



# Living with young people



**The teenage years bring a new stage in your child's development and many changes for the whole family. Young people are discovering who they are, building skills to shape their own lives and working out their place in the world. A strong relationship with parents helps them feel more secure and confident as they work through these big changes. They still need your love and guidance as they take more responsibility for their own lives.**

## About young people

During the pre-teen and teenage years, young people go through rapid physical and emotional changes. Their 'brain wiring' changes and they have a strong need to experience new things and be accepted by peers. Many achieve new milestones such as learning to drive, getting a job or starting a relationship. It can be rewarding for parents to see them becoming their own person, bringing new ideas and energy into the family and using the positive values they have learned over time.

Young people are:

- working out their values and own unique identity
- practising making decisions for themselves
- learning to manage their emotions and behaviour
- becoming more conscious of their body and appearance
- learning about relationships
- discovering and understanding sexuality
- learning new things and finding what they are good at
- working out what they want in their future.

Some young people can feel unsure of themselves, despite a 'grown-up' attitude. Outward confidence can sometimes mask their inexperience in making decisions and coping with change. They want new freedoms but still need the security of their family.

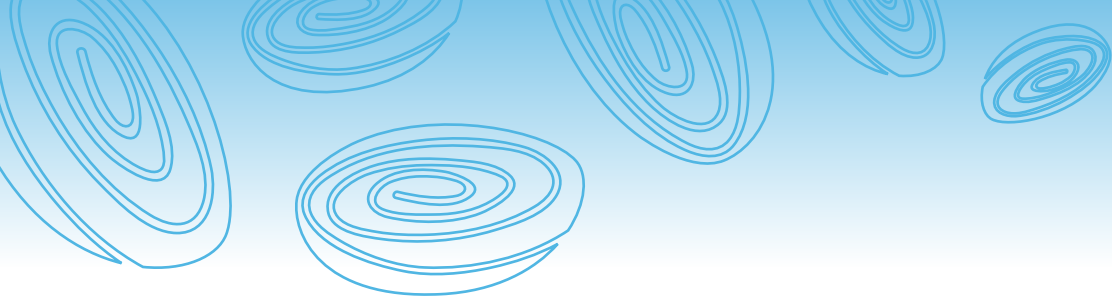
## You can help your son or daughter by:

- showing your love and understanding
- modelling the behaviour you expect
- being dependable and respectful
- being easy to talk to
- supporting them to make healthy, safe decisions
- inspiring them to achieve their best
- getting help when needed.

**Good communication with your young person is key to supporting them through the teenage years.**

## Adolescent development

Adolescence is the stage between childhood and adulthood. It can begin at different ages and progress at different rates. It starts with puberty, usually at around 11 to 14 years, although it can be as young as 8 in some children. By middle adolescence (15 to 17 years) the physical changes are usually complete and young people can start to look like adults. However, their thinking and emotions may seem childish at times as these take until late adolescence (18 to 21 years) to mature. Change can continue into their late 20s.



## Puberty

During puberty, new hormones trigger growth spurts, body changes and sexual development. Adolescents can feel clumsy and awkward as they adjust to their new body and sexual feelings. They may feel self-conscious and worry about developing too fast or too slow, and whether they are 'normal'. Your reassurance and acceptance are important at this time.

## Sleep

Young people need lots of sleep - just over 9 hours each night. Not getting enough good quality sleep can affect their mood, impulse control, memory and achievement at school or work. The hormone which prompts sleep is released later, and they often don't feel tired until late at night. They can go to sleep late and wake up late. This can make getting to school or work hard and cause conflict at home.

It can help young people to:

- have a relaxing sleep routine
- go to sleep and get up around the same time each day
- keep TVs, phones and other electronic devices out of bedrooms when they go to bed.

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**It is OK for young people to sleep in a bit on weekends, but for no more than 1 or 2 hours, so their body clock doesn't get too disrupted.**

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## Thinking skills

During adolescence, changes in the brain have a big impact on how young people think. Old neural pathways that are no longer needed are pruned away and new and more complex connections are made over time. This gradual reshaping can lead to them feeling confused at times. Often when they shrug and say 'I don't know' – they really don't know! You can help by asking specific questions rather than broad ones, eg 'So what was the best part of your day?', or 'What did your teacher think of your ideas for that project?' rather than 'How was your day?'

