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## Tips for Meaningful Interactions with Adolescents

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When do the normal ups and downs of adolescence become something to worry about? We want to honor a young person's emotions and give them space to be themselves. It's normal for a teenager to feel blue sometimes, but what if they are sad and withdrawn for three or four weeks? Yes, teenagers are often irritable, but maybe you are noticing excessive angry outbursts. ***These may be red flags.*** If a young person is struggling with school, has begun to withdraw from friends and family, or has dropped out of previously enjoyed activities, you may be the source of hope and help.

To help, **ALL** we need to do is **Assess, Listen, and Link**:

### Assess

**Look for signs and symptoms**...mental health problems affect a person's thinking, emotional state and behavior. They can disrupt a person's ability to work or attend school, carry out daily activities, or engage in satisfying relationships.

- ❖ **Physical Changes** – changes in normal sleeping or eating habits, hygiene changes, eyes that are glassy, pinpoint or dilated, weight loss or gain
- ❖ **Emotions** – depressed mood and/or mood swings, unrealistic or excessive anxiety or guilt, excessive irritability or anger, lack of inhibition, lack of emotion or emotional response, helplessness or hopelessness, oversensitivity to comments/criticism, low self-esteem
- ❖ **Thoughts** – Frequent self-criticism or self-blame, difficulty concentrating or remembering, racing thoughts, delusions or hallucinations, thoughts of death, suicide, or harming others
- ❖ **Behaviors** – Crying spells, withdrawal from others, loss of motivation, use of drugs and alcohol, avoidance or phobic behavior, showing distress, talking rapidly, threatening physical violence or fighting

***Some of these same signs, especially the physical changes, may be caused by physical health problems.***

### Listen

Many young people find it difficult to express their emotions and they may not have a well-developed ability to articulate what they are thinking or feeling. Be careful not to trivialize a teen's feelings—seek to validate emotions, not dismiss them.

- ❖ Using “I” statements, state nonjudgmentally what you have noticed such as “I have seen you be very quiet lately.”
- ❖ Ask questions, but don't push
- ❖ Realize it may be a relief for the young person to talk about how they feel



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- ❖ Be genuine and respectful
- ❖ Be comfortable with silence
- ❖ Remember it's about *them* not *us*; don't compare their experience to your own youth
- ❖ Be accepting even though you may not agree
- ❖ Be aware of your body language and facial expressions. Non-verbal language is often "louder" than our spoken words.
- ❖ Be positive with your feedback: "I believe in you." "I'm glad you're willing to talk to me about this."
- ❖ Be prepared to hear "I'm not ready to talk or change." Validate their feelings and reiterate their concerns: Say, "Change can be really scary. Let me help you with that," or "Okay, when you are ready, let's talk."

### **DO**

- ***Listen, even when they are talking about a friend who is struggling, rather than themselves. Be open and ready to hear—this may be an important opportunity to build trust***
- ***Provide practical help when relevant, acknowledge your limits, offer consistent emotional support***
- ***Set boundaries; be mindful of your role and when it is time to consult with a parent or a professional***
- ***Offer hope and talk about the good stuff in their lives—they got a part in the school play; they made a goal in yesterday's soccer game***

### **DO NOT**

- ***Dismiss a teen's experience. If they are sad about a relationship breaking up, suggesting they'll get over it in a few weeks invalidates their feelings***
- ***Make promises you can't keep, give advice, focus on "right" vs. "wrong," or try to "fix" the problem***
- ***Overshare personal information in an attempt to gain trust; do maintain boundaries and show you can be a trusted other without needing to be a friend***

### **Link**

**When you see something, say something:** When you are concerned a child may need referral to professional help, call upon your Education Director or supervisor to strategize the best way to help this individual child and connect the child/family to the appropriate resources in the community.