

Sexual health advocacy

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A tool for workers



This tool provides information to help you advocate for changes in your organisation that can better support young people around their sexual health. It includes advice for working with all young people, including those who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, LGBTIQA+, and young people with disability.

Anyone working with young people can use this tool – including workers in youth services programs, schools, sports clubs, homelessness services, and youth advocacy and legal services.

Sexual health initiatives are most effective when delivered as part of larger, holistic program provided by trusted workers.

However, organisations may face barriers when being proactive with young people about their sexual health. These can include workers feeling it is not part of their role, management seeing sexual health as ‘too risky’, competing priorities, lack of resources and concerns around parent/guardian consent.

This tool addresses these concerns by providing information to integrate sexual health into pre-existing programs and frameworks using Kotter’s 8-step change model.

Anyone, at any level in an organisation, can be an effective advocate for change.

By following these easy steps, you can help build your organisation’s capacity to support the sexual health of young people.

Consider using this tool alongside the **organisational checklist**. It is designed to help you plan sexual health activities as part of your work.

8 STEP SUMMARY

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STEP 7: Build on the changes your organisation makes to include better sexual health programs and interventions

STEP 8: Anchor sexual health priorities in your organisation

Step 1

Gather the evidence about the sexual health needs of young people

The first step in advocating for including sexual health in your organisation's work is showing why this change is needed.

Strong evidence shows that providing advice, support, information and access to services encourages young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health. This means they are less likely to experience:

- Unhealthy relationships
- Unwanted sex
- Unintended pregnancy
- Sexually transmissible infections (STIs).^{2,3}

What we know about young people and sexual health

Condoms are not used consistently

The best way to prevent STIs is by using condoms consistently – but many young people use condoms inconsistently or not at all.

A national survey of Australian secondary students found over 50% of sexually active students in years 10 to 12 reported inconsistent or no condom use in the previous 12 months.⁴

Young people have reported not using condoms due to:

- Limited knowledge of STI symptoms and transmission
- A fear of being judged
- Feeling embarrassed
- Being unprepared.⁵

More young people need to have regular STI tests

Most STIs go undiagnosed and untreated so it is essential that all sexually active young people are offered regular STI testing.

Over 50% of sexually active young people aged 16–26 years report never having had an STI test.⁵

Barriers to STI testing and access to sexual health services for young people include:

- Not knowing how to access STI testing services
- A belief that they are at low risk of contracting an STI
- Lack of knowledge that STIs have no signs or symptoms.^{6,7}

Chlamydia is one of the most common STIs among young people

Around 74% of chlamydia diagnoses occur among young people aged 15–29 years and 54% of diagnoses in young people aged 15–24 years.³

Chlamydia may contribute to long-term health complications, including the risk of pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility.

STI screening for young people is a NSW policy priority

In the NSW STI Strategy 2016–2020, young people aged 15–29 are a priority for programs aimed at reducing STI transmission and increasing screening rates.⁸

The strategy identifies priority settings for engaging in this work, including youth services, mental health services, community services, and drug and alcohol services.

Step 2

Create a coalition of others eager to engage in sexual health promotion with young people

Create an advocacy working group to influence change within your organisation.

If possible, engage a representative from your management team to support the change you are trying to create. They can help champion the project with other management staff and support you in your coalition.

Identify and contact community stakeholders from local health services, local government, non-government organisations (NGOs) or community groups/members. These stakeholders could be directly involved or could help with planning sexual health activities or providing the necessary resources.

Below is a list of organisations and partners that can provide you with information and support:

Sexual health support:

HIV and Related Program (HARP) Units, NSW Health
NSW STI Programs Unit, NSW Health
Family Planning NSW
Yfoundations
Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW (AH&MRC)
Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services
ACON
Your local Sexual Health Clinic
Your local General Practice

Other potential partners:

Local council
Other youth or community services in your area
Young people participating in the program
Young people who are willing to assist their peers
Schools
Parents/carers
Sporting organisations

Recruit partners to join and support you in developing sexual health programs. Your local health district's HIV and Related Programs (HARP) Unit can help you make some of these links.

