Adolescence is often seen as a phase that marks a transition from dependence to independence from family. The reality is, however, that adolescence usually marks a move to a more mature “interdependence”, where family relationships become more equal and reciprocal.

Strong adult relationships that can ride the difficult times in adolescence are important for future health and wellbeing. A good relationship with at least one significant adult who provides unconditional love and positive regard is a protective factor against adverse events in adolescence.¹

With young people who have complex needs, more than one of these relationships may need to be developed and nurtured, since the risk of ‘ruptures’ in a singular relationship in times of crisis is high.²

Addressing the connections that young people with complex needs have with family is important no matter what the current quality of those relationships is. Family connections can be built and rebuilt when both parties are receptive to the idea, at any time, even when parenting skills in the past have been poor.³

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how their behaviour may have been ‘received’ and explore ways to express feelings and needs more appropriately to increase the likelihood of better outcomes. You may need to help them to learn to be assertive rather than aggressive.

**Help them to recognise strengths in family relationships**

Most family members will have strengths, which may be highlighted so that the young person is better able to appreciate their family members. Sometimes people get “stuck” in a way of thinking about their family, and need some help to consider their family relationships in a different way.

**Help them to practice communication skills**

Help young people understand effective communication, through modeling and guidance. For example:

- Encourage them to work out what they really want to express before they start to communicate with family members.
- Highlight the importance of body-language (including soft eye contact, low calm voice tone, relaxed body posture, no threatening gestures etc.)
- Using “I” language, taking responsibility for their own feelings and expressing these so that the other person understands and may be able to respond
- Properly listening to hear the other person’s thoughts and feelings and checking you’ve heard right.
- If face-to-face communication is too difficult at this stage, maybe a letter, email or text message is easier until things improve.

**Help them to practice other relationship skills**

Try introducing your clients to the idea that good person-to-person skills are likely to improve relationships with others. Encourage them to try the following strategies:

- Practice putting yourself in the shoes of another person. Think about what the other person might be feeling or wanting.
- Try to assume goodwill in the other (for example, that they care as best they can and are trying to communicate as best they can)
- Negotiate for a situation where both sides are happy with decisions and outcomes, not just one side.
- Look at other ways to resolve conflicts, e.g. involving a third party
- Sometimes agree to disagree – no-one can get what they want all the time
- Try to show signs to the other of wanting to work it out

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**Ideas from this Help Sheet**

- Family connections can be built and rebuilt when both parties are receptive to the idea, at any time, even when parenting skills in the past have been poor.
- Your role with a young person is limited. Building more long-term connections is critical.
- Even short, strengths-based discussions around family can be helpful, if your role cannot offer more.
- Young people may need help to discern good and bad qualities of relationships.
- Help young people to take responsibility for their own behaviour in relationships.
- Help them to practice good communication and relationship skills.
- Facilitate connections directly when you can.

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**Related Help Sheets**

**Worker Help Sheets**

- Simple Guide to Genograms
- Dealing with “Black & White” Thinking
- Reframing Feelings About Family
- When Contact with Family is Harmful
- Confidentiality and Duty of Care Issues

**Parent Help Sheets**

- Family Dynamics
- Building Our Relationship
- Improving Communication
- Dealing with Conflict
and continue the relationship where possible

- Try to be honest and reliable with others where possible, to build trust
- Find things in common to talk about, laugh about, or do together
- Be willing to give and receive help from others – everyone needs to do this
- Encourage the young person to do tasks between your sessions, for example, to contact someone significant to them, or to try out one of the above strategies.

**Facilitate connections directly where you are able to**

Direct assistance from you to help build connections with others is likely to benefit young people greatly. In particular, with re-connections, support may be needed for both young person and their family. This may involve:

- Meeting with the family member prior to the young person meeting with them (so long as you have the young person's consent)
- Facilitating/mediating understanding between young person and family members
- Providing information to family members
- Referral to family mediation or counselling where appropriate

**Useful Links**

**Website for Young People**

  This brings up a list of youth friendly websites with resources regarding family relationships. A number of these websites are very useful, for example:
  - Reach Out Central> Sorting Stuff Out
  - Child and Youth Health
  - When Love Hurts
  - Relationships Australia > Building Better Relationships
  - Bursting the Bubble


**Suggested Reading**