and recognize when a health issue becomes urgent.
- **Make informed decisions**—for example, engage in productive dialogues with their health care providers about treatments; choose behaviors based on long-term health consequences and goals.
- **Follow daily health and hygiene routines**—for example, create routines for sleep, meals, and exercise; access and use digital goal-tracking apps.

Tip 5. Partner with Community Organizations and Programs



Partnering with community organizations and programs to align services, share resources, and develop joint initiatives can help ensure comprehensive care, enabling youth to recover from adversity and thrive.^{10,11}

Recommended Actions:

- **Partner with community organizations:** Talk to schools, libraries, community centers (youth clubs, sports, and recreation), housing and continuum of care organizations, behavioral health care organizations, and faith-based organizations about bidirectional referrals and joint programming.
- **Identify youth-focused programs in the community:** Identify or co-develop innovative youth-focused programs that emphasize personal growth, mentorship, self-efficacy, teamwork, and skills training (see the box on Café Momentum).
- **Formalize collaborations:** Establish formal collaborations through a Memorandum of Understanding that delineates roles and responsibilities, including a standard, formalized system for referring youth between your health center and the community organizations.

From the Field: [Café Momentum](#)

Café Momentum is a nonprofit program that provides justice-involved youth ages 15-19 with paid culinary internships at fine dining restaurants. Youth interns also receive life skills and social skills training, financial education, case management, and mental health services. Their model promotes accountability, growth, and long-term stability.





Tip 6. Engage Youth in Solutions

Youth are more likely to trust their providers and stay in care when they are given a voice and role in shaping the services and programs that impact them.¹⁰ Providing opportunities to partner with youth in decision-making also builds their leadership skills and confidence.^{11, 12}

Recommended Actions:

- **Form youth community advisory groups:** Invite patients to form a youth advisory group that meets regularly (e.g., monthly, quarterly) to provide input and feedback on health center services, programs, and decisions that impact their well-being. Appoint a group leader to whom members can relate or are likely to respond.¹⁰
- **Remove barriers to group participation:** Poll youth about their preferences for group meeting times and formats (e.g., virtual, in-person, or hybrid). If meetings are held in person, offer food, drinks, and transportation to participants. In addition, small stipends (e.g., gift cards) can help demonstrate that you value their time and efforts and can help meet some basic needs.¹¹
- **Ask all youth for feedback:** Provide structured and unstructured opportunities for youth feedback on programs and services, such as through informal one-on-one interventions and online surveys.^{10,12}
- **Respond to feedback:** Assign a time during staff meetings to discuss patient feedback, identify follow-up actions, and address them accordingly. It is essential to implement changes as fast as possible to show that the health center is serious about its feedback.¹²

From the Field: Health Resource Open House

At Fenway Health, a community health center in Boston, MA, the Youth Advisory Board helped design a back-to-school health resource open house tailored for youth. In addition to offering easy registration for care and services, the health center provided free food, karaoke and live performances, and opportunities for youth to connect with role models and mentors, meet new friends, and to get involved in the community through volunteering.

From the Field: School-Based Health Alliance

School-Based Health Alliance's Youth Advisory Council and Youth Health Hub brings young people who are involved in a school-based health center or interested in connecting health and education to build a community, find opportunities and more.

¹² Search Institute. (n.d.). Current projects. <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/current-projects/>

Tip 7. Provide Flexible, Multimodal Access Points



Meeting young people where they are—digitally and in person—makes a big difference. Many youth are juggling school, work, and extracurricular activities, all of which have inflexible hours. To better engage and retain youth, health centers can offer flexible appointment policies, and can communicate via a variety of digital formats.

Recommended Actions:

- **Drop-in hours:** Create times when youth can drop-in for certain services without an appointment.
- **Late policies:** Adjust or eliminate late arrival policies for youth.
- **Online scheduling:** Enable online or app-based appointment scheduling.
- **After hours:** Offer evening and/or weekend appointments to accommodate the schedules of youth and their families.
- **Texting:** Use text messaging to send appointment reminders, medication reminders, and to stay engaged with clients about resources and care.
- **Telehealth:** Provide primary care and mental health care via telehealth.