Partners and local support will help drive the change you plan to make. Support can be achieved by:

- Running community and parents/carers information sessions before or during a sexual health education program
- Developing a communication plan explaining why this work is necessary and using this to promote the change to others
- Using internal and external meetings/forums to discuss the change and receive feedback.

Step 3

Create a vision for changing your organisation's approach to sexual health

The vision will bring together ideas and activities for improving young people's sexual health into a clear statement.

This statement should include:

- An understanding of the importance of providing information about relationships and reproductive and sexual health
- A welcoming, inclusive, friendly and non-judgemental service
- Creating policy and physical environments which support the positive sexual health outcomes of young people
- Delivering holistic and comprehensive services
- Meeting the sexual health and wellbeing needs of young people accessing your service
- An understanding of duty of care and mandatory reporting. See the **consent, age and the law** fact sheet

Step 4

Communicate your vision for sexual health in your organisation

Once you have developed a vision and action plan, you need to communicate this to your organisation.

This ensures all groups are included and have the opportunity to be part of the process. It can include formal and informal channels.

Promote this vision to your CEO, management team, external partners, parents/carers, community members and young people.

You can promote it to young people, partners and your local community through media releases, newsletters and social media platforms.

Below are some messages and information you may include.

Effective sexual health programs:

- Reduce myths
- Increase knowledge and understanding
- Strengthen positive values and attitudes
- Increase skills to make informed decisions
- Increase communication with parents, carers and other trusted adults

These programs can help young people to:

- Delay first sexual experience
- Reduce risk-taking behaviours
- Increase the use of protection against unintended pregnancy and STIs

Step 5

Remove common obstacles to engaging in sexual health work in your organisation

Being prepared for any concerns or negative reactions to improving the sexual health of young people will help you overcome them if they occur.

Below are some common concerns you may face and strategies for managing them.

Use this information to demonstrate to management that you are aware of the risks and how to manage them.

Management and staff are concerned about legal risks

- Provide evidence as outlined in this tool about why sexual health work is important

- Provide the policy background supporting sexual health programming, including from funders
- Seek support of community, parents/carers and other stakeholders
- Be aware of your reporting responsibilities – sex between underage young people does not always require a mandatory report.⁹
- See the **consent, age and the law** fact sheet.

Staff are resistant due to their values or believe it is not their role

- Consider sexual health as part of holistic programming
- Encourage staff to attend training to build their skills on young people and sexual health
- Emphasise that workers have a duty of care to provide information and materials to enhance young people's sexual health

- Discuss organisational values around supporting young people's sexual health. See the **exploring values** fact sheet.

Parents, guardians and carers are resistant

- Consult with parents, guardians and carers about planned programs and activities and seek their input
- Reassure parents, guardians and carers that you respect the diversity of values and beliefs among young people and their families

Provide parents, guardians and carers with resources that demonstrate the importance of talking to young people about sexual health, such as 'Talk Soon. Talk Often. A guide for parents talking to their kids about sex.' See talksoontalkoften.wordpress.com

- Reassure co-workers that research shows parents, guardians and carers want their children to be well informed.¹⁰
- See the **talking to parents** fact sheet.

Approaching the subject of sexual health is challenging

- Incorporate sexual health into a psychosocial assessment or conduct a HEADSS assessment at intake
- Use tools such as **The Brief Intervention Tool and Guide**
- Use the key messages (Appendix 1) to help guide the conversation
- Use fun games and activities to help break the ice

- Remember sexual health discussions do not have to be intimate or clinical. You only need to provide young people with information, support and referral.

Concerns exist about distributing condoms

- Reassure people that providing condoms, lube and information does not mean you're assisting or encouraging young people to have sex. The ultimate decision rests with the young person⁹
- Follow the **Condom Protocol** – a guide to providing condoms to young people at your service
- Explain that the law allows you and your organisation, if working in partnership with a Local Health District or receiving funding from NSW Health, to distribute condoms, lubricant and dams to young people. (Section 34 (1) of the Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Act Gazette No 115 (2015))
- Encourage young people to open, touch and play with condoms as a way to break down barriers to condom use and learn about safe sex
- Become a Condom Credit Card Provider (fpnsw.org.au/ccp)
- Incorporate this work into policy and procedures using the attached model policy (Appendix 2).

