consider how best to involve the parents, caregivers, or guardians. In the case of a medical emergency, you need to call for emergency assistance first. If the young person is at risk of suicide or harm (perhaps from alcohol or other drug use), the first aider will need to involve a parent, caregiver, or guardian urgently. Even if the problem is not urgent, it is still best to involve parents and caregivers when possible and as soon as possible. Start by asking the youth if they would like to speak to their parents or caregivers privately or if they would like you, as the first aider, to help. You can offer to talk to their parents or caregivers along with them or by yourself. Parents, caregivers, or guardians may not have a great deal of knowledge about mental health challenges or disorders themselves, and you may be in a position to give them the information they need to get help for their child. This may be information about mental illness or appropriate professional help and how to access it.

If the young person asks you not to involve their parents or caregivers, you need to find out why. In most cases, the young person will say they think their parents or caregivers will not understand, will be angry, cannot afford professional help, or something similar. Most parents or caregivers will do everything they can to help their children. Explaining this can help the young person to overcome their concerns about speaking to a parent or caregiver.

There are situations in which it is not appropriate to contact a parent or caregiver. If a youth reveals an experience of abuse, neglect, or exploitation at home, contacting a parent or caregiver may further endanger the young person. If this is disclosed during your conversation, you may need to contact appropriate authorities. Different states have different laws regarding the reporting of abuse and suspected abuse, including neglect and exposure to violence (See Appendix 1: Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect: Summary of State Laws).

Roles and Responsibilities of Adults When Helping a Youth

Anyone can be a first aider—a teacher, a youth worker, a sports coach, a parent or caregiver, or anyone else who knows the youth well enough to notice that their behavior has changed.

You may have questions regarding helping a young person, particularly with regard to their rights and yours. Some of these questions are answered below.

If I’m helping a young person, and I am not their parent or caregiver, should I contact their parents or caregivers?

Parents play a pivotal role in obtaining any necessary professional help for their children. You will need to
If you are unsure whether it is safe or appropriate to approach a young person's parent or caregiver about a possible mental health problem, seek advice from a mental health professional, community mental health center, or a family run advocacy group.

**Does the young person have the right to privacy?**

Young people have the right to privacy when talking with professionals who are bound to codes of ethical conduct. Although other adults who come into contact with young people may not be bound to these codes, they are a good guide to ethical behavior.

There are limits to confidentiality. If a young person has shared information with you as a first aider and has asked that you keep it confidential, you should do so unless

- You have concerns that the young person is at risk of self-harm or harm to others.
- The young person has disclosed that they are being abused.
- You believe that the young person does not have sufficient maturity to make decisions about privacy.
- As part of your job, you may have guidelines about reporting that override the young person’s concern for confidentiality.

If you are not sure whether you should break confidentiality, call your local mental health agency or speak to a colleague.

Even if confidentiality has to be broken, the young person does have the right to privacy, which means that information about their mental health should not be shared with people who do not need to know about it. In a school, for example, the young person's teachers may need to know, as well as a school counselor or nurse, but information does not need to be shared with the whole staff.

**Does the young person have the right to make decisions about their health care?**

Young people have the right to be involved in or make decisions about their care. In some states, young people under age 18 have the right to

- **Seek their own health care and make decisions about treatment.** However, if the health professional they speak to does not believe they are mature enough to understand their condition and care, the professional may have to contact the young person’s parent or caregiver.
- **Consent to treatment, even if a parent or caregiver does not consent.** If the health professional believes that treatment is in the best interest of the young person and that they are mature enough to understand the treatment and the associated risks, the health professional can act against a parent's or caregiver's wishes. Any conflict may have to be argued in court, and the court will rule in the best interests of the young person.
- **Refuse treatment, even if a parent or caregiver has consented to the treatment.** However, if a health professional or a parent can prove that the young person does not understand the potential consequences of refusing treatment, they can have the young person treated against their wishes.

In an emergency, medical professionals can provide treatment without parental or caregiver consent or the consent of the young person. After age 18, a person has the right to refuse
health care or any medical treatment. If a doctor (or anyone else) provides treatment of any kind without proper consent, it is a crime. However, a health professional can seek the support of the courts to treat a person against their will, if the professional believes that there is a risk to others if the treatment is not given or that the person cannot make their own choices.

If I am helping my own child, is there anything else I need to know?

If another adult approaches you with concerns about your child, it is important that you take this seriously. Sometimes a young person seems relaxed and happy at home, and this may lead you to think that the concerns the person is expressing are exaggerated or untrue. However, it may be that at school your child is very anxious or fearful, is socially isolated, or shows other symptoms that are not apparent in the home. It is important that you discuss the concerns with your child and find out whether they feel differently outside of the home.