Changes in the brain that happen over time help young people to:

- make decisions, solve problems, identify risks and plan ahead
- think in abstracts and understand more complex ideas
- work out their own values, beliefs and views about the world.

The ability to see different points of view takes time to develop. They may want to test their new thinking by questioning ideas, authority and social norms. They may seem argumentative and rebellious at times. Don't take it personally. Remind yourself they are not attacking you, but testing their thinking with people they feel safe with. You can help by modelling and encouraging respectful ways to question different views and other people.

## Risk taking

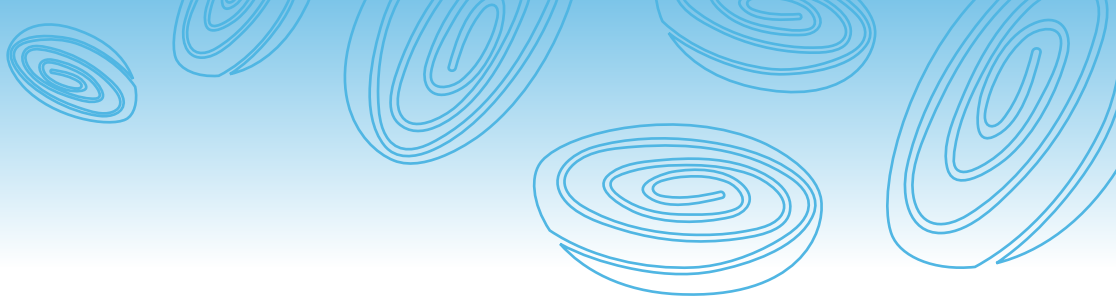
The part of the brain dealing with impulse control and thinking about the outcome of actions matures in late adolescence. Young people often want to try new things for the fun of it but don't yet have the ability to think of all the risks and how to keep safe. New experiences are an important way to learn and build skills and confidence but they will need your help for a while to think about safety.

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**Asking young people how they plan to keep safe and suggesting things they haven't thought of usually works better than telling them what to do.**

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## Friends and social groups

Having friends and being accepted by peers and social groups is very important to young people.

- They have a strong need to ‘be the same’, ‘fit in’, and feel they belong.
- Having friends helps them gain social skills, share ideas and work out their values and identity.
- They often want to spend more time with friends than family.
- The ‘ups and downs’ of friendships can have a big impact on them.

You can help by getting to know their friends and making them welcome in your home. If there are problems with friendships, you could listen and help your son or daughter think about their values and possible solutions. If you are concerned about any of their friends, try not to criticise. You could ask questions that help them think about the friend’s actions, eg ‘Why do you think Nathan gets into so much trouble? What might happen to his apprenticeship plans if he keeps missing a lot of school?’

## Feelings

Adolescence can bring new, intense feelings that change quickly. Some young people are quick to be offended or hurt and have a strong sense of justice, eg ‘That’s not fair!’ Sometimes they just need space and time to calm down. As they get older they usually get better at identifying and expressing their feelings and respecting the feelings of others.

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**Be patient with your son or daughter. They are going through changes and working out their own unique identity. You can expect strong feelings and some inconsistent attitudes and behaviours for a while.**

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## What parents can do

It can take time to get used to the fact that your daughter or son is changing and you will eventually be ‘letting go’ as a parent. They are progressing towards living by their own choices and you may become more of a loving mentor than a manager of their lives. Here are some ways to support your young person during this stage of their development.

### Model the behaviour you expect

It is important to behave in ways you expect of your young person. They learn from what you do and can be quick to spot a double standard.

You could:

- stay calm even when upset. This models self-discipline. Have a break to calm down if you need to
- speak to them with respect. Don’t yell, name-call, lecture, embarrass or shame them. Expect them to respect you in return
- model self-care and healthy, safe behaviours
- be balanced in your use of screen technology
- admit your mistakes without making excuses. This shows you don’t see yourself as perfect or have all the answers.

