

# EARLY TEENS

## 12–15

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# MAKING PROGRESS AT SCHOOL



*Starting high school can be exciting and fun, but may also be a bit scary for some kids in care. Sometimes it's because they haven't attended school regularly in the past, or they've been moved from school to school. Sometimes it's because their personal experiences have left them with overwhelming stress and pain that make it harder for them to concentrate and learn.*

It's good to get on top of school problems quickly, before they become big obstacles with the potential to have long-term impacts on your child. A quick response from you also sends your teen the clear message that you value their education and have their best interests at heart.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO.



### MORE HELP

Department of  
Education Learning and  
Support Services

[dec.nsw.gov.au](http://dec.nsw.gov.au)  
1300 679 332 or 131 536

*Available to all public school students. Talk to your school or call the Department for details.*

Aboriginal Education Officers  
1300 679 332

*Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) support Aboriginal students. To find out more, contact your school or the Department.*

**SUPPORT SCHOOL EVERY DAY.** All kids aged between six and 17 should go to school every day, not just because it's the law, but because it will help them feel like they belong and give them the best chance of doing well. If your child is consistently reluctant to go to school, it could be because they're having problems with friends or they're struggling in the classroom. Talk to your child, and to the school, and work together to resolve the problems that are making them want to stay away from school.

**GET TO SCHOOL ON TIME.** Work on a routine that will help kids get to school on time. Look at the transport timetables together and choose the most suitable bus or train service. Talk about other smart habits, such as packing their school bag the night before. It can help to put the routine down on paper in a visual way so your teen can understand it very easily, and stick it up somewhere central.

**THINK ABOUT TUTORING.** Having a tutor come to your home for some one-on-one teaching time could be just what your teen needs to catch up with their classmates. If you think a tutor or some other sort of teaching support would be valuable, talk to your caseworker. Extra teaching help may be included in the Education Plan.

**GET SOME GOOD STUDY HABITS GOING.** Forward planning can be a challenge for kids who have experienced trauma. Ask your child simple questions about what school work they've got coming up, when it's due, how much time it will take to finish and when they plan to start. Encourage your teen to mark those dates on a planner or calendar so you can both keep track of progress.

**GET TO KNOW THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION OFFICER (AEO).** Your child's school is likely to have an AEO. The AEO will monitor your child's progress and support their educational needs. Get in touch with the school's AEO so you can share feedback and help your teen thrive at school.

**THINK ABOUT ELECTIVES IN YEAR 8.** Towards the end of Year 8, students will select elective subjects for Years 9 and 10. Use this as a trigger to talk to your teen about their strengths. It can also lead to a conversation about how the effort they put into school now will help them prepare for the life they want as adults.

**BE SMART ABOUT HSC SUBJECTS.** In Year 10, the teen in your care will choose subjects for the Higher School Certificate (HSC). Encourage them to think about the subjects they're good at or have a strong interest in. If your child enjoys the classes they're taking, they're more likely to feel confident and do the best work they can. Your child's current teachers, their Year Adviser and the school's Career Adviser can all help you and your child with subject selection.

**LOOK AHEAD TO UNIVERSITY OPTIONS.** Kids in care may not have had much exposure to the idea of going to university after school. It's a good idea to start talking to your child about university education now, even before they start making choices for their HSC. There are a range of programs that give kids in care an introduction to university life through camps and "taster" programs. Talk to your caseworker to find out more about them.

**GET A HEAD START WITH VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET).** Your teen may think there is no point staying on for Years 11 and 12 if they don't plan to go to university. These days, high schools offer Vocational Education and Training (VET) for students interested in trades or vocational areas such as music or sport. These traineeships and apprenticeships involve school-based training and some paid work as well as ordinary school studies. If you or your teen think a VET course is a good option, talk to your school and your caseworker and make it part of the Education Plan.

**ACT EARLY ON SCHOOL ABSENCES.** If you are doing everything you can to get your teen to school each day, but they're still skipping school or leaving the school grounds, get in touch with the school and your caseworker so that you can work together on a solution. School absences can result in serious actions like court orders, so it's best to deal with the situation as early as possible. If your teen has not gone to school and you don't know where they are, call the 24-hour Child Protection Helpline (132 111 or 1800 212 936 TTY) for immediate support.

**STAY A STEP AHEAD OF PROBLEMS.** If you're aware your teen has been misbehaving or staying away from school, try to organise a catch-up with the school and your caseworker so you can discuss what is going on. It's much better if these issues can be sorted out before they become big problems.

**RESPOND TO A SCHOOL SUSPENSION.** If kids are involved in serious misbehaviour, they may be suspended. Usually, a suspension means your child cannot go to school for a number of days, and cannot come onto the school grounds without permission. The principal will organise a "suspension resolution" meeting and you can request that your caseworker attends. For kids in care who are already struggling at school, a suspension can trigger a complete disengagement with education. Together, you and your caseworker can ask the school to consider alternatives. For example, an internal suspension where students are supervised at school but kept out of their regular classes, can be a better option.