Step 6

Create short-term wins that have immediate impact on young people's sexual health

Major change takes time.
But short-term wins keep
your organisation motivated
and engaged.

They may use minimal resources, effort and time but they provide the basis for support for bigger change within your organisation.

Short-term wins include:

- Establishing a connection with the local HARP Unit and local sexual health clinic
- Completing the **organisational checklist** with your workplace.
- Providing desktop access to sexual health-related websites on computers used at your organisation. Examples are: Play Safe (www.playsafe.health.nsw.gov.au), Body Talk (www.bodytalk.org.au) and ACON (www.acon.org.au)
- Including links to sexual health websites on your organisation's webpage
- Providing youth-friendly resources about reproductive and sexual health
- Making condoms, lube and dams available in accessible areas.

Step 7

Build on the changes your organisation makes to include better sexual health programs and interventions

Set goals for your organisation. These build on what you have achieved from your short-term wins.

Here are a few suggested activities:

- Invite sexual health educators to run a session within your existing programs run at your organisation.
- Include healthy relationship and sexual health content into living skills programs.
- Invite a local HARP Unit team member or sexual health worker to deliver sexual health information and education sessions with staff.
- Attend sexual health trainings offered by HARP Unit, YFoundations and Family Planning NSW.
- Become a Condom Credit Card (CCC) provider through the Family Planning NSW Condom Credit Card project.
- Report wins to management through regular meetings.

Step 8

Anchor sexual health priorities in your organisation

Ensure better practices become a core part of your organisation's culture, policies and procedures.

Adopting sexual health policies is a great way to ensure good sexual health interventions. It will help you better capture and reproduce practices within your organisation.

The **model policy** (Appendix 2) represents better practice for a range of principles and procedures around the sexual health and wellbeing of young people.

Your organisation may adopt the complete model policy. Or you might choose to adapt relevant sections to fit your organisation's existing philosophy, practice and policies.

References

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8. health.nsw.gov.au/policies/ib/2016/pdf/IB2016_005.pdf
9. Shopfront Legal Centre (2012)., *Age of consent: issues for youth workers Factsheet*
10. Dyson, S. (2010) *Parents and Sex Education: Parents' attitudes to sexual health education in WA schools*. Department of Health, Western Australia
11. *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales Number 115 Friday, 18 December (2015)*.
12. WHO (2006a). *Defining sexual health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health, 28–31 January 2002*. Geneva, World Health Organization.

Appendix

1. Key Sexual Health Messages

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

Sexual health information
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The Play Safe website provides sexual health information for young people in NSW.
STIs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Most STIs don't have symptoms – you can't tell who has an STI.■ STIs are treatable.
Condoms and dams
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ To keep sex safe always use a condom and get tested regularly for STIs.■ Condoms are most effective when used properly.■ Familiarise yourself with condoms, how to use them and where to get them so you are prepared.■ Condoms offer the best protection against STIs and at the same time prevent unplanned pregnancies.■ Condoms are strong and flexible.■ Dams when used correctly during oral sex, can prevent STIs.
STI testing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ STI testing is quick, easy, painless and usually free with Medicare.■ STI testing is confidential.■ Most STI tests are self-collected urine tests or swabs.■ Young people should be tested for STIs when they change partners or at least every year, even if they have no symptoms.
Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Young people have a right to make their own decisions about sex.■ Consent can be given and taken away at any time.■ Talk with your partner/s about sexual health.■ Each person is unique and has a right to feel comfortable with who they are.

2. Model Policy

1. Sexual Health Policy

Purpose: This policy ensures all clients of **(insert service name)** have access to the information and support they need to achieve optimal sexual health and wellbeing. It outlines the rationale for developing a safe, non-judgemental and sex positive environment that provides the best possible sexual health outcomes for young people.