You might be fearful of discussing symptoms you have noticed with your child because you are worried it will alienate them. For most people, the opportunity to discuss unpleasant feelings can be a huge relief. Let your child know that you will support them to get the help needed. However, do not let the problem become the main focus of your relationship—spend time enjoying each other’s company and talking about other things.

It can be emotionally difficult to accept that your child needs mental health care. Some parents feel that they are to blame for their child’s mental health challenges or disorders, either because they feel they should have been able to prevent it or perhaps because their own family has a history of mental illness. The reality is that many things contribute to the development of a mental illness. Focus instead on the opportunity to help your child, and if you need it, seek additional support for yourself. The main thing to remember is that you can only do your best.

How to Communicate Effectively With Young People

Providing mental health first aid to a young person can be challenging. Some youth are reluctant to talk with adults about sensitive issues, such as mental health challenges, and others find it difficult to talk about or describe their emotions. Some adults struggle to engage young people in conversations of any kind and will find it even more difficult to talk to youth about sensitive issues. For those adults who find communicating with young people difficult, a number of strategies may help.

**Be genuine.**

Young people are very adept at recognizing when an adult is faking it. If you are uncomfortable in a discussion with a young person, admit it. For example, you might say, “This is hard for me to talk about, and perhaps it’s difficult for you, too.”

**Be careful about using slang.**

Use language you are comfortable with. If you try to use slang you are unfamiliar with or not used to, a young person will be able to tell immediately.

**Allow for silence.**

Young people may struggle at times to express what they want to say. Interrupting a silent moment may prevent the young person from having adequate time to form their words.

**Try different settings for communication to see what works best.**

There is no right setting for tricky conversations, but where you have the conversation might make you or the young person more comfortable. You may find that taking a youth out for a snack offers an opportunity in a different setting to talk about anything they need to. Some adults find it easier to talk to a young person while doing another activity. Others may find that talking to a youth is easier while driving in the car, washing and drying dishes,
or taking a dog for a walk. For someone who works with young people like a teacher or sports coach, talking while playing a sport (kicking a soccer ball around or playing a friendly basketball game) may be more appropriate. Activities that do not require much eye contact can make it easier for the young person to talk, and time-limited activities that have a definite endpoint can be less overwhelming for young people as well. Talk to the young person you are helping to find out what would make them most comfortable.

**Do not compare the young person's life with your own experiences from that age.**
Adults often fall into the trap of thinking that young people today have a much easier life. Remember that your parents' generation thought the same thing about you. Saying, "If I had the opportunities at your age that you have today, I would..." is not helpful. The world changes constantly, and new opportunities mean new challenges.

**Do not trivialize the young person's feelings.**
Mental illness can occur at any age. Wondering what a young person has to be depressed or anxious about implies that their life experiences are less valid just because of their age.

**Do not ask the young person to justify or explain their behavior.**
Young people often act without thinking about the consequences and later realize that they made a mistake. Asking "why" can put young people on the defensive. Asking why they rode down a hill in a shopping cart or threw a party without permission is not as useful as talking about how such behavior could be avoided next time.

**Watch your body language.**
This is always important, no matter who you are talking to. However, with a young person, body language needs extra attention because you may be silently communicating that you, as an adult, are the expert. Defensive or authoritarian body language (arms crossed, hands on hips, standing over the young person) will make it very hard to have a useful conversation. If the young person seems relaxed and open, try to match their body language. If the young person appears defensive, make your body language as open as possible by appearing relaxed, keeping your palms out, sitting alongside but angled toward the young person, and keeping your voice calm and low.

**Provide positive feedback and look for and acknowledge the youth's strengths.**
Young people are told constantly—by their parents or caregivers, their teachers, and the media—what they are doing wrong. Any positive feedback you provide can help make them more willing to communicate with you. Even something as simple as "I'm glad that you are willing to talk to me about this—it shows a great deal of maturity" can help. Identify the young person's strengths, for example, "You are very organized to be holding down a job in addition to not missing a day of school."

**Help them to find the language they are looking for.**
Many young people find it difficult to express their emotions, which can result in their complaining of physical symptoms when the emotional symptoms are what are really bothering them. They may simply shrug their shoulders or say they do not know when asked how they are feeling. You can help them to find the emotional language they need. Offering a few terms to pick from could help, for example, "To me, you don't look very happy. Are you feeling sad, angry, or frustrated?"