

Protecting the Health of Teens: Consent & Confidentiality Laws

Minnesota providers of health care services to adolescents support existing consent and confidentiality laws. Most providers believe that these laws allow adolescents to get the care they need.

What's wrong?

Adolescents in Minnesota often engage in behaviors that are risky to their health:

- They become sexually active at an early age; some become pregnant.
- They start smoking and begin drinking. On average, 12th graders report starting these behaviors at the age of 15 years.

Mental health is also at risk. Nearly one quarter of Minnesota 12th graders report feelings of low self-esteem, depression or disordered eating.

Teens need care in the areas of reproductive health, chemical dependency and mental health. Yet, at a time when they are likely to begin behaviors that will seriously affect their adult health, teens:

- use health care services least;
- are least likely to be insured, and
- are least likely to use traditional medical services.

Adolescents say that one major barrier to health care is concern about confidentiality of care.

The Solution: Protect Confidentiality, Educate Parents

Adolescent desire for privacy related to certain health services is a normal part of adolescent development. While research generally shows that parents can have a positive impact on the health behaviors and health care decisions of youth, there is little evidence that mandatory parental involvement makes for healthier teens. There is no evidence that current Minnesota laws allowing for confidential services affect parental involvement in the health decisions of their adolescent children.

The Research: "How Do We Know"

Overall, the research findings and the findings of a survey of adolescent health care providers, conducted in October, 1998 by the School of Public Health and the National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Research Center at the University of Minnesota, suggest that reducing or eliminating consent and access would create a barrier to adolescent health care services and would not encourage better parent-teen communication.

For More Information

If you want to know more about issues of adolescent access to confidential health care services or issues of significance and concern in the lives of Minnesota teens, contact:

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Best Bets

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Existing confidentiality and consent laws in Minnesota support adolescent health. These laws should:

- **Make it easier for teens to confide in their health care providers.**
- **Make it easier for teens to disclose the kind of information needed for appropriate diagnosis and treatment.**
- **Acknowledge that a desire for privacy is a normal part of adolescent development.**
- **Are consistent with the ethics governing the doctor-patient relationship.**

Parents still play an important role in the health of their adolescent children. Health care providers should continue to:

- **Encourage teens to involve their parents in their health care.**
- **Explore —with adolescents— reasons why they may be reluctant to do so.**