## USEFUL TIP

### Build breakfast into your teen's routine

*Eating a good breakfast helps kids concentrate better in class, which in turn helps them learn better. It also supplies their muscles with energy so they can do their best in sport and other physical activities.*

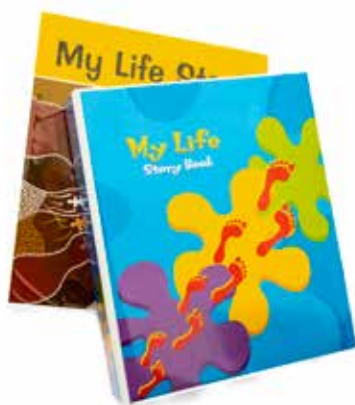
  
**MORE HELP**

**Home School  
Liaison Officers**  
1300 679 332

*Home School Liaison Officers  
support families to maintain  
regular school attendance.*

**Translating and  
Interpreting Service**  
tisonational.gov.au  
131 450

*If you are from a non-English  
speaking background, this service  
can help you communicate  
better with the school.*



**MAKE SUSPENSION PRODUCTIVE.** Carers are expected to supervise children and oversee their study when they are on suspension. If your school doesn't provide you with a study plan, ask them for one. Make sure your caseworker is aware of the suspension so you can both be involved in getting your teen engaged with school again.

**HANDLING EXPULSIONS.** If your school is considering expelling your child, they will contact both you and your caseworker. It's important you both meet with the school to talk about why they think an expulsion is necessary, and to ask them to consider other solutions. For kids in care, an expulsion is a breakdown in education that can be hard to recover from. If your child is expelled, connect with your caseworker about how to help your teen and find a place for them at a suitable new high school.



***It was hard moving schools and  
having to make so many changes,  
and to fit into so many different  
families, and to make new friends.***

*12-year-old girl*

## WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**BE PRO-ACTIVE ABOUT SCHOOL ISSUES.** Caseworkers and carers should keep each other up to date on how the teen is going at school, in terms of both learning and behaviour. If problems start to emerge, they should talk with the school about how to prevent small difficulties developing into big problems. The caseworker can ask the school to review the Education Plan if they believe the child's needs have changed or developed.

**DISCUSS LONG-TERM EDUCATION GOALS.** When a child turns 15 the goal of their Case Plan becomes "transition to independence". This is an opportunity to help the teen think about their future goals for education and employment and to start putting some plans in place for further education or training.

**THINK ABOUT A RETURN-TO-SCHOOL STRATEGY.** If a teenager has been suspended or expelled, then the carer, the school and the caseworker should work together on how to address the underlying issues and to make a successful return to school a priority.

**RESPECT THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE.** Sometimes, caseworkers have to take kids out for time with family, medical appointments or legal appointments. It's always best to avoid scheduling these in school time. Leaving school in the company of a caseworker not only disrupts the teen's education, it can also make kids feel uncomfortable.

# NURTURING IDENTITY

*In adolescence, teenagers begin to question how their family and cultural background fit in with their own sense of self. Carers play a crucial role in promoting and maintaining the connections that support a child's understanding of where they come from, who they are and who they want to be.*



## WHAT YOU CAN DO.

**CELEBRATE THE DIFFERENCES AND THE SIMILARITIES.** Help make your teen feel proud of their unique qualities by talking in a positive way about what makes them different. Show an interest in their language, religion, culture and even their looks. But help them feel like part of your family, too, by talking about the things they have in common: maybe they like the same foods or have the same interests.

**HELP OUT WITH LIFE STORY WORK.** Life Story work lets your teen reflect on their past as well as what they're doing now. Let your teen know you'd like to contribute. Offer to help gather information and collect things like photos and awards.

**MAKE CONNECTIONS.** Find out about cultural clubs, events or activities that you and your teen can get involved in. Reach out to the elders of your child's cultural community. They can answer your questions and help guide you away from well-meaning mistakes. They can also be wonderful role models for your teen.

**ENCOURAGE CULTURAL CURIOSITY.** Cultural connections are fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Ask your caseworker about your child's Cultural Case Plan and work together to meet those goals. Ask questions about your child's language, stories and cultural practices. If they don't know the answers, help them connect with people who can teach them more.

**MAKE IT PERMANENT.** If it's appropriate, you can move to create permanency in the relationship by applying for guardianship or adoption of your teen. If you want to know more about these options, talk to your caseworker. Be aware that adoption is not usually an option for Aboriginal children.

## WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**ACKNOWLEDGE CULTURAL MILESTONES.** Cultural identity is an important part of your teenager's Case Plan. Caseworkers will work with you to make sure your teen has regular contact with people from their cultural community and that significant cultural events and rituals are honoured.