Tip 8. Increase Access to Mental Health Support



Prioritizing youth mental health in health care settings is crucial for fostering overall well-being and ensuring that young people receive the support they need. Streamlining access to mental health care improves outcomes for all youth—especially those in underserved communities.^{13,14}

Recommended Actions:

- **Integrate behavioral health with primary care:** Include mental health professionals as part of the primary care team. If full integration is not possible, try to ensure that mental health care and primary care services can be accessed at one location.¹⁴

¹³ U.S. Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

¹⁴ American Medical Association. (n.d.). Behavioral health integration compendium: Steps for integrating behavioral health care into a clinical practice. <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/bhi-compendium.pdf>

- **Screen routinely for mental health challenges:** Train primary care teams to screen for and recognize signs of mental health issues, offer early and brief interventions, and provide a warm hand-off or referral to mental health professionals.^{14, 15}
- **Involve peer support:** Include youth-led support programs or youth mentors who have lived experience with mental health issues to make young people feel more at ease in seeking care.¹³
- **Provide education to youth and families:** Equip young people and their families with knowledge about mental health, early warning signs of distress, and available resources. Engaging families can be particularly important for young people who may be hesitant to seek help on their own.¹³
- **Encourage family therapy:** Engage patients in family-based interventions and therapy when appropriate, as family dynamics can significantly influence the mental health of youth.¹³
- **Provide crisis intervention:** Ensure that systems are in place for rapid intervention in mental health crises, such as suicidality, severe depression, or psychosis. This could include having crisis counselors available 24/7 or using mobile crisis teams.¹⁵

Tip 9. Help Youth Navigate Social Media



Social media misuse and overuse can increase stress and isolation among youth. In addition, adolescents are highly sensitive to social influences, making them more vulnerable to believing misinformation and following unhealthy trends on social media.¹⁶ The effects of social media vary based on the content consumed, time spent online, and individual vulnerabilities; therefore, it is important to screen for use and potential downstream effects.^{17,8}

¹⁵ National Governors Association. (2023). Strengthening youth mental health: A playbook for governors. https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Strengthening_Youth_Mental_Health_A_Playbook_for_Governors_July2023.pdf

¹⁶ American Psychological Association. (2023). Teens are spending nearly 5 hours daily on social media. Here are the mental health outcomes. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/04/teen-social-use-mental-health>

¹⁷ Riehm, K. E., Feder, K. A., Tormohlen, K. N., Crum, R. M., Young, A. S., Green, K. M., Pacek, L. R., La Flair, L. N., & Mojtabai, R. (2019). Associations between time spent using social media and internalizing and externalizing problems among U.S. youth. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 76(12), 1266–1273. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2019.2325>

Recommended Actions:

- **Validate the positive aspects of social media:** Do not assume all social media usage is unhealthy. Show appreciation for social media as a tool for connecting with friends and joining online peer communities with shared interests.¹⁶
- **Assess for problematic use patterns:** Ask about disrupted sleep, and assess for delays in learning and social skills, cyberbullying, harassment, and exploitation.¹⁸
- **Screen for downstream impacts:** Use standardized and validated questions to screen for anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and body image concerns.^{8,19}



¹⁸ American Medical Association. (n.d.). How physicians can help parents address kids' social media use. <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/population-care/how-physicians-can-help-parents-address-kids-social-media-use>

¹⁹ American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). Social media screening questions for electronic medical record systems. Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health. <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/center-of-excellence-on-social-media-and-youth-mental-health/qa-portal/qa-portal-library/qa-portal-library-questions/social-media-screening-questions-for-electronic-medical-record-systems/>

Federal Funding Acknowledgement:

This publication is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of awards totaling \$549,386.00 with 0% financed with nongovernmental sources, \$550,000 with 0% financed with nongovernmental sources, \$1,742,242.00 with 0% financed by nongovernmental sources, \$1,788,315.00 with 0% financed by nongovernmental sources, \$679,175.00 with 0% financed by nongovernmental sources, \$678,959.00 with 0% financed by nongovernmental sources, \$625,000 with 0% financed by nongovernmental sources, \$668,800 with 0% financed by nongovernmental sources, \$1,204,180.00 with 0% financed by nongovernmental sources, \$847,285.00 with 0% financed with non-governmental sources, and \$6,719,834.00 with 0% financed with non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov).