

Healthy Relationships

Facts & Conversation Guide

I. THE FACTS

Whether we like it or not, our children are maturing at an earlier age and many of them, as young as twelve or thirteen, report dating or having a boyfriend or girlfriend. While these relationships may appear casual or innocent to adults, that is often not the case. These first relationships can be all-consuming experiences, filled with intense emotions, confusion and risk taking. It is a pivotal time as youth learn about intimate relationships and start developing patterns of behavior (both positive and negative) that can last into adulthood.

Developing positive relationships can be challenging at any age, but immaturity and lack of experience puts young people at increased risk for being abused or abusing their partner emotionally, physically or sexually. Research indicates that about 1 in 3 teen girls is a victim of physical, emotional or verbal abuse by a dating partner and almost a third (29%) of teens has been the victim of sexual abuse, physical abuse or threats of physical abuse by a girlfriend or boyfriend. (1, 2)

Modeling positive, healthy relationships for our children is probably the most effective way to teach them how to be a good partner, yet that is not enough. We need to have conversations with our teens and pre-teens about the value of healthy relationships, the qualities to look for in a partner, how to show respect, resolve conflict and be supportive. With adult guidance, our young people can experience the safe, caring relationships we so want them to have.

II. THE CONVERSATION

Before the conversation –

- ✓ Think about your past and present relationships. What have you learned? What qualities do you value most in a partner? Think of examples you can share with your child.
- ✓ Review the questions below and note the ones you'd like to focus on with your teen.

1) If your teen or pre-teen does not have a girlfriend or boyfriend yet:

Explain that while they may not have a boyfriend/girlfriend yet, it's important to think about the qualities you would like that person to have ahead of time. Knowing what you want makes it more likely you will find the best person for you.

Also, if you sense your teen may be experiencing peer pressure to have a girlfriend or boyfriend you may want to talk about that. They may need support and reassurance that it will happen when the time is right for them.

Skip to question # 3

2) If your teen or pre-teen does have a girlfriend/boyfriend:

Explain that having a boyfriend or girlfriend can be great, but it's also an opportunity to learn more about themselves and relationships. Ask them about their relationship.

How is your relationship going? What are your favorite things about him/her? What do you enjoy doing together? Have you had arguments? How do you settle them? If there was something you could change about him/her what would it be?

As your teen describes their partner and relationship, reinforce the positive qualities or aspects they share. Discuss comments they make that are of concern, such as a partner who always wants to be in charge, is quick to anger, doesn't want them to spend time with other friends, texts or monitors them a lot, etc.

3) Think about couples you know (adults or teen couples). Is there a relationship that you think is really good and positive?

What makes it good? How do the people treat each other?

Examples can include a range of relationships from a grandparent's relationship to school friends. Share an example you have.

4) Do the "My Ideal Relationship" activity with your teen or pre-teen.

Give them the "My Ideal Relationship" sheet (page 5) to complete. Ask them to rate how important each quality listed is to them. Suggest they add additional qualities and rate them. Print out or make a copy of the sheet to complete yourself.

When you've both finished, compare your answers. Ask them to talk about some of the qualities they listed as "like to have" and "gotta have."

5) Why is that quality important to you? Does your boyfriend/ girlfriend have that quality? Discuss qualities they may have added to the list.

6) Of all the qualities listed on the sheet, are there a few qualities you consider the most important? Circle those qualities.

7) Discuss the qualities on the list that are associated with healthy, respectful relationships (see below), starting with the ones your teen circled. Talk about why it is important and how it is shown in a relationship.

- **Accepts me for who I am**
lets me be me, doesn't make fun of the way I look, what I say, etc.
 - **Listens to me**
cares about what I think, makes me feel heard, etc.
 - **Trustworthy**
Tells the truth, keeps promises, respects privacy, etc.
 - **Treats me as an equal**
respects my opinions & choices, is willing to solve differences together and compromise, doesn't put me down, etc.
 - **Doesn't try to control me**
doesn't act jealous or like they own me, doesn't constantly want to know where I am and with whom, lets me have my own friends, etc.
 - **Doesn't pressure me about touching or sex**
respects my body, my choices, my comfort level, etc.
 - **Doesn't use physical force**
doesn't ever threaten or hurt me physically, can control their anger, can solve conflict peacefully, etc
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8) What if you had a crush on someone, but they didn't have one or more of the qualities that show respect? (mentioned in # 7)

Highlight the fact that while there are many qualities that we may like our boyfriend/girlfriend to have (e.g., good looks, athletic, smart), being respectful is a must. We should expect respect and show respect in our relationships.

III. BOTTOM LINE (wrap up the conversation)

- Healthy relationships are based on mutual respect. You show respect by your actions, such as treating the other person as an equal, being trustworthy, and not trying to control the other person's behavior.
- Expect respect & show respect in your relationships.
- If you have questions or concerns about a relationship, you can always talk to me. I am here for you.

IV. RESOURCES

- Breaking the Cycle (<https://www.breakthecycle.org>) is a youth friendly website that provides tools and resources to prevent and end dating abuse.
- Choose Respect (<https://www.chooserespect.org>) is an interactive website that focuses on pre teens and young teens learning how to develop healthy relationships to prevent dating abuse before it starts. It is a national effort sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Futures Without Violence (<http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org>) is a highly regarded organization dedicated to addressing sexual and domestic violence. One of its many successful programs is the *Coaching Boys into Men* leadership program for high school athletic coaches. Coaches and non-coaches alike should check out their excellent guide entitled, "8 Ways You Can Coach Boys into Men."

(1) Davis, Antoinette, MPH. 2008. Interpersonal and Physical Dating Violence among Teens. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency Focus. Available at http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/2008_focus_teen_dating_violence.pdf.

(2) Liz Claiborne Inc. & Family Violence Prevention Fund. 2009. Topline Findings -Teen Relationship Abuse. Teenage Research Unlimited.

My Ideal Relationship

Check how important each quality is to you when choosing a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Qualities	Don't Need To Have	Like To Have	Gotta Have!
1. good looking			
2. interesting			
3. confident			
4. accepts me for who I am			
5. popular			
6. smart			
7. listens to me			
8. funny			
9. athletic			
10. dresses cool			
11. trustworthy			
12. treats me as an equal			
13. easy going			
14. shares my interests			
15. creative/artistic			
16. doesn't try to control me			
17. affectionate			
18. doesn't pressure me about touching or sex			
19. talented at _____			
20. doesn't use physical force			
21.			
22.			