**BE PART OF BIG FAMILY MOMENTS.** Teens may want to feel connected to their birth family's milestones. If it's appropriate, caseworkers can arrange for the teen to be part of events such as birthdays, weddings and school graduations. Some cultures have rituals that should be honoured as a child grows up. Caseworkers and carers can work together to make sure those important moments are observed.

**FOCUS ON LIFE STORY WORK.** Caseworkers can use Life Story work to help kids take pride in their personal story and develop a sense of cultural identity.



### USEFUL TIP

## Talk up positive family traits

*Help teens feel good about themselves by pointing out the positives in their family. You could say: "Your mum has the most wonderful laugh!" or "I think you'll be as tall as your dad one day".*



### MORE HELP

#### Aboriginal Statewide Foster Care Support Service (ASFCSS)

[absec.org.au](http://absec.org.au)  
1800 888 698

Free telephone advice and advocacy service for carers of Aboriginal children.

#### Multicultural NSW [multicultural.nsw.gov.au](http://multicultural.nsw.gov.au)

Lots of useful links to community organisations and cultural events.

#### Ethnic Community Services Co-operative [ecsc.org.au](http://ecsc.org.au)

Workshops and resources supporting quality care for people from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds.



## SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL WELLBEING & MENTAL HEALTH

*Wellbeing is built on physical, mental and emotional health. It's about having positive social relationships, being active, finding meaning in life and feeling that you're going well in areas that matter to you. Boost your teen's wellbeing by encouraging them to try new things, have goals, appreciate their strengths and focus on the good things in life.*

Childhood experiences of trauma, grief and loss make it hard for some teens to feel 'well' on the inside. You may see a range of responses like anger, slamming doors, bullying, shyness and withdrawal. Teaching kids ways for coping with difficult feelings can help reduce the risk of depression and anxiety. Get in early with professional help from counsellors, psychologists and therapists if you think your child needs some support.



### MORE HELP

**Youth Beyond Blue**  
[youthbeyondblue.com](http://youthbeyondblue.com)  
1300 22 4636 (24 hour)

Resources, tools, online chat and a 24-hour help line for teens struggling with their wellbeing.

**Kids Help Line**  
[kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)  
1800 55 1800 (24 hour)

Free confidential counselling for kids, over the phone, through email or on web chat.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO.

**GET SET FOR HAPPINESS.** You can help set up your teen for the best possible chance of happiness and contentment just by encouraging some simple habits. Get them interested in a healthy lifestyle and show them the value of eating, exercising and sleeping well. Try to get them involved in some sort of volunteer work. Helping other people has been shown to have a big impact on mental health and wellbeing.

**BE SENSITIVE TO SEPARATION.** Kids who have been removed from their families can experience feelings of grief and loss, even if the environment they are leaving behind them was abusive, neglectful or dangerous. It may take weeks or months for your child to move past those feelings. If the grief continues over a long period, or if it seems very intense, get in touch with your caseworker. It might be useful to get some professional support.

**UNDERSTAND THE IMPACTS OF TRAUMA.** Experiences of abuse and neglect can make kids feel worthless and powerless. They can also find it hard to trust people or to feel safe. You can do a lot to help the child in your care feel safe, respected and valued just by listening to them, giving them lots of love and making sure they feel like they belong. Your caseworker can arrange professional support services with a psychologist or counsellor if that would help.

**LOOK FOR HIDDEN SIGNS OF TROUBLES.** Some signs of grief and trauma, like tears or anger, are easy to recognise. Others might not be so obvious. These include clinginess or withdrawal, sleep difficulties, aches and pains, risky behaviour or substance abuse. If you notice any of these things, talk to your child or seek some professional support to help them deal with their feelings.



**RECOGNISE DEPRESSION.** Everyone feels sad sometimes. Depression is different because it is more intense and lasts longer. Kids who are feeling depressed may be tearful a lot of the time, find it hard to concentrate, have bad sleep, get sick easily, suffer from stomach aches or headaches, and may stop doing the things they used to enjoy. If you think your teen is depressed, let them know that you've noticed a change in their behaviour and encourage them to talk about how they feel. If the depression is more than you or your teen can handle on your own, speak to your caseworker about professional support.

**TAKE ACTION ON ANXIETY.** If your teen is constantly irritable, upset by changes in routine, unusually argumentative or nervous, or is worrying a lot about certain places, people or events, they may have a problem with anxiety. You can help a child with anxiety by maintaining the regular routine, being tolerant of their behaviour without encouraging avoidance of people or situations, and showing lots of love. Speak to your caseworker if you think professional support would help.