Definitions: Sexual health: sexual health is "...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality... Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence."¹

1.1 Statement of rights

Young people have the right to decide freely on all matters related to their sexuality without coercion, discrimination and violence, and with respect for others. This encompasses people's right to explore their own sexuality free from shame, fear and guilt.

1.2 Sex positivity

(Insert service name) commits to a sex-positive approach that is informed by an understanding of mutual rights and responsibilities. Sex positivity focuses on life-enhancing and pleasurable aspects of sexuality and not just the risks. It includes being non-judgemental, using inclusive

language, promoting choice, and supporting people to be aware of their choices.

1.3 Information

Young people have a right to accurate reproductive and sexual health information and education, and a right to access confidential service provision. This enables informed decision making with respect to their sexuality and sexual health.

(Insert service name) will provide sexual health programs and information individually and in groups as appropriate to their clients' needs.

1.4 Holistic intake, assessment and casework

(Insert service name) will support clients to provide appropriate information about sexual activity and sexual health concerns as part of holistic intake, assessment and casework processes.

1.5 Referral

(Insert service name) will maintain a comprehensive listing of sexual health clinics, youth friendly general practice and youth health services for referral of young people seeking sexual health information, testing and treatment.

Young people referred to these services will be supported to prepare for and attend appointments. They will also be supported with follow up on any outcomes of the consultation such as further testing, treatment or contract tracing.

1.6 Condom distribution

(Insert service name) recognises that distribution of condoms, dams and other protective materials is an effective response to individual and community health.

(Insert service name) will provide free access to readily available condoms, dams and other materials and the information required to use them effectively.

1.7 Partnerships

(Insert service name) will form partnerships with organisations and individuals that will support service capacity to provide sexual health interventions.

(Insert service name) will develop formal partnerships with NSW Health agencies to ensure workers are legally permitted to provide condoms and other materials under *Section 34 (1) of the Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Act*.

1.8 Child protection

In delivering sexual health interventions for young people including condom and dam distribution **(insert service name)** will assess risks associated with child protection issues including mandatory reporting and previous trauma.

Staff will apply the child protection policies of **(insert service name)** if sexual health interventions result in client disclosure. This will be done with an understanding of the law as it applies to consensual sex between young people of similar ages.

(Insert service name) recognises that staff concerns about disclosure of sexual and other abuse are not a rationale for avoiding sexual health interventions but rather require a risk assessment and action plan.

1.9 Healthy physical environment

To ensure young people feel comfortable discussing and seeking advice about their sexual health **(insert service name)** will provide a welcoming and inclusive environment that is respectful and inclusive of cultural, sexual and gender diversity.

1.10 Consultation and participation

Young people, their families, carers and significant community members, such as Aboriginal Elders and culturally and linguistically diverse community leaders, are key partners in promoting and supporting sexual health and wellbeing initiatives.

(Insert service name) will provide these partners with information about, and opportunities to contribute to, the development of sexual health initiatives.

1.11 Learning and skills development

(Insert service name) will support staff to access resources, tools and professional learning to enhance their knowledge and capacity to deliver and promote sexual health programs and information.

¹ WHO (2006a). Defining sexual health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health, 28–31 January 2002. Geneva, World Health Organization.

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.

NSW STI PROGRAMS UNIT: www.stipu.nsw.gov.au

FAMILY PLANNING NSW: www.fpnsw.org.au

YFOUNDATIONS: www.yfoundations.org.au

ABORIGINAL HEALTH AND MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL OF NSW (AH&MRC):

www.ahmrc.org.au

FOR YOUR LOCAL SEXUAL HEALTH CLINIC:

www.health.nsw.gov.au/sexualhealth/pages/sexual-health-clinics

THIS RESOURCE IS PART OF THE NSW SEXUAL HEALTH PROMOTION
FRAMEWORK WHICH IS FOCUSED ON IMPROVING THE SEXUAL
HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS DIFFERENT SETTINGS.

THE PROJECT IS FUNDED BY THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH

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