

Providing Family Planning Services to Adolescents during Uncertain Times: Tips and Strategies

Public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic present daunting challenges both to organizations providing reproductive health services and to youth trying to access these services. Yet, such crises can spark innovative strategies to meet the challenges, resulting in new approaches to providing care that can strengthen health services overall.

This job aid presents insights from both providers and youth on ways to adapt your family planning project's services to meet young people's emerging needs.

Provide whole-person, client-centered care

Focusing on the whole person and their needs and circumstances beyond just the presenting problem is a basic principle of providing youth-friendly reproductive health services. As the pandemic has taken its toll on young people's mental health and put many families at risk of housing loss and food shortages, a whole-person approach to care is even more essential.

- Proactively check in with youth about how they are doing overall. In all virtual and in-person visits, be sure to ask if they have any additional concerns they wish to discuss.



“It really helped that my provider just took the time to ask me how I was doing and listened to what I had to say.”

- Be prepared to connect clients to a full range of services and resources.



“We knew that many people were struggling throughout the pandemic to meet basic needs, so we wanted to make sure we had an active, updated list of places where people can get emergency assistance and referrals to other social resources.”

- Facilitate youth access to behavioral health services and support.



“As part of our virtual outreach events, we were able to bring in our social workers to do mental health workshops, and this is something we're going to try to continue.”

- Recommend places, such as virtual after-school programs or local youth-serving organizations, where youth can connect with other youth and adults.

Recognize and address the unique confidentiality issues associated with virtual visits



“I think the hardest part of having a medical visit from home is that I'm not always alone in the house, and more often than not, there are multiple people here and I may not want to share certain information with my provider if I know the other people in the house may be able to hear me...”

Here are some strategies to preserve and protect a youth's confidentiality before and during a virtual visit:

- Ask youth clients what method of contact they prefer and if it is okay for clinic staff to reach out to them using this method.
- Confirm with youth clients that you have their phone number/contact information rather than their parents' contact information (but keep in mind that not all youth will have their own phones).
- Reassure youth that no personal information will be mentioned via text, voicemail, or email, and that personal information will only be discussed with the client, with their consent, and under circumstances that protect their confidentiality.
- Allow flexibility and expanded hours for scheduling of virtual visits, including late-night hours, if possible.
- At the beginning of the visit, do a privacy screen. Ask "Are you alone in the room?" or "Can other people hear what you are saying?"
- If parents are in the room, explain to them that, just as with visits at the clinic, part of the visit is devoted to one-on-one time with the young person.
- Be prepared to take a history and conduct risk assessments using yes/no questions. If your virtual platform allows it, you might suggest that clients can type their responses in the chat box.

Youth's suggestions for what their peers can do to protect their privacy during a virtual visit:

- Take the call in the bathroom, outside, or in a parked car
- Use headphones
- Schedule the call at a time when there are fewer people at home

Find new ways to get medications and supplies to youth clients

With more virtual visits happening, clinics have come up with creative ways to deliver the prescriptions and supplies that they previously gave youth on-site at the clinic, including:

- Mail delivery of supplies in plain, unmarked packaging
- Curbside pickup of supplies at the clinic or other community locations frequented by youth
- Use of a mobile van to bring supplies to people in their neighborhoods



PROVIDER

"The other exciting thing that we did was to start 'That Box,' which includes home testing kits, condoms, and then just some fun things like little toys and pencils and fun masks. It's just a nice little box with no markings to show what's inside. Since November, we've gotten over 220 boxes out to the community."

Keep the channels open for youth input and feedback

With clinic providers and staff stretched thin during a public health emergency, it may seem necessary to temporarily suspend activities that are not direct services. But even in a crisis, it is essential to maintain channels for youth to express their needs and preferences for services—whether through a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) if you have one, listening sessions with clients, or other outreach activities.



PROVIDER

"We asked our YAC if they wanted to continue meeting [during COVID], and overwhelmingly, all of them said 'Yes! Please allow us to have a say in something! We don't have a say in when we're having graduation or whether we go to prom. There's so many things we've lost autonomy over that affect us, so can we please just keep this [the YAC] going?'"

Intensify your agency's outreach activities on social media

In emergency conditions, when youth are not attending school or community events, outreach via social media is even more important. Your clinic can leverage social media to:

- Let youth know that you are there to provide reproductive health services
- Advise them about the protocols for in-person visits
- Inform them of the availability of telehealth services and how to set up a telehealth visit

In addition, some family planning projects have used Facebook and Instagram to host virtual events—such as workout nights, pride events, or healthy relationships groups—to support healthy behaviors, strengthen connections with local youth, and help them to feel less isolated. If you have a YAC, consider allowing youth to run or create content for your social media outreach. This approach can make the messages more engaging and reduce the workload of program staff.



“[The clinic I normally go to] is trying to make fun events via Zoom... you can tell someone, ‘Hey, I’m just going to this event,’ and you don’t have to say, ‘I’m going to the clinic.’ And it’s other youth there and it makes you feel good and it gives you a connection.”

In summary

Providers and youth clients agree that many of the innovative approaches to maintain services during the COVID-19 pandemic should remain in place after the crisis is over. These innovations have increased access to services and helped to foster a culture of care that focuses on the whole person.



“We’ve had some really exciting things happen and I’m kind of glad that the pandemic was able to push us... It allowed us to think more creatively as to how we can continue to provide services to our patients.”