**ACT EARLY ON SELF-HARM.** Sometimes teenagers cope with intense distress by deliberately hurting themselves through cutting, scratching, burning or biting. Some do it in less obvious ways, such as binge drinking or food refusal. These behaviours are called self-harm. Self-harm can quickly grow into an addiction and can lead to serious physical injury or accidental death, so it's important to tackle it early. If you think your teen is self-harming, or you see them doing it, stay calm and let them know you want to listen and help. Give wounds and injuries the treatment they need (this helps reinforce that your teen's body is important and should be looked after). Let your caseworker know what's happening. Support from a counsellor or psychologist could be really valuable.

**TAKE QUICK ACTION ON SUICIDAL THOUGHTS.** Teens in care are vulnerable to suicidal thoughts. If your teen says they feel hopeless, if they talk a lot about death or suicide, if their behaviour or mood takes a turn for the worse, or if they do more obvious things like writing farewell notes or gathering things they could use in a suicide attempt, then it's possible they are considering suicide. You should act quickly. Let your child know that you care, that you understand how bad they're feeling and that you will get them the help they need. Tell your caseworker as soon as possible so that professional support can be arranged. If you think that your teen is at immediate risk of a suicide attempt, ask them directly if they are thinking about suicide. If the answer is yes, stay with them. Call Lifeline on 13 11 14 for support, or emergency services on 000, if you need to.

## WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**GET HELP EARLY.** Without early attention and support, feelings of sadness, anger or anxiety can escalate into mental health issues. Caseworkers can talk to young people and carers about tapping into websites like Beyond Blue and Headspace, or getting involved in activities that help them feel good about themselves. Concerns about a child's emotional wellbeing or mental health must be taken seriously; connecting with a psychologist for professional support can be a good move.

**CONNECT WITH PROFESSIONALS ON SERIOUS ISSUES.** Self-harm and suicidal thoughts are a sign of serious mental health challenges. Usually, these are more than a carer or caseworker can deal with on their own. Caseworkers can check in with a psychologist to make plans for relevant support services. If there are concerns about the child's mental health or if counselling or psychologist services are arranged, the caseworker will need to update the Health Management Plan.



### USEFUL TIP

## Get to know your teen's triggers

*Occasions like birthdays and Christmas can trigger memories that drive big emotional responses. Try to be aware of those dates so you are ready to respond with the patience and kindness needed.*



### MORE HELP

#### Headspace

[headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)  
1800 650 890

*Young people and their families can get help online, over the phone or at a local Headspace centre.*

#### Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS)

[ahmrc.org.au](http://ahmrc.org.au)

*Find your local AMS on the 'members' page of the Aboriginal Health and Medicine Research Council website.*

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# STAYING SAFE AROUND DRUGS & ALCOHOL



*It is illegal for children to smoke or drink alcohol before the age of 18. The use of illicit drugs, or prescription drugs that haven't been subscribed by the person's doctor, is illegal at any age. However, most Australian teenagers have had some experience with alcohol and cigarettes before the age of 17, and many have used or been exposed to illegal drugs.*

Drug and alcohol use can have serious short-term and long-term impacts for teens, and can lead to dependency in adulthood. It's important to encourage a responsible attitude, but also to help teens stay safe. One of the most influential things you can do is to model safe and healthy behaviour that your teen can learn from: drink responsibly, don't smoke and don't use illegal drugs.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO.



### MORE HELP

#### Quitline (24 hours)

[icanquit.com.au](http://icanquit.com.au)  
13 78 48

*Clever online tools for people who want to stop smoking.*

#### Youth Beyond Blue

[youthbeyondblue.com](http://youthbeyondblue.com)  
1300 22 4636 (24 hour)

*Online chat and a 24-hour help line for teens who want to talk and ask questions about drug and alcohol use.*

**KEEP UP COMMUNICATION.** Support your teen's friendships and growing independence, but make sure you still find time to catch up and talk one-on-one. Make sure your child understands your attitude to under-age drinking and drug use, and the boundaries you have set. Try to keep up to date about who your child hangs out with, where they are and what they do when they're not at home.

**EXPLAIN WHY THE LEGAL AGE FOR DRINKING IS 18.** Talk to your child about why there is a legal age limit on drinking. Explain that the parts of the brain that look after learning, planning and emotional stability are still developing during the teenage years and that alcohol interrupts that development. Using alcohol in adolescence can lead to memory loss, learning difficulties and mental health issues including anxiety and depression.

**KEEP IT REAL.** Be straight with kids about the scary side of taking drugs, drinking and smoking when they're under age. Let them know about the health impacts and criminal consequences in an age-appropriate way. Explain that smoking can give you cancer and other diseases; that drinking can make you take risks that might hurt or kill you; and that taking drugs, or even holding them for a friend, can mean a criminal charge.

**BE AWARE OF WHAT DRIVES DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE.** Kids in care may start using drugs and alcohol to ease the pain of trauma or the symptoms of mental health issues such as depression, or because they have grown up around drug and alcohol use. If your teen is using drugs or alcohol, try to find out more about how they're feeling. It could be they need professional help to cope with difficult emotions. Let your caseworker know what's happening so they can connect you with any services you need, and update the Case Plan.



