

The Role of the Adult Volunteer When Youth Turn to Them in Crisis

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Volunteers who work with adolescents may be called upon for help during times of crisis in the lives of youth. Because of the supportive role that adult volunteers play in the lives of youth, they may be the first to whom youth confide serious troubles or challenges. In most situations, a volunteer can work with the young person to seek help from her or his parent(s).

However, volunteers face complex ethical situations when young people confide in them that they may be sexually active, pregnant, using or abusing alcohol or other drugs, or struggling with sexual identity (as examples). When is it ethical hold the information confidential, and for how long? As youth professionals, what advice can we give volunteers that is developmentally appropriate for a young person in serious crisis? This paper offers suggestions for youth professionals to share with adult volunteers regarding how to respond to such situations.

Communicating Support

The young person has come to the adult volunteer either (1) because the youth trusts the volunteer with significant a confidence, (2) because the youth is afraid to confide in parent(s) or guardian(s), or (3) some combination of these. The adult volunteer has the responsibility to help and respect the young person. How this challenge is managed will be shaped by the age and developmental stage of the child, as well as by the particular reason the child chose to reveal the issue.

In talking with the young person, the following messages are appropriate.

- I will help you to the best of my ability, as long as you let me help you. Letting me help you means that you will act responsibly and remove yourself from any danger.
- This is a serious issue, and you need to handle this as an adult. It probably will be difficult. Because you are a minor, your parent(s) has a legal responsibility to care for you and to be involved. It is important that you take responsibility for the issue, which INCLUDES telling your parent(s).
- I will have trouble managing this problem with you alone. I will need to include other people who can help us determine the best ways to resolve this challenge. Those people might include other caring adults, helping professionals, and ultimately your parent(s).

Supporting Youth in Crisis

Several key questions can guide the support of the young person.

Are You in Danger?

Is the young person in immediate danger, either due to a health risk or due to reaction from family members or peers? (Although it is unusual, some youth are met with violence when they tell parent(s) that they are pregnant or when they "come out" as gay or lesbian.) If so, the volunteer has the responsibility to do whatever is necessary to protect the health of the youth by seeking medical care, counseling, or other support with or for the youth.

This would ideally be done in cooperation with the parent(s). However, in some cases this is not immediately possible due to concerns for the welfare of the young person. In such cases, the volunteer should remain as active as possible in helping the young person address the issue. The young person brought the volunteer into the situation either due to fear of parent(s) or trust of the volunteer. For that reason, the volunteer should remain involved. Of course, there may be significant challenges, as the parent(s) may ultimately resent this involvement. It is important to remember that the welfare of the young person is the primary concern.

Have You Talked with Your Parent(s)? If Not, Why Not?

If the parent(s) has been told, it is important to determine why the youth has involved the volunteer. Do they want additional help with the problem? The volunteer must try to determine how she or he can help the youth as well as the parent, and in what ways this involvement is appropriate.

Some youth will not have told parent(s) because of their fear of the consequence. Unfortunately, some youth fear their parent(s) for good reason. As mentioned above, in rare cases these issues may be met with violence or being kicked out of the home. In these cases, it is important that the youth have a non-parent adult in whom they can confide and with whom they can problem-solve. This places the volunteer in a difficult situation, because the necessary response in this case is to keep the confidence until it is safe for the child to confide in the parent(s).

What Is the Right Thing to Do?

If the young person hasn't told her or his parent(s) because of fear of disappointing them or of facing a confrontation, it is the role of the volunteer to help the young person with the immediate problem while encouraging her or him to reveal the issue to the parent(s). In other words, the youth should know that it is *not acceptable* not to tell the parent(s) because she or he will get in trouble.

The young person should know that it is only acceptable to wait if she or he is in danger. In such cases, the volunteer should commit to helping the young person under the condition that a plan is developed for telling the parent(s). The plan might not involve telling the parent that day or that week, but the plan should outline the steps the young person will take to become prepared to talk with the parent(s) about the issue. The volunteer should agree to provide support until that time.

Finally, the consequences of not keeping the plan must be discussed. The volunteer should explain that she or he has been put in a difficult position and that if the youth does not follow the plan, the volunteer will have to tell the parent(s) in the interest of the youth's safety and health.

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