



Adolescent-Friendly Health Services at School-Based Health Centers

The piece that brings me back every time to a school-based health center is it really means I can do community health. If you're in a hospital, private office, or even in an FQHC, you are a medical place and you only see people if they show up... When you're in school, the school is your patient. One of my personal goals is to see all the students...I think there's so much preventive work we can do, even for kids who don't have an identifiable health problem...I think all the students can use something we offer.
- SBHC Nurse Practitioner, Oakland, CA

The number of school-based health centers (SBHCs) in California has been growing consistently over the last 20 years despite the lack of a dedicated state funding stream such as that found in many other states. The result is that SBHCs in California are increasingly adopting a model in which they serve, not only the students in the school, but also members of the broader community. CSHC is supportive of this model in that it increases patient volume and clinic revenue, and also increases access to care for the entire community. However, the original impetus for SBHCs was to create a model for health care delivery that would be more successful in reaching children and adolescents. The adolescent population is of particular concern because teens are a unique population that demands a particular type of practitioner, clinic environment, and clinical practice. This is particularly important when it comes to providing effective reproductive health services for youth.

The purpose of this paper is to assist SBHCs that serve the entire community in maintaining an adolescent-friendly practice to ensure the best healthcare experience for a young person. The practices described in this paper have emerged from research on adolescent health as well as interviews with staff at SBHCs that do exemplary work with teens.

This guide walks through each step of an average appointment—from the front desk and waiting room, to the medical visit, and to the SBHC's visibility in the school—and provides strategies for creating an adolescent-friendly practice.

The Front Desk and Waiting Area

For a lot of students, it's the first time they've been to healthcare without a parent. It's an amazing learning experience for students. In some ways, it's a rite of passage. We try to make that a positive experience because so many people have negative experiences with healthcare because they're entering a system that's not really set up for youth: it's either set up for babies, adults, or they're in the ER. Everything here is for them.
- SBHC Nurse Practitioner | Oakland, CA

The front desk sets the tone for the SBHC, and it is important to make that first impression a positive and lasting one.

Ensure an Inclusive and Welcoming Reception • As students' first point of contact in the health center, front office staff can be the most welcoming adults in the SBHC. Front office staff should be non-judgmental, easy to relate to, and refrain from discussing personal or confidential issues. They should be able to relate to teen patients in a culturally competent manner and, to ensure inclusivity, should avoid making immediate assumptions about gender or sexual orientation. *Most importantly, they should enjoy working with young people.*

Our front-desk person? Our students love her! The staff are people that the youth can relate to and want to be around, and that's more true when you have drop-ins. Students can come in to get a Maxi pad, fill up their water bottles, use the bathroom, or just talk and hang out. - SBHC Site Supervisor, Oakland, CA

In terms of staff, the way they looked made a difference. They didn't dress above us. They were casual even when we entered the clinic, and I didn't feel like I needed to be so professional around them. You don't feel like you're being judged, and as youth, we have a lot of questions and we know that whatever we ask, we won't be judged. - Former SBHC youth leader, Los Angeles, CA

Protect Privacy • Privacy is a very high priority for adolescents. According to young people, guaranteeing privacy greatly enhances the reputation and popularity of the health center.^{1,2,3} SBHCs should ensure that youth have both physical and acoustical privacy while at the health center. If the SBHC serves the whole community, it is optimal to have separate entrances, registration windows, and waiting rooms for adolescents and other members the community. If separate intake locations are not possible, the staff can have youth fill out a half-sheet of paper with their name, reason for a visit, and visit urgency; that way they do not have to say the information out loud where other community members might hear.

Offer Student-Only Hours • If the health center serves the whole community, it should have teen-only hours, especially for young people who do not want to the run the risk of bumping into a family member or neighbor in the health center. Finally, allowing walk-ins is essential for giving youth access to the health center when they may need it most.⁴ A great way to make sure clinic hours work for youth is to have a youth advisory board choose the hours with SBHC staff.

Create a Comfortable Environment • The health center can be an inviting place where students will want to spend their free time, such as during lunch or after school. It can have magazines, colorful walls, couches, comfortable chairs, music, television programs, and healthy snacks that appeal to students; as well as decorations that reflect different genders, sexual orientations, abilities, cultures, and ethnicities. Most importantly, the environment should reduce a young person's possible anxiety associated with seeing a health care provider.⁵

Quick Check!

- Do you have student-only hours?
- Have you consulted with students to ask if the hours of operation are convenient for them?
- Does the front desk staff avoid discussing the reason for the student's visit out loud?
- What are three words that describe your waiting room?
- What can you add to your waiting room to make it a more comfortable space?
- In your SBHC, how do you inform adolescents of their minor consent and confidentiality rights?
- Is your policy on mandated reporting visible and in understandable language?