**TALK ABOUT RISK AND REGRET.** Drugs and alcohol change the chemical balance of the brain and affect the way a person thinks, feels and makes decisions. Explain to your teen that they might do things under the influence of drugs or alcohol that they wouldn't do normally; things that are dangerous or that they may regret later. If they're using drugs or alcohol regularly, they may also find that they start feeling moody, anxious, panicked or unmotivated most of the time.

**EXPLAIN THE DANGERS OF EXCESSIVE DRINKING.** Explaining the difference between how teens and adults react to alcohol can be helpful. Teach kids that teenagers are less sensitive to the sedative effects of alcohol than adults. That means they're likely to keep on drinking long after most adults would have called it a night, making it easy for them to drink to excess and put themselves at risk of things like unsafe sex or violence.

**TALK ABOUT DEPENDENCY AND ADDICTION.** Teenagers can become dependent on drugs much more quickly than adults, and drinking in adolescence significantly increases the chance of a person becoming dependent on alcohol later in life. Help the child in your care to understand that their behaviour now puts them at risk of dependency and addiction in the future.

**REMAIN SUPPORTIVE AND APPROACHABLE.** If you think your child is using alcohol or drugs, let them know you're worried about them and that you're there to listen to them whenever they're ready to talk. When they do open up to you, listen to what they have to say and try to respond in a non-judgmental way. It's important you let your caseworker know what's going on, so they can keep an eye on it, too, and organise support services if that would be helpful. If you have talked to your teenager about their alcohol or drug use and they're open to getting some support, offer to help them find the right sort of information or services. You could suggest looking for advice online, calling a support service or speaking to a local doctor. Remember that being supportive isn't the same as approving of your child's drug or alcohol use.

**KEEP THEM SAFE.** If you know your teen is using alcohol or drugs, talk to them about staying safe. Tell them never to use drugs or alcohol if they don't know where they came from or what's in them. Never use them when they're alone. Don't mix drugs and alcohol. Remind them that their ability to make good judgments may be affected and they should try not to rush into taking a risk or doing something they wouldn't normally do. Most importantly, tell them to get in touch with you any time they feel scared or unsafe so you can get them out of that situation.

## WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**BE CLEAR ABOUT THE RULES AROUND DRUGS AND ALCOHOL.** Some families may believe it's alright to let teenagers drink, or even to use "soft drugs" such as marijuana. However, it is illegal for anyone to use drugs and for anyone under 18 to smoke or to consume alcohol. Caseworkers may have to remind carers that it is never okay for the under-18 in their care to be drinking, smoking or using drugs.

**LOOK AT WHAT'S BEHIND THE DRINKING OR DRUG USE.** Sometimes teens start using drugs and alcohol for fun, but sometimes they do it because it helps them deal with emotional pain. Carers and caseworkers should be looking for the stresses that may be causing the teen's behaviour, and getting some professional support from a counsellor or psychologist if that would help.



### MORE HELP

#### Kids Help Line

[kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)  
1800 55 1800 (24 hour)

*Confidential support and counselling for kids by phone, through email or on web chat.*

#### Reach Out

[reachout.com.au](http://reachout.com.au)

*Practical tools and support around alcohol and drug issues for teens.*



### USEFUL TIP

## Come up with strategies

*Help your teen prepare for peer pressure. Get them ready with a few standard responses like "No thanks, I have to get up early". Suggest they hold on to a soft drink so they can say "I'm okay for now". Remind them they can always find a moment to put down a drink and walk away from it without making a scene.*

# 5

## BEING RESPONSIBLE WITH MONEY

*In the early teen years, kids typically have money in their pocket – and they want to spend it. Having your own money, and saving for something you really want, are things that help teenagers prepare for life as an adult.*

### WHAT YOU CAN DO.



#### MORE HELP

##### Money Smart

[moneysmart.gov.au](http://moneysmart.gov.au)

*Ideas and tips on pocket money and part-time jobs, plus online tools like budget planners and savings calculators.*

##### LawStuff

[lawstuff.org.au](http://lawstuff.org.au)

*Simple explanations of legal issues affecting children and young people.*



#### USEFUL TIP

### Use pre-paid cards

*Pre-paid phone cards limit the amount that can be spent on calls and data. Pre-loaded debit cards can help keep online shopping purchases under control. You can buy them at supermarkets or post offices.*

**ORGANISE POCKET MONEY.** Many families match pocket money to the age of the child, so a 13-year-old gets \$13 a week and so on. Pocket money should be covered by your care allowance. To kick-start the saving habit, encourage kids to pick something to save for (like a concert or a video game). Help them work out a savings plan that will get them to their goal. Carers with other kids at home should make sure that everyone gets pocket money according to the same scale, and everyone has the same guidelines for how they spend and save.

