

## Talking to Your Teen About Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships

In honor of Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month – let's discuss how we can talk to our teens about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships.

An important first step when talking to your teen about dating is sharing what a healthy relationship looks like. Start an open conversation with your teen, asking them what qualities they think make up a healthy relationship. By letting them lead with what they already know, your teen is more likely to feel like this is a conversation instead of a one-sided lecture, increasing the likelihood that they will be engaged and buy into what is being discussed. Asking your teen for their opinions, experiences, and input will also help them feel heard and respected throughout the conversation.

While listening to what your teen has to say about healthy relationships, be an active listener and focus on their strengths. Being an active listener means asking questions when you don't understand something, reflecting back what you hear your teen saying, and validating the healthy relationship qualities they point out. When you use active listening skills and hone in on your teens strengths, they will feel validated, heard, and respected throughout your conversation.

After hearing from your teen about what they think a healthy relationship looks like, we encourage you to share some healthy relationship qualities that they might have missed or may need more information about. We've provided some key healthy relationship qualities to help you guide the conversation:

- First, and most importantly, healthy relationships are **free from all forms of abuse, neglect, and threats** to one or more person in the relationship's physical safety, emotional safety, well-being, and development.
- **Open, honest, and safe communication** is key to healthy relationships! In healthy relationships, both people are willing to communicate their emotions, needs, and expectations, while also providing space for the other person to do the same. Neither partner should feel afraid to share for fear of the other person's reaction or response.
- **Mutual respect and support** are two other foundational elements of healthy teen relationships. Both partners should value the other person's values, beliefs, and boundaries, even if they don't always agree or understand. They should also lift each other up and be there to support each other during challenges.
- **Trust** in healthy relationships means that both people feel like they can depend on one another and feel emotionally and physically safe with each other.

- **Healthy boundaries** ensure that both partners feel safe, comfortable, and supported in the relationship. It's important for teens to have an open and ongoing conversation about boundaries in their dating relationships to ensure that both people's wants, needs, and limits are respected. Encourage your teen to think about their boundaries and help them practice communicating those boundaries. It's also important to discuss respecting other people's boundaries and how to navigate **boundary violations**.
- **Consent** is critical to building healthy teen relationships. Consent is an agreement between people in a relationship to engage in sexual and/or intimate physical contact. When we talk about consent we usually think about sexual activity; however, it's important to keep in mind that consent goes a step beyond that and can include other forms of intimate physical contact/interaction, such as hugs, holding hands, and touching. Consent is a clear and enthusiastic yes. It is ongoing and involves communicating every step of the way. Consent is free of coercion. Consent means respecting when someone says no. Consent is NOT saying yes under the influence of a substance or after pressure and coercion, and not saying no does not mean yes.
- **Conflict resolution** is an important part of relationships! Being able to resolve arguments or disagreements in a healthy way promotes both people's well-being and strengthens the relationship. Talk to your teen about key components of healthy conflict resolution, such as compromise, boundaries, respect, and emotion regulation.

This is a lot of information to cover, so it's important to be mindful about not overwhelming your teen with too much at once. Start an open and ongoing conversation about dating relationships, and let your teen know that you are there for them whenever they have any questions or concerns!