A lot of it is the aesthetic appeal of the health center... I think for a lot of people the doctor's office is scary, and the whole health field in general is the scariest place, especially when things go wrong. But if you focus on the aesthetic appeal of the health center, it brings your attention away from the cold and sterile associations with traditional health care settings. It really helps you become more comfortable with the place you're going to get treated. - Former SBHC client, Los Angeles, CA

Offer Understandable Health Education Materials • Health education materials are essential, especially if they are eye-catching and easy to read. We're all too familiar with traditional health pamphlets, so try to stock materials that are youth-friendly. A good way to ensure this is by hosting a youth focus group, where students can give feedback on the utility and readability of materials. When it comes to placement in the health center, health education materials should be in locations like the waiting room, exam room, and bathroom where youth can pick them up without others seeing.

Provide Information on Minor Consent & Confidential Services • The SBHC should have up-to-date knowledge about California's minor consent and confidentiality laws. The health center can define, promote, and post its policies on confidentiality throughout the health center. Briefly informing students of confidentiality policies and what kinds of situations have to be reported can help them feel in control of their visit and reduce anxiety associated with mandated reporting.

The Visit

Hire and Retain Health Care Providers Who Have Experience with Youth • It is important to recognize that not all providers are comfortable working with teens or want to address teen issues. This is not a judgment, just a reality. If SBHCs are going to be successful serving teens, it is essential that they hire staff that *want to work with teens*. Health care providers should be trained in adolescent health and have experience working with youth. Experienced adolescent health providers can not only make the visit more comfortable but can also increase communication and understanding.⁶ In addition, consistency of providers is important to helping youth feel more open discussing their health needs and questions. The sponsoring clinic of the SBHC should strive to assign the same health providers consistently to the SBHC to build adolescent-provider trust.⁷

Have a Health Educator on Staff • The majority of adolescent health issues involve behaviors and choices made by teens—initiation of sexual activity, use of substances, wearing helmets and seatbelts, getting regular exercise, etc. Moreover many adolescents have questions about their health and often have no reliable source of information. For these reason, a health educator is an *essential* position to in an SBHC to effectively serve teens. Youth are often more comfortable with a health educator because he/she is typically younger than the medical provider and often more comfortable with sensitive topics. At many SBHCs, the health educator does the initial intake for a visit. The intake is a significant moment for many youth as it's the first time they can experience a confidential setting and share their health concerns with a friendly adult. The health educator can be a trusted ally during appointments, follow-ups, and drop-in health education sessions.

At the SBHC, it's an educational experience, too. You have that resource with someone who can educate you on your health, instead of rush a lot for the sake of time. It's important to build that relationship to make sure the person is informed. In other health care settings, sometimes it's so fast, you forget why you came in. - Former SBHC client, Richmond, CA

Provide Sexual and Reproductive Health Services • Many youth look to their SBHCs for reproductive health services because they are either worried about confidentiality or feel uncomfortable talking with their family doctor.^{8,9} Therefore, it is critical that an SBHC offer these services to reduce barriers to youth obtaining care.¹⁰ These services can range from basic sex education to STI treatment and providing birth control at the clinic.

Offer HIV, STI, and Pregnancy Testing • HIV testing, sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing, and pregnancy testing should be available at all SBHCs serving youth. It is important to emphasize to young people that only urine samples are needed for STI testing, rather than requiring pelvic exams for young women and urethral swabs for young men.¹¹ In some settings, females can now be tested for Chlamydia using a simple, self-applied vaginal swab. To maximize opportunities for screening, offer testing regardless of which services are sought at a visit.¹² Implementing proactive clinical protocols can also maximize screenings. For example, these can include: opt-out screenings for new clients, paper or electronic chart flags for providers, and standing orders for tests during time-limited visits.¹³

Administer HPV Vaccinations • SBHCs serving teens should offer Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccinations. California state law allows youth 12 years of age and older to consent to the HPV vaccine. SBHCs can reduce disparities in HPV vaccine series completion by giving the vaccine at school.¹⁴

Provide STI Treatment • STI treatment is a vital service at SBHCs. Single-dose medication treatments are helpful for increasing adherence in youth.¹⁵ Health care providers can dispense the single-dose medication directly during the visit. The SBHC is also well-positioned to offer partner therapy for STIs, which promotes treatment adherence and better partner communication.¹⁶

Dispense Contraceptives & Emergency Contraception • Health centers should dispense contraceptives whenever possible, rather than sending youth to the pharmacy with a prescription. Studies show that the farther an adolescent must travel to obtain contraceptives, the longer the interval will be between initiating sexual activity and receiving protection.¹⁷ Also, pelvic examinations are no longer required before dispensing contraceptives. Studies show that effective use of hormonal contraception is more likely if the adolescent can initiate the method right away, rather than waiting for her next menses.¹⁸ The health center should also dispense Plan B/Emergency Contraception because it needs to be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex or birth control failure.

Quick Check!

- Do the SBHC's medical providers have a genuine interest in teens? If you sense they might not be comfortable with certain topics, can you send them to trainings?
- Does your SBHC have a health educator?
- Does your SBHC offer the reproductive health services described in this guide?
- How many medical providers practice at your SBHC?
- Do you offer confidential time for youth who visit the health center with their parents?

Confidential Time for Sensitive Services • Some health centers practice “confidential time” during a visit when a young person can see the health care provider without their parent in the exam room. Confidential time is critical to providing appropriate care to teens, even if the intake forms do not indicate any issues of a confidential nature. The SBHC should inform parents and young people of this practice at the front desk so that parents are not surprised or offended when they are asked to leave the exam room for part of the visit.

