

DECISION-MAKING WITH TEENAGERS

Parents are usually the decision-makers for their children up to age 18, when the law presumes a child is now an adult and can decide for themselves. Young children generally accept their parents as decision-makers, but teenagers are becoming independent and sometimes do not accept their parents' decisions.

We expect adults to get full information about their medical situation and to decide for themselves what they want. That is based on the idea that an adult is able to understand and make the decision that they believe is best.

As teenagers grow up they are more and more able to understand the world, and hopefully to decide for themselves. Of course it is different for each teen, but our job as parents is to do our best to help them be ready at age 18 to decide on their own.

Sometimes children will never be able to make their own decisions because of developmental problems. For those children, the parents can ask the court to make them the permanent guardian for their child after age 18. Parents do need to ask for court action in these cases, and starting to do that in the year before the child turns 18 is important.

Minnesota has a law called the Minor Consent Law, which says that in some limited cases teenagers can decide for themselves. One basis for the power to decide for themselves about medical treatment is their circumstances of living. If they are living apart from parents and managing their own financial affairs, if they have given birth to a child, or if they are married, they control their own medical decisions. Find out if there are similar or different laws that might apply in your state. Your social worker can help you get this information.

Certain types of treatment can also be done based on the decision of the teenager. Teenagers can seek treatment for drug and alcohol abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and emergencies on their own. They can also request inpatient mental health treatment on their own.

Children's always tries to get teenagers to work with their parents or other responsible adults around medical care. We know that medical care is complicated for everyone, so we encourage teenagers to work with the adults in their life.

As a parent you can work best with your teen if you try to be sure they feel respected as the person whose life and body and mind are affected by the treatments.

Some ways to do this are:

- Include the teen in all the information meetings and information sharing by doctors and the health care team
- Don't keep secrets about the health care situation of the teenager
- Prepare them to be part of the discussion themselves
- Plan to give them time alone with the doctor. One good plan is to structure time for the teen alone with the doctor, the parents alone with the doctor, and the teen, the parents, and doctor together
- Give them time to think about decisions if possible
- If they want to talk with a brother, sister, or a friend, try to make that possible
- Avoid situations where the teenager makes choices because they are trying to prove you wrong
- If an argument starts, suggest trying a different approach like writing down the pros and cons, asking a third person to join you, writing a note to each other, or cooling off for a few minutes and then trying again
- Ask your doctor, nurse, or other health care provider to talk with your teen and you

Finding ways to cooperate with teens around medical decisions is essential. It is extremely hard to force them to cooperate with treatments they don't want, and forcing them now may make them reject important medical care later. Ask your health care team to help you find ways to work together.

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