

# Less than half of US youth discuss sensitive topics with their doctors

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Fewer than half of young people in the United States are having discussions of sensitive topics with their regular healthcare providers, according to a new study published in *Pediatrics*. This new research led by researchers at the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health suggests that modifying healthcare delivery practices may improve discussions between youth and their healthcare providers. Youth-provider discussions are important opportunities to promote health for young people.

While access to care has increased under the Affordable Care Act, this research suggests that the content of [healthcare](#) for [young people](#) is often not meeting professional recommendations. Young people were asked if they and their provider had discussed 11 specific topics recommended by national medical guidelines, spanning alcohol and other drug use, use of tobacco, [sexual health](#), [mental health](#), school performance, gun safety, and physical/sexual abuse. For 10 of the 11 topics, fewer than half of young people reported discussing that topic with their provider at their last visit. The topics that were discussed the least were gun safety, sexual orientation, and sexual or physical abuse.

The study found that discussions are shaped by healthcare delivery factors such as having had a youth-provider talk about confidentiality, providing private time with young people during office visits, using health screening questionnaires, and having enough time for youth and [healthcare providers](#) to interact. These factors were associated with increases of 50 percent or more in the likelihood of a youth-provider

discussion at their last healthcare visit.

"The [good news](#) is that some basic changes to healthcare practice could greatly improve opportunities for young people to discuss health with their care providers," said adolescent medicine specialist John Santelli, MD, professor of Population and Family Health at Columbia Mailman and the lead author of the study. "Describing confidentiality to a young person, providing private one-to-one time, using health questionnaires in the office, and taking time to listen to young people—all are things that providers can do to improve dialogue with young people. Talking about confidentiality can create safe spaces for discussion. Health questionnaires can signal to young people that a healthcare provider is interested in discussing sensitive issues."

Data was collected from 1509 adolescents and young adults through a 2016 national internet survey. Young people in the survey were 13-26 years of age and had seen their regular provider within the past two years. Surveys were offered in both English and Spanish.

The authors found that multiple social and personal factors were associated with youth-provider discussions about sensitive topics. Rates of discussion were similar by gender but often declined with age. Rural youth reported fewer discussions compared to urban/suburban youth. Youth from higher income families also reported fewer discussions. Youth desires to discuss specific topics were also associated with an increased likelihood of a discussion of that topic—as was youth involvement in health risk behaviors.

Dr. Santelli concluded: "Discussions between young people and their healthcare providers can be important first steps towards better [health](#)."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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