### Provide a secure base

Your young person is becoming more independent but still needs the security of parents, home and family.

It can help to:

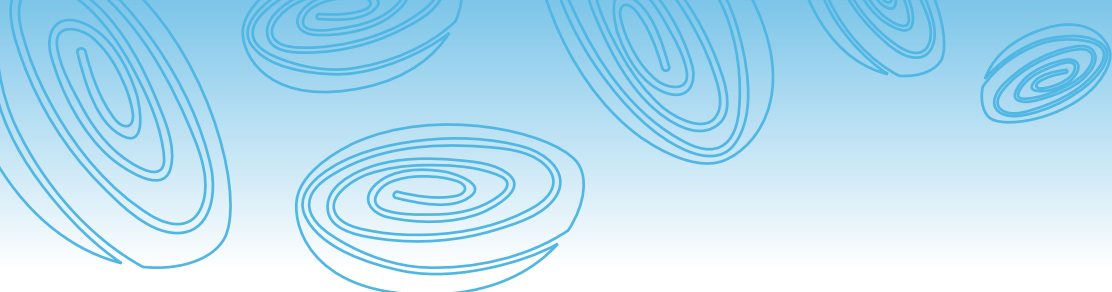
- be dependable and consistent so young people know what to expect
- provide structure and routine around things like school, homework, sleep and activity
- expect their involvement in the family, eg meals, celebrations, household chores
- encourage their involvement with the broader family and trusted friends. A strong network can help them feel they belong and provide a safety net of caring adults to talk to.

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**Regular family mealtimes without TV or electronic devices can provide a sense of connection for your young person and the whole family.**

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## Stay connected

Young people need to know they matter to you and are loved for who they are.

Some ways to keep connected with them are to:

- **be warm and loving and show you enjoy being with them.** Have fun and laugh together. Tell them you love them
- **be relaxed and easy to talk to.** Your words, tone of voice, the look on your face and your body language all affect your communication. When your son or daughter feels safe and able to talk openly, you are more likely to have meaningful conversations about what is going on for them and how they see the world
- **spend regular time together.** Make time to connect with them often, even if you are both busy. A quick catch-up can help keep you connected. Take opportunities to talk, such as when driving in the car. Make special time or plan outings to just be together. Show interest in things that interest them
- **be available when they want to talk.** It may not always be convenient, but when you stop and give young people your full attention, they get the message that they matter and can come to you when they need to
- **be a good listener.** Let them be themselves and express their own opinions and ideas, even if they are different to yours. Give them time to talk. Listen for the thinking and feelings behind the words. Allow silences without rushing in to fill the space. Try not to lecture, give advice or 'words of wisdom'. These can give the message you think they can't solve their own problems

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**Young people are more likely to talk if you are a good listener and don't react with emotion or jump in with advice, however well intentioned.**  
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- **show you understand how they feel and what they're going through.** When young people feel really listened to, it helps them 'get their feelings out'. Sometimes this is all they need and can help them find their own answers. They learn that all feelings are OK, even difficult ones, as well as the value of talking to someone when things are tough. You could say:
  - 'I can see you're really upset about that'
  - 'That must be really tough'
  - 'I'm sorry you're finding things so hard'.

Dismissing their concerns by saying not to worry or this will pass, or saying something like 'When I was your age...' are not helpful

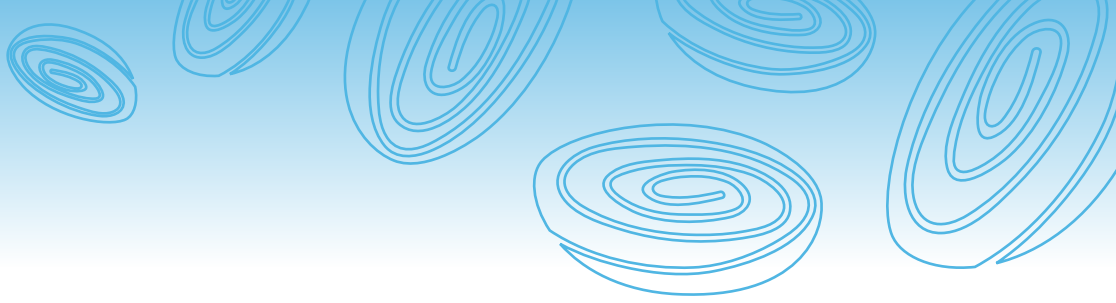
- **be open to talking about sensitive topics,** eg relationships, sexuality, sex, drugs and alcohol. Young people will learn it is OK to talk with you about these things and they can come to you if they have any questions or concerns. You don't need to have all the answers. See the end of this Guide for sources of information and support
- **reconnect if things break down.** It is important to work out how to reconnect with your son or daughter if there have been upsets, anger or harsh words. You could say 'That didn't work for either of us. Let's start again. What do you think we should do?' Listen to their answer without jumping in, and work out a solution together.

If your son or daughter doesn't want to talk, or finds it hard to talk about some issues, don't push them. Let them know they can come to you about anything. If you don't know how to help, support them to find good information or other trusted adults to talk to. Young people often get information from their peers or online and it may not be accurate.

## Respect privacy

It is usual for young people to want private time, 'space' and even some secrets from parents. It is part of working out their identity and forming their own values and views.





It can help to:

- respect their personal space. Ask before entering their bedroom
- resist any temptation to go through their diary, phone or personal things. This breaks trust. If you want to know something, it's best to ask them
- ask enough, without prying, to be sure of their safety when they are not at home, such as where they will be and who they will be with. A good question is 'What are you going to do to make sure I don't need to worry about you?'

### **Inspire young people to achieve their best**

Young people need to believe in themselves and see future possibilities and goals they can aspire to.

It can help when you:

- show confidence in them and expect them to do well. They will come to expect this of themselves
- introduce them to new ideas and experiences that stretch their thinking and imagination. Help them see where their interests and passions can take them, and to take next steps towards achieving their goals
- connect them with other trusted adults and mentors who can expand their networks and experiences
- praise their efforts rather than their abilities. Saying 'I see how hard you worked on that project', rather than 'You are really clever', helps them know their strengths and learn what to do next time
- let them teach you things. It shows you value what they know and are open to learning too.

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**Help your son or daughter follow their interests and dreams. Talk about what these are and ways they might achieve them.**  
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### **Build responsibility and self-discipline**

Young people need to learn to do things for themselves and make good decisions that keep themselves and others safe.

You can help by:

- giving them opportunities to make their own decisions
- helping them learn from mistakes. This is more effective than telling them what to do or punishing them
- not doing things for them that they can do for themselves
- not protecting them from the natural outcomes of their behaviour, such as failing a test if they don't prepare for it.

### **What about behaviour?**

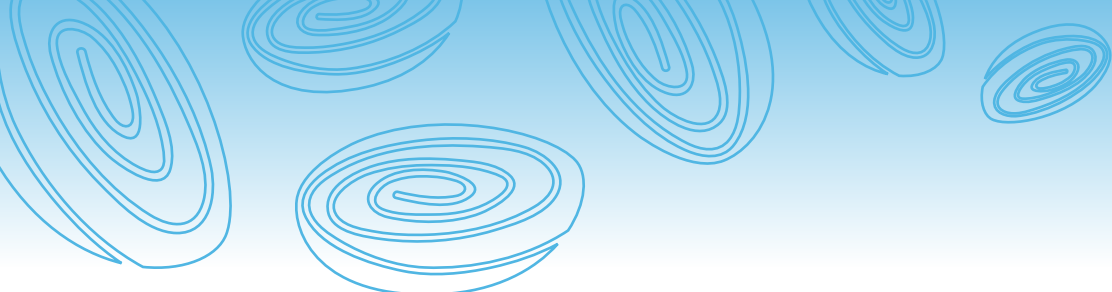
Young people have a strong need to feel they are in charge of their own lives and making their own decisions. However, it is also important for parents to have clear expectations that help keep young people safe and support their wellbeing. Having open conversations can help you explore options together and negotiate how they can meet expectations.