**SET SOME LIMITS.** For some kids, having access to large amounts of money might increase their risk of getting into trouble, including buying drugs, alcohol or cigarettes. You might want to set a limit on how much money they can access.

**LET THEM MAKE MISTAKES.** Letting your child manage their own money, within the guidelines you have set, is a confidence booster and shows you trust them. If you think your teen is doing something silly, like buying a product that is overpriced or poor quality, tell them what you think but don't stop them and don't offer to replace the money wasted. The best way to learn about money is to make mistakes.

**BE CLEAR ABOUT LENDING AND BORROWING.** Most adults borrow money at some stage, either from friends, family or from a financial institution. Teach teens a few rules around lending and borrowing money. It's always better not to borrow if you can avoid it, but if you do, you must be responsible about paying it back on time. The rules are the same whether your child borrows from you or from friends.

**EXPLAIN THE COST OF TECHNOLOGY.** Many teens own and use devices such as smartphones and laptops. Have a conversation about the value of these items, and who will cover the costs of phone calls, data, shopping and in-app purchases.

### WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**SET UP A BANK ACCOUNT.** Teens can save money in a personal bank account. Setting up an account may require identification documents such as a birth certificate. Caseworkers can help you and your teen access those documents.

**DEVELOP A LEAVING CARE PLAN.** Caseworkers will develop a Leaving Care Plan for your child after they turn 15, even if they are staying on in your home. It provides a focus for caseworkers and carers to consider whether the teen has the living skills they need for life as an independent adult, including managing money, looking after their health and wellbeing, and achieving education and employment goals.

# THINKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

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*It's healthy for teenagers to develop a sense of their sexuality, learn how to express affection and have respectful relationships. Sexuality isn't just about sexual behaviour; it's about the way your child feels about their body, and their growing ability to have feelings of intimacy, attraction and affection for others.*



## WHAT YOU CAN DO.

**KEEP LISTENING AND TALKING.** Lots of parents and carers find it difficult to get used to the idea that their teen is emotionally involved with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and may even be getting physically involved, too. Try to remember that it's all part of growing up. Resist the temptation to pry into your teen's affairs, but do take the opportunity to have conversations about the healthy and positive relationships you've had in your own life.

**SET BOUNDARIES.** The age of consent is 16. That means it is an offence for a child under the age of 16 to have sex, even if the other person is a similar age. Explain to your child that the age of consent is about ensuring both people are emotionally mature, have a strong and confident sense of themselves, and have the capacity to give their consent to sexual activity. If you believe the child in your care is sexually active under the age of 16, you must let your caseworker know.

**BE REALISTIC.** Sex at an early age isn't great for a young person's wellbeing, but the truth is many teens start having sex before they turn 16. Make sure your child knows how to stay safe, including using contraception to protect against pregnancy and avoiding sexually transmitted diseases. Be aware that kids over the age of 14 are legally allowed to give consent to their own medical treatment, including asking a doctor for a contraceptive or a termination. If your religious or moral beliefs make it hard for you to discuss these things with the teen in your care, ask a mentor or caseworker to have a talk to them.

**UNDERSTAND THE ISSUES AROUND PREGNANCY.** News that a teenager is pregnant will have a big emotional impact on both the teen and her carer. On a legal basis, the decision to continue or terminate the pregnancy rests solely with the young woman involved (although she may choose to include her male partner in this decision). Her options are to terminate the pregnancy, to have the child and raise it herself, or to continue with the pregnancy and have the baby adopted. The Family Planning Association can be a wonderful source of support in this situation.

**ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR TEEN'S FEELINGS.** Social attitudes have become more welcoming of people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual and some young people may feel a sense of relief when they share how they feel about their sexual identity. Others may feel nervous, scared, ashamed or angry. The best thing you can do is show respect, and validate and support their feelings.



## MORE HELP

### Family Planning NSW

[fpnsw.org.au](http://fpnsw.org.au)  
1300 658 886

*Providing information about contraception and sexual health.*

### Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS)

[ahmrc.org.au](http://ahmrc.org.au)

*Find your local service on the 'members' page of the Aboriginal Health and Medicine Research Council website.*

### Families Like Mine

[beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)  
1300 22 4636

*Beyond Blue supports the health of young LGBTI people. Their downloadable resource Families Like Mine is a great place to start.*



## USEFUL TIP

### Keep doing what you always did!

*If your teen talks to you about their sexual identity, make a special effort in the weeks that follow to spend time together doing things you've always loved to do. It shows your feelings haven't changed. And it creates comfortable moments that might help your child open up and share their thoughts.*



## MORE HELP

**Minus 18**  
[minus18.org.au](http://minus18.org.au)

*Youth-led organisation for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth offering online resources and support services, social events for under-18s, and mentoring.*

**Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)**  
[pflagaustralia.org.au](http://pflagaustralia.org.au)

*A peer support group that helps keep families connected.*

**BE POSITIVE.** You may have been expecting your teen to talk about their sexual identity, or you may be completely surprised. Most carers in this situation will need some time to reflect on how they feel about this information, but in the meantime it's important to let your child know you love them and want them to be happy. When children reach a point where they feel comfortable talking about their sexual identity, and when that is backed up by a positive response from the caregivers in their lives, it can result in a big boost to self-esteem.

