



The Safety Net:

Trusted Adults and Peer Relationships as Protective Factors for Teens



Adolescence is a time of immense change, when young people are developing a sense of self, figuring out their interests and gaining independence. During this period, the relationships young people develop—both with peers and trusted adults—play a pivotal role in shaping their choices, sense of self and overall well-being.

The Role of Healthy Friendships

Healthy friendships provide camaraderie and fun, while also serving as a protective factor—a person, activity or characteristic that reduces the risk of harm and promotes healthy development—for young people. There are several ways that healthy friendships can act as a protective factor for young people, including:

- **Build a sense of belonging.** When healthy friendships are present, young people feel more connected, reducing loneliness and isolation.
- **Influence positive choices.** Friends can help support choosing healthy behaviors and reducing participation in risky ones.
- **Heightened emotional well-being.** Having friends to talk things through with can reduce stress and anxiety.
- **Development of healthy life skills.** This period of life is when skills for communication, empathy and conflict resolution begin, having healthy relationships to help forge those skills is pivotal.

When young people have strong, healthy, positive peer relationships, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, including skipping school, gambling and substance use.

What Does Healthy Support Look Like to Young People?

- Feeling heard and respecting their story, feelings and points of view
- Receiving honest feedback without judgment
- Being encouraged and trusted to make informed decisions for themselves

The Power of Trusted Adults

While adolescence is a period when young people gain independence, having identified trusted adults remains essential to healthy growth and development. Trusted adults can be parents/stepparents, teachers, faith-based leaders, community leaders, coaches, counselors, extended family or another safe adult that the youth connects with. These adults can support the young people in their lives through:

- **Guidance and perspective.** Trusted adults can help teens work through challenges and guide them in making informed decisions.
- **Modeling healthy behaviors.** While it may seem that young people want little to do with adults during this stage of life, they learn a lot about how to cope, communicate and problem solve from the adults around them.
- **Safety nets.** Trusted adults give young people a place to turn to in times of need, and knowing they have that support can also build confidence and resilience.

Having even one trusted adult can significantly lower the risk of a young person engaging in substance use, struggling with mental health challenges or participating in risky behaviors.

Keys to Being a Trusted Adult:

- Actively listen more than you speak—no distractions!
- Maintain a position of nonjudgment
- Check in regularly and leave it open-ended
- Be reliable

For young people, having strong friendships and trusted adults creates positive feelings but also acts as a strong protective factor, keeping them safe as they develop strong interpersonal skills and setting them up to make informed, educated, safe decisions.