When young people feel they have a say and are involved in working things out, they feel more 'invested' in making things work and become part of the solution. They are less likely to 'push-back' against limits. This approach can help keep your relationship strong, and there can be a win-win for both of you.

You could agree on:

- how they will keep safe as they go out on their own or with friends
- how they will be responsible for their chores
- the use of mobile phones and other screens
- being safe online
- whether girlfriends or boyfriends are allowed to sleep over
- the use of alcohol and drugs
- attending or hosting parties.





You could:

- talk about your family expectations, eg safety, honesty, responsibility, respect, caring for each other
- agree what is negotiable and what is not. You may have different priorities
- ask what would help them meet the agreed expectations
- make agreements when things are calm, rather than in a crisis
- give young people a chance to practise the behaviours you expect. Be prepared for them to make mistakes.

**When young people feel listened to and that they have a say, they are more likely to work out ways to cooperate and meet expectations. Limits can be renegotiated as young people get better at making their own decisions.**

### **If agreed expectations and limits are not met**

At times, young people may push limits and not meet expectations even if they have agreed to do so.

It can help to:

- stay calm and avoid 'losing your cool', even if you feel frustrated or upset. Shouting and angry comments don't help. They can hurt and create distance between you
- ask your son or daughter to reflect on why they didn't do what was agreed. What got in the way or made it difficult for them to comply? Listen to their reasons. This approach helps them take responsibility for



their actions, and is more effective than lecturing or punishing them. Remember your goal is to help them learn skills and work out solutions for themselves

- ask for their ideas about what could help them meet expectations next time
- come up with a new agreement together.

**Be loving, firm and consistent as young people develop skills and responsibility. This may take time.**

## **Conflict**

Arguments and conflict can happen in families when young people start to express their own views and values and challenge limits and authority. They are developing their own sense of identity and may have opinions and values which are not the same as yours. Try not to take it personally.

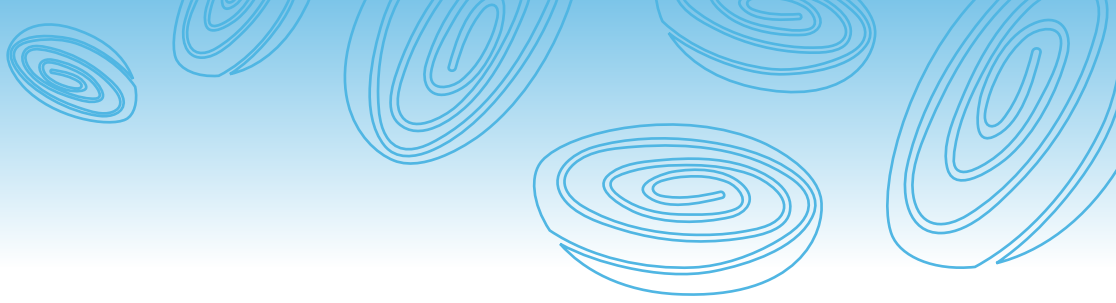
You could:

- stay calm, even if you feel angry
- agree about respectful ways to have difficult conversations. Try to do this before problems arise
- look for the cause of the conflict before you react
- try not to react to negative comments
- focus on current issues - don't bring up old ones
- admit when you're wrong without making excuses
- take a break if needed and agree to talk later when you both are calm.

While difficult conversations can be stressful, you could see them as an opportunity to understand your son or daughter more deeply. It is a chance to help them manage strong feelings and problem-solve in a difficult situation. Having conversations with a 'win-win' attitude can bring you closer and build your relationship.

### **Power struggles**

As young people become more independent, the role of parents shifts towards one of influencing rather than controlling or managing their lives. If you find yourself in a struggle with your son or daughter, it can help to think about whether winning or having control has become your goal rather than helping them learn responsibility.



You could improve things by:

- taking the lead as the adult and stepping out of the power struggle
- being a good communicator – listen as well as talk
- being clear about your values and why certain things are important to you.