**LOOK AND LISTEN FOR CUES.** Some young people will want to celebrate their sexual identity. Others will want to be more private about it. This is your teen's journey, first and foremost. Let the child in your care take the lead in relation to what they want to say or do, and when.

**HELP MAKE HEALTHY CONNECTIONS.** If your child is ready to make connections with other young people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, you can show your support by lending a hand. Help them research supportive local groups, assist with transport to a specific event or activity, and let them know that their new friends are always welcome at home. Being engaged in their life will help you make sure they are reaching out to people in safe and supportive environments.

**THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND ACTIONS.** Learning about your child's sexual identity can be confronting for some people. If you feel challenged by your child's sexual identity, it may help to speak to someone who has been through a similar experience, or to have some counselling. Your caseworker may be able to recommend some support services.



*Try to understand what the other person is going through and try to give them the confidence to tell you anything.*

*15-year-old boy*

## WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**CREATE CONNECTIONS.** Respecting and supporting a child's sexuality is essential for their self-esteem. Caseworkers can help both carers and kids in care to connect with the support services that can help them grow into this emerging sexual identity, safely and confidently.

**ALWAYS PUT THE CHILD FIRST.** Children have the right to grow up in an environment where their views and opinions are respected. Caseworkers will always support the rights of the child in care, but they can also offer support to a carer who is feeling uncomfortable around the issue of their child's sexuality. Some counselling could help the carer to understand what their teen is going through, and learn how to deal with the change.

# DEVELOPING GENDER IDENTITY

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*Gender is about how a person sees themselves and chooses to express themselves, regardless of their physical characteristics. Community understanding of how we develop an identity around sex and gender is changing. As a result, there is greater acceptance of gender diversity.*

However, teens who are exploring and questioning their identity in this way may feel scared or ashamed. They may face discrimination from those around them. They may be at risk of harm. As a carer, you are in a strong position to protect your child at a time when they are feeling very vulnerable.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO.

**LET YOUR CHILD SET THE PACE.** Your child may have been thinking about their gender identity for a long time before talking about it with you. They may take even longer to share their feelings with other people they know. Respect your child's right to confidentiality and allow them to decide who to share this with, and when.

**RESPECT NAME CHANGES.** Your child will feel supported and respected when you use their preferred name and refer to them as "he" or "she", according to their preference. Even though this is just an informal change, it's important to let your caseworker know so they can include it in the Case Plan. A legal name change is possible in some circumstances but will require an application to the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages; your caseworker can give you more information.

**HELP WITH RESEARCH.** Teens may want to know more about how to have their gender identity officially recognised. They may also want to know about their options for medical interventions in adolescence and adulthood. In partnership with your caseworker, you can help your child access the information and the services that will help them best.

**GET SOME SUPPORT.** You may struggle to know exactly what to say or how to support your child. If that's the case, you might find it useful to talk to a counsellor or to other people who have been through similar experiences. Some support services are listed on this page. If you're finding it hard to accept your child's new gender identity because of your own values or beliefs, have a talk to your caseworker. Remember that children in care have the right to their own beliefs and way of life, and to be treated with respect.

## WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**KEEP COMMUNICATING.** It's important for carers and caseworkers to keep each other up to date about what's going on for the teen. Sometimes, a caseworker may recognise a child's change in attitude, behaviour or self-identity before a carer does. It is important for the caseworker to raise this with the carer and support them to respond to the change in the most appropriate way.



### MORE HELP

#### Reach Out Parents

[parents.au.reachout.com](http://parents.au.reachout.com)

*Information, resources and strategies for carers of teens who are questioning gender identity.*

#### Twenty 10

[Twenty10.org.au](http://Twenty10.org.au)

02 8594 9555 (metropolitan areas)

1800 652 010 (rural freecall)

*A community-based support service for young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex.*



### USEFUL TIP

#### Praise courage

*Challenging your gender identity and then letting other people know about it takes an enormous amount of courage. Let your teen know that you respect and admire their bravery.*



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# MANAGING SERIOUS BEHAVIOUR



*From withdrawal to rage, the kind of behaviours you find confronting in your teen are likely to be based on whatever kept them safe in the past. The commitment you show during these rocky times can make a big difference.*

When things get tough, step back and reflect. Ask yourself what has worked for this young person in the past, and what hasn't. Be proud of the small wins and take time out to recharge so you can handle behaviour more positively.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO.



