



Sirs,

It is disappointing that the Government's new child health strategy has missed the opportunity to tackle very real worries about adolescent health. Recent reports consistently show that UK teenagers expose themselves to more risky behaviour than many other western countries and have higher rates of drinking, drug taking and teenage pregnancies. Better and more accessible health support for older children is sorely needed.

The new Make Space for Health youth health programme is testing out ways of meeting these challenges - working at a local level, with institutions and services as well as with youth workers and young people. The Make Space campaign discovered that 6 out of 10 young people do not know where to go for health advice if they needed it. But, more importantly, 9 out of 10 teenagers would tap into support services if they were available in the same place as exciting activity programmes such as music, games and sport. We will be passing on our findings to decision makers over the coming months. What's clear is the need for Government to lead the debate on this issue. It's time to take youth health beyond traditional settings and to weave it into the daily activities of young people.

Helping teenagers to be healthier is a tough challenge. It means listening to what they are telling us and providing accessible advice and support in places where they don't feel judged or stigmatised. The Government's challenge is to reach young people in places where they feel comfortable such as youth clubs and community centres, to provide information in language that makes sense to them and to support healthy life choices through affordable and fun exercise opportunities. This is what we try to do with the Make Space for Health programme supported by Nestle.

While early intervention is essential to give children a healthy start in life, the emphasis on children has overshadowed the needs of millions of teenagers. The new strategy has great potential to redress the balance. It will give young people the support they need to reject unhealthy behaviour and to prevent serious and irreversible illnesses later in life.

Dr Miriam Stoppard is a writer, broadcaster, medical doctor and Chair of new youth health programme, Make Space for Health, steering group