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**Power struggles happen when both people want to be right. Try not to get into these – nobody wins!**

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As your son or daughter gets older, you may have to accept they are making their own life choices. However, parents have the right to say what happens in their home and young people need to respect this while living there. If they do not abide by your values and limits, eg by using drugs, parents sometimes ask young people to leave. If you say this, be sure it is what you want. While young people need to accept the outcome of their choices, they also need somewhere safe to go. If they come into contact with the legal system give them moral support but avoid rescuing them, eg paying fines. This often results in the behaviour continuing.

## Get help with difficult issues

Sometimes young people get involved with risky things that can cause harm, eg alcohol, drugs, unsafe sexual behaviour. They may struggle with their emotions and feel anxious or low a lot of the time, or withdraw from family and friends.

If you are concerned, it is important to act early and get help for your son or daughter as well as yourself.

You could:

- talk with them if you feel OK to do so
- make sure they have access to good information
- encourage them to talk with their teachers, a counsellor, youth service, doctor or other trusted adult. Offer to go with them if they would like you to.

## If there is violence or abuse

Some young people can be violent towards parents, siblings or others in the family. It can be physical, verbal, emotional, sexual or financial.

If this is happening:

- take steps to keep yourself and others safe
- make it clear that violence and abuse are never OK
- seek help straight away – it is rare for this to stop without help. See the end of this Guide for sources of support.

## Looking after yourself

Parenting a young person can be stressful at times and parents can feel upset and worn out. Looking after your health and doing things you enjoy can help you feel more positive, and show young people that you respect and value yourself.

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**Let young people know you are there for them, even in difficult times. This keeps you connected and provides the secure base they need. The best resource they have is you.**

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## Want more information?

### Emergencies

Phone 000 for ambulance, police or fire

### Police attendance

Phone 131 444 for non-urgent police attendance

### Domestic Violence Crisis Line

Phone 1800 800 098

Support for anyone experiencing domestic violence [womenssafety.com.au](http://womenssafety.com.au)

### 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)

National domestic violence counselling and online service [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

## For parents

### Family and relationships information and counselling services

Fees may apply

- **Relationships Australia**  
Phone 1300 364 277  
[www.rasa.org.au](http://www.rasa.org.au)
- **Uniting Communities**  
Phone 1800 615 677  
[www.unitingcommunities.org](http://www.unitingcommunities.org)
- **Centacare**  
Phone 8215 6700  
[www.centacare.org.au](http://www.centacare.org.au)

### Sammy D Foundation

Connect Mentoring Program

Phone 8374 1678

Mentoring for children 8-18 years [www.sammydfoundation.org.au](http://www.sammydfoundation.org.au)

### Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Australia

Phone 1300 463 686

One-to-one mentoring program for vulnerable children and young people 7-17 years. See website for referral information [www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org.au](http://www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org.au)

### SHine SA

Booklet 'Talk it like it is'. A guide for parents on communicating with their children about life, love, relationships and sex [www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)

### Raising Children Network

Information on raising children of all ages [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including, 'Talking sex with young people', 'Children and learning about sexuality', 'Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual', 'Young people, alcohol and drugs', 'Young people, feelings and depression', 'Young people and food', 'Young people and parties', 'Cyber safety', 'Peer pressure', 'Blended families', 'Single parenting', 'Violence towards parents', 'What about parents' rights?' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

## For young people

### Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800

Phone, web or email counselling for children and young people 5-25 years anytime  
[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

### ReachOut Australia

Information and online support for young people under 25 on everyday issues as well as tough times [www.au.reachout.com](http://www.au.reachout.com)

### Headspace

National Youth Mental Health Program

Phone 1800 650 890

Adelaide office phone 1800 063 267

Telephone, online or in-person help for young people 12-25 years and families going through a tough time [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

### SHine SA Sexual Healthline

Phone 1300 883 793, country callers 1800 188 171 9am-12.30pm, Mon to Fri

Confidential advice on a range of sexual health matters

### SHine SA Clinics

Phone 1300 794 584 to make an appointment. See website for drop-in times and fees  
[www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)



**Government of  
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### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660**

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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