

Playbook: Healthcare Professionals

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Healthcare professionals – such as physicians, nurses, behavioral health providers, and counselors – provide essential preventative care and treatment to youth. Often, these relationships involve multiple interactions throughout a young person’s development, providing healthcare professionals with a unique opportunity to integrate a health-promoting approach that achieves protection, prevention, and flourishing across all aspects of youth development.

Create the environment.

1. Develop shared goals and expectations.

- Collaborate with youth to set meaningful care goals that support autonomy and positive development.
- Co-create treatment plans that reflect their values and preferences.
- Help youth link care decisions to broader life goals.
- Explore spirituality or reflective practices (e.g., journaling, mindfulness) as sources of strength, and integrate them into care when relevant. Doing so aligns with professional standards and best practices.

2. Foster a nurturing patient experience.

- Design welcoming spaces that reflect youth preferences (e.g., music, snacks, sensory tools).
- Share uplifting messages through media (e.g., television, posters) that reinforce protective beliefs.
- Offer flexible appointment times that respect youth schedules.
- Provide break areas with movement and self-directed activities (e.g., reading, puzzles, games) when peer interaction is limited.

3. Advocate for youth when appropriate.

- Communicate with parents/caregivers on behalf of youth (with their permission) when treatment adherence is an issue.
- Support youth preferences in care decisions that are consistent with clinical recommendations.
- Assertively pursue steps to ensure youth receive optimal care. For example, help secure access to needed specialist services by reaching out directly when necessary.

4. Innovate to meet patient needs.

- Develop new programs or unique solutions that align with the treatment focus and healing (e.g., healthy cooking classes, patient vegetable gardens).
- For providers in more traditional medical settings, advocate for longer appointment times to allow more time for relationship-building.
- Consider ways to streamline services received during appointments and who those services are provided by to allow as much face-to-face unstructured time for relationship building. For example, sending screening measures via a portal to be completed prior to the appointment.

Have conversations.

1. Practice honest and caring communication.

- Show full presence, patience, and respect to create a safe space for open dialogue, especially around sensitive topics.
- Be transparent about services, procedures, and confidentiality to build trust.
- Share professional insights honestly, linking risky behaviors to youth’s values and goals. In the spirit of the youth’s autonomy and collaboration, ask permission first.
- Balance honesty with compassion to show genuine care.
- Validate concerns with empathy (e.g., “I can see why that’s difficult”).
- Respond to disclosures of risky behavior with nonjudgment and appreciation for their trust (e.g., “Thank you for sharing this”).
- Ask permission to discuss healthier alternatives that align more closely with their values and goals.

“Thank you for trusting me with this. I know it’s not easy to talk about. How does taking care of this issue fit with what you want for yourself?”

“Before we start, I want to make sure you understand what we’re doing and why. Is that okay with you?”

“I am glad you are focusing on getting protein to help your muscles develop. Can I share my perspective as your doctor? I care about you and am concerned because this diet can really impact your kidneys.”

“What are some things you do when you feel stressed? Some youth your age prefer reaching out to a friend, going for a walk, or other social or physical activities. What are your thoughts about those options?”



2. Show support in meaningful ways.

- Use kind words and gestures to recognize progress and achievements. The more specific, the better.
- Communicate in age-appropriate ways, validate concerns, and support informed decisions.
- Reassure youth they're not alone—you're sharing responsibility for their care.
- Consider offering peer support groups for youth with similar needs.
- Problem-solve WITH the youth rather than FOR the youth. Ask them to come up with possible solutions, then offer to share your ideas.

3. Build connection, voice, and mattering.

- Build rapport by exploring interests and sharing appropriate personal insights.
- Reflect on when youth feel most supported in care.
- Emphasize their role in decision-making to the greatest degree possible.
- Welcome questions and feedback on how to improve, and incorporate the feedback they offer.
- Offer follow-ups when time is limited to ensure all concerns are addressed.

4. Model and celebrate growth and resilience.

- Notice and praise specific efforts, persistence, and positive behaviors.
- Reframe health-related setbacks as learning opportunities to strengthen problem-solving and coping skills.

"I noticed you've been consistent with [medication/appointments/self-care]—that takes real commitment. That type of dedication will serve you well in life."

"I hear your struggles and see how hard you're working on this. Let's work on this together and see if we can come up with some next steps that feel right to you."

"It's really important to me that we get to know each other and you feel comfortable with me. What's something most people don't know about you?"

"What helps you feel heard when you're here? Is there anything I do that makes it easier or harder to open up?"

"You're the expert on your own body so you get to decide. I have some ideas, but I want to hear what you think first."

"It's okay to feel this way, a lot of people feel nervous about that. I'm really proud of you bringing it up so we can find ways to work through this."

"I appreciate how you handled that situation, and you didn't give up – that shows real strength and commitment."

"Mistakes are how we learn what works for us. We build resilience every time we try again after something doesn't work out. How might you approach this differently next time?"

1. Empower youth to take ownership of their health.

- Equip youth with the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to actively participate in their healthcare decisions and self-management.
- When developmentally appropriate, invite parent/caregivers to step away during portions of the appointments and coach them on supporting their child's growing autonomy while balancing their need for guidance.

2. Cultivate a health-promoting workplace culture.

- Help staff build confidence in discussing tough topics (e.g., suicidal thoughts and actions, sexual health, substance use) by normalizing discomfort, modeling approaches, and offering practice with feedback.
- Promote staff well-being by recognizing their value, providing burnout prevention resources, and fostering team connection.