Within the structure of the visit, one of the things I do is I make sure that I have time alone with adolescents for any appointment, even if they come with their parents. The

parent and child know that from the beginning there will be confidential time. Even if their parent is around, [adolescents] know they'll have confidential time. - SBHC Nurse Practitioner, Oakland, CA

After the Visit

Practice Confidential Correspondence • It is important that all phone calls and texts protect the privacy of the youth. Young people can specify phone numbers and email addresses as confidential or not confidential. This will allow health center staff to tailor phone messages, emails, and texts accordingly. The SBHC should also consider how a student can be confidentially called from class for an appointment. SBHC staff can use standard summons slips to notify students of their appointments. They should also work with school faculty and request that teachers do not name the SBHC out loud when a student is called from class.

Give Quick Appointments & Prescriptions • Young people should be able to obtain appointments and prescriptions quickly to encourage use of the health center especially for urgent matters.¹⁹

Health center staff should follow up with youth after an examination, if they miss their appointment, or if they do not return a phone call. This signals to the youth that they are noticed, valued, and missed and can strengthen their relationship to SBHC staff.

Quick Check!

- How do you ensure confidentiality when a student is called from class?
- On average, how long do students wait for their follow-up appointments at your SBHC?
- Do students receive prescriptions immediately?
- Does your staff follow up with students if they have missed appointments?

The SBHC's Visibility in the School

Support Provider-Adolescent Informal Socializing • When do you have the opportunity to socialize with your health care provider? It's a rare event for adults and can be a meaningful one for young people. Building relationships between SBHC staff and adolescents is essential to the health center's effectiveness and popularity. Allot intentional time for staff to socialize with students at the school. This will increase the health center's visibility on campus.²⁰

Organize On-Campus Activities • Another good way to publicize the SBHC is by holding on-campus activities. Staff can conduct presentations on health topics and services offered at the health center. Better yet, youth leaders from the health center can also promote the center's services to other students. Youth can lead both organized and informal outreach to increase the health center's visibility and students' trust in confidential services at the SBHC. Remember that youth leaders can be the best bet at reaching many students at your school.

If possible, school staff, SBHC staff, and student clubs can work together and hold assemblies on health topics. This is great venue for sharing information on services offered at the health center. School-wide assemblies will not only increase the visibility of the health center but will also demonstrate the health center's integration with the rest of the school.

Offer Incentives • Incentives distinguish SBHCs from other medical settings: how often do adults get offered a gift card for making their annual check-ups? Incentives can take a variety of forms and can ultimately draw students to your SBHC. Offer incentives to students for basic health education sessions, to make their follow-up appointments, or even when they refer a friend for services.

Simple things like prizes for getting your vaccination? They don't do that at bigger clinics or hospitals. They make a difference. At the health centers, they find a way to attract youth. A Starbucks card or a free smoothie—these treats bring students in. For example, when we did Halloween outreach, we had vegetables and treats and at the same time, we provided information on the services in the health center. And [students] didn't leave without saying anything; they had to write down what they learned. Health centers know how to attract the youth differently. Use the incentives to bring students in so they can start using services. - Former SBHC client and youth leader, Los Angeles, CA

Utilize Social Media & Morning Announcements •

Social media is a popular and easy way to reach youth. The health center can use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to share brief messages on health topics, the health center, and upcoming events. But don't forget the morning public address announcements! This tried-and-true method of communication is still a useful avenue to reach the whole campus.

Train Peer Health Educators • Peer-to-peer health education changes the face of an SBHC by entrusting young people to deliver basic health education services for a campus. With comprehensive preparation and adolescent-friendly curricula, young people can be trained to educate their peers on a variety of topics through small groups, one-on-one health education sessions, or as an informal “go-to” person on campus.

Peer educators can function as a conduit for other students to access the health center. Some SBHCs hire former peer educators as SBHC staff thereby opening a career pathway for youth interested in the health field.

Engage Youth in SBHC Evaluations & Decisions • As clients of the health center, youth can offer some of the best advice to guide the SBHC to better serve young people.²¹ An SBHC can involve students in planning, shaping, monitoring, and evaluating services. Students should feel like they have a say in clinic operations: this helps them feel invested in the SBHC's broader mission. Successful SBHCs work to solicit student feedback as much as possible. The health center can have a confidential system for youth to submit suggestions or complaints about services. For example, this could be a feedback box located in the waiting room where students can anonymously submit their comments. Select clients can also complete a “secret shopper” list—a list to which they can clandestinely refer as they walk through a regular SBHC visit—so they can evaluate their adolescent-friendly SBHC visit using the criteria shared in this guide.

Quick Check!

- Do students have the opportunity to interact with all SBHC staff outside of the health center?
- Do you partner with school clubs, academies, and faculty to promote your services?
- If you maintain social media pages for your SBHC, have you adjusted the security of the pages to match your SBHC's privacy and confidentiality policies?
- How does your SBHC engage students in health education, outreach, or the evaluation of SBHC services?

Citations

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