



Rationale

Most young people develop through adolescence to adulthood without great difficulty and experience good health. Adolescence is marked, however, by increased exposure to a range of risks to health and well-being, including mental health problems, death or injury from road accidents, and exposure to drug use.

Students in Years 11 and 12 are a diverse group because of differences in cultural background, personal experiences, geographic location, gender and values held by the local community and the family. They vary in their levels of maturity and in their ability to face challenges of this time of life, such as exam pressures, learning to drive, decisions about the future and the pressure to use alcohol, tobacco or illicit drugs. The way in which they cope with these issues in late adolescence can have a significant impact on the rest of their lives.

One important factor contributing to young people's ability to maintain health and stay safe is the capacity to adapt successfully to changes or challenges through this period. The ability to form and maintain positive relationships and the development of a personal identity or sense of self with which they are comfortable are also important.

In Years 11 and 12, students' relationships change as they are given more responsibility and as more is expected of them. The capacity to form positive, satisfying relationships is connected with young people's sense of themselves as "worthy" or "valuable". The formation of an independent, adult identity is an important task of adolescence.

Important aspects of an evolving adult identity are body image, gender and sexual identity.

There is pressure on young people in our community to look good and to conform to the ideal body shape, as portrayed in the media. Most girls in secondary school say that they want to lose weight. A study of adolescent health in Victoria, in 1996, found that 34% of Year 11 girls and 9% of Year 11 boys were dieting. It also found that most girls tend to perceive themselves as heavier than their actual weight.

Gender is fundamental to young people's sense of who they are, what they can do and who they might become. Individual students are active in developing a sense of themselves as young men or women through many everyday interactions. These can be with their family, their friends, the media, the particular culture into which they are born and in which they grow up, the wider society, and the attitudes and practices they encounter at school.

A student's concept of what it means to be masculine or feminine is not static or permanent and may change over time or in different contexts.

Their own sexuality and their ability to form relationships can be sources of concern for many students. They may be unsure of whether they are, or ever will be, attractive to

those they are interested in. Another consideration is that some young people are not ready for long-term or sexual relationships but feel that they should be “in love” or gaining sexual experience. They may believe that they are incomplete without a partner and so have unrealistic expectations of relationships.

Individuals may deny aspects of their emerging identity or become hostile or withdrawn rather than risk rejection or being seen as not conforming to preferred stereotypes. Such pressure can result in major difficulties with the development of personal identity and can place individuals at risk of self-harm. For example, hostile attitudes towards young people who are gay, lesbian or transgender can result in great stress or self-loathing for those students who believe they are not heterosexual or who are confused about their sexual identity.

Drug use may be a significant aspect of leisure activities for many young people and can place them at significant risk of harm. Young people use drugs for many reasons. For example, some young women may begin and continue smoking because they think it will assist them to control their weight. Some young men may use steroids to build more muscular bodies.

The *1996 Australian School Students' Alcohol and Drugs Survey* indicates that the main drugs of concern in adolescence are alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. This survey found that more than half of all students have tried a cigarette at some time and about one-fifth smoke regularly. By the time young people reach seventeen or eighteen years of age, many of their smoking habits are already formed.

The 1996 survey found that approximately 59 percent of seventeen-year-old males and 50 percent of seventeen-year-old females reported drinking alcohol within the week prior to the survey. Of those who drink alcohol, approximately one-third of both males and females reported drinking at potentially hazardous or harmful levels at least once in the previous fortnight. The most common places for drinking alcohol for young people are at home, at parties or at friends' places.

While some adolescents try illicit drugs, the survey also found that these are not a major factor in the lives of most students. Cannabis is the most frequently used illicit drug, and the survey reported that one-third of students have tried it at some time. Males use cannabis at a rate twice that of females.

The use of other illicit drugs remains relatively low. Recent use (described as use in the last week) of cocaine, steroids, heroin and ecstasy was so infrequent that it could not be estimated reliably by the 1996 survey. This suggests that, while individual communities may have a particular problem, the general use of these drugs by young people is rare.

For a small number of young people, adolescence will coincide with the onset of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders or deliberate self-harm. Some of these young people will display suicidal behaviours and a small number will complete suicides.

Some young people will be placed at risk of death or injury from road accidents, where a combination of behavioural and cultural characteristics, such as risk taking, over-confidence, inexperience and gender have been found to be factors in the over-representation of adolescents in these statistics. For example, adolescents are two-and-a-half times more likely to be killed or suffer serious injury in motor accidents than any other age group. The driving behaviours most frequently linked to crashes involving young people are speeding, alcohol use, fatigue and not wearing seat belts.

Crossroads offers a specific opportunity for schools to invite senior students to reflect upon and share issues that are important to them. Through this course, teachers can encourage students to discuss their aspirations, opinions, thoughts and feelings in a familiar and safe environment. Teachers' positive expectations can structure and guide behaviour and can also challenge students to move beyond what they believe they can do.

Students will understand and appreciate that they are valued as individuals if they are connected to their school community and if their teachers have confidence that they will be able to build a successful life for themselves in which they can contribute to the community. The importance of these messages for the health of our students cannot be over-estimated.