

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: **Need a Helping Hand : Dealing with Services**

A range of services is available to support young people and their families. Services and programs vary according to the problems and issues they try to address and the ways they approach their work. At first they can all seem similar and it can be confusing. Even though there are many youth and family services, when you work out your specific concerns, only a few may be able to address your particular needs.

It can take a bit of persistence to find a service that meets your needs. While it can feel frustrating, you often gain something useful from each person you talk to. As you work through the different leads, you are picking up knowledge of the field, and improving your understanding. Each time, there is chance you will find a useful message or connection.

Eligibility criteria

There are some basic questions that will determine which services you are eligible for and which ones may suit you.

What is the problem?

There are services that specialise in issues such as: drug or alcohol use, mental health or eating disorders. Other services are more general. Some provide counselling or outreach services; others support groups; or recreation; some have an education, training or employment focus.

Where do you live?

Some services cater to particular areas. You may have to live in the region to be eligible.

How old is the young person?

Some services are open to 10–18 year olds, while others deal with young people up to age 25.

Do you want to be involved?

Some services work with young people treating them as independent individuals. They do not involve the family – they may even exclude the parents to respect the young person's privacy.

Other services see the involvement of the family as part of the picture. If you want to be involved and your child is happy for you to be, you should look for a youth-family service or ask the workers when you contact an agency whether they are open to involving family members in their work with young people.

Who is the help for?

Are you looking for help for the young person, or for yourself? Is the young person willing to participate? Some services support family members whether or not the young person is involved.

Starting the search

You have to start somewhere. Have a few ideas about what kind of help you think you are looking for and start ringing around. Be prepared for it to take a while before you feel you are making progress.

You might get some information about types of programs and eligibility criteria from websites or brochures. Personal recommendations from someone who has had a similar experience, may be the best place to start. It can also be helpful to 'listen' to your gut feelings.

Who should contact the service?

Sometimes it is appropriate for you to contact the service but if your young person is old enough and independent enough, it may be more appropriate to leave it to them to make the approach themselves. You can do the initial investigation about which service might be best, but let them decide if they wish to act on the information. Some services require the young person to contact the service themselves, so as to demonstrate motivation and commitment to attending.

How to approach a service

Put aside some time to make a few calls. Expect to have to speak to a few different people. You might have to try a few times to get onto the people you are looking for. You may have to leave a message.

Start by asking some basic questions about the type of service and eligibility criteria for services. If you do not fit an agency's criteria, or they do not fit your needs, ask them for the next place to try.

Try to get to the right person at the service before you tell your whole story. At the beginning it should be enough to give a couple of basic details. Eventually you will need to be able to answer the following sorts of questions:

- Where do you and your child live?
- Who are you concerned about (what is their age and sex)?
- What is the problem (what are you concerned about, what are their difficulties, what behaviours are there, what effect is this having on the family)?
- How long has it been a problem?
- What have you tried (approaches, services)?
- What services do you think you need (someone that a concerned parent can talk to, someone to help your young person, someone to work with you both, information, counselling, a treatment program, a group)?

After you have told your story and worked out that your situation is suited to the particular program, the worker should tell you the next step in the process. They may tell you they need to receive a call from your young person saying they are interested in attending the service, or that you or the young person need to come in for an assessment.

You may be placed on a waiting list. Ask how long the waiting is - days, weeks or months. It is disheartening when help is not available immediately, however this is the reality of many services.

If you have a preference for a male or female worker, or a young or old one, you can request this, although these issues are not usually important when it comes down to who is helpful. Usually it is about feeling comfortable, understood and supported by the person you see and their experience with others in your situation.

Don't be afraid to ask about the qualifications and experience of the workers. If you are going to commit time and effort to seeking help, you have a right to know about the experience and expertise of the service-providers and to then decide whether this is the right service for you.

Give feedback

Like all services, some staff are more friendly and some less, some workers are more capable and some less, some people make it their business to know a lot and some do not, and people have their good days and bad days.

If you get an unfriendly or unhelpful response, you may have caught someone on a bad day, or the systems in place may not be adequate. It is good for the sector for you to give feedback to the service about your experience. If the service has been particularly helpful or unhelpful, your information may assist the service to be as good as it can. Write to the service or ring and ask to speak to a manager if you feel this would be helpful.

Getting the most out of the service

If your child agrees to start attending a service, talk to them about the fact that it will take time for them to work through the problems and issues they are experiencing. They need to make a genuine commitment to getting and receiving help.

If you start to see someone yourself, do not expect them to instantly solve all your problems. These problems took a long time to develop and will take time to resolve. Still, you may be surprised at what can be achieved quickly. Small changes or different ways of seeing things can have a big impact.

Try to be clear about what you want to achieve from the service that you choose to attend. Let the worker know if you think they are not addressing the issues that you came to work on. But also be prepared to look at what you need to do differently to help the situation. Be on time and reliable and open to different ways of looking at things. Always try to take away at least one good idea or useful piece of information. It is ok to take notes if you want to, as you may forget things that are useful to remember, if you are feeling anxious or nervous.

When the young person will not accept help

If your young person is resistant to seeing anyone it can still be useful for you to find out information and pass it on to him or her.

Find out about the range of programs available in your area. Contact services for more specific information about the people they will see and what they do. Let your young person know what you have found out. Tell them about it or leave brochures for them to read or a letter to explain it. It will be up to them whether they act on it.

Even if they do not act on it, you have shown them you believe seeking help is worthwhile and this may be a seed that produces action at a later time. In the mean time, it may be appropriate to get help for yourself so that you can understand your young person's situation better.

When the service will not talk to families

Some services do not deal with families. They treat the young person as a separate individual.

If you want to be involved, ask before you start what role parents can play in the agency's program, and choose a service that allows family involvement.

However, your young person may become involved with a service that does not automatically include you. If you try to contact the service your child is attending, you may find they will not speak to you, even to confirm that your child attends there. They do this so as to respect the privacy of their clients.

If you need to contact the service, ask your young person for their permission first, and ask them to let their worker know that they are okay for you to speak with them. Your young person may be asked to sign a consent form agreeing that their worker can speak to you. You may need to reassure your young person that you do not want to interfere, but want to learn about how you can best help the situation. They could come with you or be there when you ring up, or they could give you a written note.

If your young person does not want you involved, you should respect this. They have a right to privacy. A key thing you are trying to achieve is for your child to become an independent, responsible person. If they are getting help for themselves, then this is a big positive step.

You can still ask for general information about how the service operates and what kind of work it does. You should also let the service know that you are willing to be involved when they are ready.

While it can be useful for you both to get support from the same place, if that does not work out, you can still get help for yourself from another agency.



Tips from this Help Sheet

- Although trying to find the right service can be frustrating, each time you are learning more about services and what will help.
- There are eligibility criteria for most services, which you will need to meet before they will help you.
- Websites, brochures, personal recommendations or just starting to ring around are all good places to start.
- Sometimes it may be best, or necessary, for the young person to contact the service themselves.
- Have a set of basic questions ready that you want to ask the service.
- Give feedback on good or bad service.
- If your young person is resistant to seeing anyone it can still be useful for you to find out information and pass it on to them.
- If you want to be involved, ask before you start what role parents can play in the agency's program, and choose a service that allows family involvement.





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→ **Strong Bonds is a project of Jesuit Social Services.**

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