### MORE HELP

#### Kids Matter

[kidsmatter.edu.au](http://kidsmatter.edu.au)

Search for 'serious behaviour problems' to find a helpful fact sheet for parents and carers.

#### Triple P Positive Parenting Program

[triplep-parenting.net.au](http://triplep-parenting.net.au)

Seminars and discussion groups on parenting teenagers. You can look for similar parenting courses in your local area.

**KNOW THAT WHAT YOU DO MATTERS.** It's important to remember your teen is learning from you, even if they don't show it. Kids in care are often hyper-vigilant, which means they're intensely aware of what is going on around them. Their past experiences may have caused them to develop some really difficult behaviours, but every time they see you act calmly, constructively and supportively, they are slowly getting to know new ways of behaving.

**SET RULES – AND UPDATE THEM.** Routines and rules can be reassuring for kids from chaotic environments. Establish the "house rules" and the consequences for breaking them, but be prepared to review them. Show your teen that you respect their growing maturity by updating the rules as they begin to demonstrate greater responsibility. For example, you might push back their bedtime from 9pm to 10pm.

**BE PROUD OF THE SMALL WINS.** It may take a long time for your teen to start feeling safe and comfortable in your home, and even longer before they begin learning new ways to react and behave. Don't feel disheartened if things are moving slowly. Instead, look for small signs of progress: maybe your teen will sit down to watch TV with the family without being asked, or they'll say thank you for a nice meal, or share a laugh with you about something. Those things are proof that you're having a positive impact on your child's life.



*Actually listen to what the kids say. I have had many issues with people not listening to what I have to say.*

*15-year-old girl*

**TRY TO FIND THE TRIGGERS.** Look for patterns in your child's challenging behaviour (keeping a diary could help). You may notice that certain people or situations trigger difficult reactions. Encourage your child to talk about how those people or situations make them feel.



**TALK ABOUT CHOICES.** When your teen is upset or misbehaving, listen to what they have to say and acknowledge their feelings. Also point out that while they can't control how they feel, they do have control over how they respond. Help your child to think about different ways they can react to those feelings, and to consider more helpful choices in the future.

**UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGE.** The strategies typically used to deal with challenging teen behaviour are often less effective on teens in care. That's because these kids may have developed their behaviours as a way of surviving in an unsafe or abusive environment. Responding to the behaviour alone won't be productive. Thinking about the reasons behind the behaviour and understanding the triggers will help carers handle difficult behaviour more positively and effectively.

**BE YOUR CHILD'S CHAMPION.** Other adults in your teen's life, such as teachers or sports coaches, might have strong negative reactions to your child's bad behaviour. Your instinct might be to explain the reasons behind the behaviour, but it's important to respect your teen's privacy. Don't share their story with others. Instead, tell the other adult that you know your teen can be hard to handle, and share your insights on how to manage their more challenging moments.

**CONNECT WITH OTHER CARERS.** Talking to someone who understands – like another carer – can be a comfort, and might even provide some fresh ideas on how to manage your teen's behaviour. Connecting Carers NSW runs a telephone helpline and peer support programs. Find their contact details at the back of this book.

**ACT ON VIOLENCE.** When behaviour gets violent and the child is at risk of hurting themselves or someone else, you must contact your caseworker immediately and call emergency services if necessary.



## USEFUL TIP

### Encourage self-awareness

*Your teen may find it hard to describe their feelings and emotions. Prompt them with simple words like “angry”, “sad” or “happy”. If you need to get a bit more specific, say something like “a little bit sad” or “very angry”. Keep the descriptions basic and avoid more complicated words like “distressed” or “infuriated”.*

## WHAT YOUR CASEWORKER CAN DO.

**TALK AND SHARE.** Caseworkers and carers should always be communicating and sharing their thoughts on how the teen is going. If the challenging behaviour isn't improving, or if it's getting worse, they can work together to get things heading in the right direction. The caseworker might be able to organise some special training for the carer to help them deal with the teen's reactions, or arrange some respite so the carer can take a break. It's valuable for the caseworker to check in with the carer to make sure the solutions they put in place are genuinely helping.

**STAY IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH THE SCHOOL.** Carers and caseworkers can also support each other in making sure the school understands the child's behaviour and responds appropriately. Schools should be encouraged to support the child through counselling and other services, and to carefully consider their use of more severe consequences like expulsion.

**LOOK AT THE OPTIONS.** If the challenges continue to mount up, it could be helpful to get some professional support from a counsellor or psychologist. Your caseworker can update your teen's Case Plan to include those services.

**CONSIDER A BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT PLAN.** If a child is at risk of hurting themselves or someone around them, or if their behaviour is more than the carer can cope with, a caseworker may develop a Behaviour Support Plan. The Plan is developed collaboratively by the carer, the caseworker and a psychologist.