

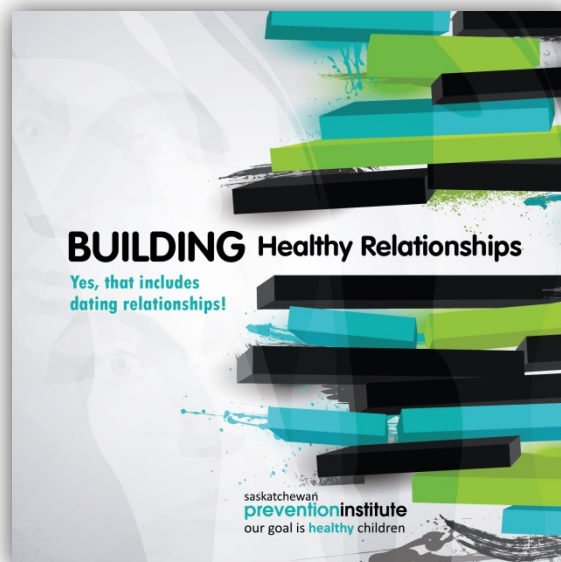


Tips for Talking With Your Students

How to Build Healthy Relationships, Including Dating Relationships

This booklet is designed to help you educate your students about what healthy relationships are. It also provides you with additional resources and information in case you need more support.

A related booklet is available for youth, titled *Building Healthy Relationships: Yes, that includes dating relationships!* This booklet can be used by adolescents, including younger adolescents who may not be dating yet. It provides information about how to build healthy relationships of any kind (e.g., friendships, relationships with family, dating relationships), as well as information specific to healthy dating relationships. This free booklet is available for order or download (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-301).



Why is it important for educators to talk with young people about healthy relationships?

Teaching young people about how to build healthy relationships, including dating relationships, will provide them with valuable skills that can improve their overall health. This information also helps them to avoid the negative outcomes of unhealthy dating relationships, like dating violence. When young people understand what healthy dating relationships are, they are less likely to tolerate unhealthy and potentially abusive relationships.

Despite its importance, few adolescents receive formal education related to the knowledge and skills necessary for building healthy dating relationships. Schools are in a unique position to provide adolescents with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes required for them to make and act upon decisions that promote healthy relationships throughout their lives. In particular, teachers are well-positioned to provide healthy relationship education because they are seen as trusted sources of information and often serve as role models, advocates, and mentors. Teachers can incorporate healthy relationship education and skill-building into existing school-based learning, such as sexual and reproductive health education and other relevant classes.

Ideally, educating young people about healthy dating relationships should begin early in adolescence, since this is the time when many young people start facing decisions about dating relationships. Research shows that by 15 years old, almost three-quarters of Canadian adolescents have been in a dating relationship. Just over half of these adolescents report being in their first dating relationship by age 12. These relationships can have both positive and negative effects on adolescents, depending on the quality of the relationship. Possible negative outcomes of *unhealthy* dating relationships include dating violence, depression, unplanned pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In comparison, positive outcomes linked with *healthy* dating relationships include improved academic performance, better relational skills (e.g., communication, negotiation, and empathy), and the ability to recover from difficult situations.

A few notes about terminology

The term “adolescent” refers to children between the approximate ages of 10 and 19 years.

Some people define “dating” differently than others. When talking about a dating relationship in this resource, it means any kind of romantic relationship (e.g., someone a young person has a crush on or flirts with, someone a young person goes out with once or twice, someone they are in a long-term dating relationship with, and so on).

Tip #1:



Build and Maintain Strong Relationships With Your Students

As young people enter their adolescent years, they can start to separate from the adults in their lives. However, strong adult-adolescent relationships are extremely important at this time. Research shows that high-quality relationships help young people succeed in life and overcome challenges. For example, a strong relationship with your students can positively impact their academic performance, behavioural choices, and help them to persevere in the face of challenging life situations.

Conversations about topics like dating relationships are a lot easier when you have built meaningful relationships with your students. The following are tips for building meaningful relationships and for staying connected with your students:

- Commend young people for their hard work, regardless of whether they succeed or fail.
- Teach them that everyone makes mistakes, including adults, and that they can grow as individuals by learning from their mistakes. If you make a mistake, apologize right away. This will show your students that you care about your relationship with them. It will also provide them with an example of when and how to apologize when they have wronged someone.
- Within obvious limits, allow your students to make decisions about activities that involve and impact them. This will show your students that you trust them and it will give them confidence to make decisions that impact their lives. For example, you could ask your students for input on assignments, class content, or ways they can improve a specific skill or their performance in a certain area.
- Young people have a lot to teach adults. Be attentive to the ways you learn from young people. Let them know when you have learned something from them and that you are excited about it.
- When young people seem curious about an activity, topic, or issue, ask questions such as, “What do you find interesting about this?” This will show them that you care about their interests and that their ideas are worthy of exploration and discussion.
- Challenge students to set high goals for themselves and hold them accountable.
- Show students how the things they are learning in school are relevant to their interests and success outside of school, now and in the future.
- Help to expand young people’s circle of caring adults. Connect them to adults, such as other educators, community members, Elders, and so on, who can help them explore their personal interests and strengths.¹

Adults can have different levels of meaningful relationships with young people. For example, there may be a handful of young people who you invest more time and energy into because you share a particular interest, or because you have a unique connection with them. There may be others who you care about, but do not devote as much time to. It is not possible to offer considerable attention and support to each young person you encounter; however, there are things you can do to make all students feel valued – like treating them with respect and compassion.

Tip #2:

Enhance Your Own Knowledge About Healthy Relationships

When educators have accurate information, they are able to positively influence the knowledge and behaviours of their students. Conversations with your students about healthy relationships will be easier when you are informed about the topic. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the qualities of a healthy relationship and the unique issues surrounding adolescent relationships. It is also important that you are able to teach your students about the signs of an unhealthy relationship. Following, on page 4, are common features of healthy relationships and signs of unhealthy ones.

¹ For more information on ways to build meaningful relationships with your students, see the following resource: *Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive* (www.search-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-Relationships-First-final.pdf)

Common Features of Healthy Relationships

- **Communication:** Both people are honest about what they think and feel, and listen to each other. Good communication is important, both in-person and online.
- **Respect:** Both people like each other for who they are and feel free to be themselves around each other.
- **Trust:** Both people want the best for each other and are honest and dependable.
- **Support:** Both people build each other up and are there for each other.
- **Fun:** Both people laugh together and enjoy hanging out with each other.
- **Equality*:** Both people make decisions that are right for themselves and feel important and liked for who they are.
- **Independence*:** Both people are able to spend time apart and be okay with it. Each one has their own friends and activities.
- **Boundaries*:** Both people know what they want/don't want and what their limits are (i.e., what lines they don't want to cross).

*Note: Many of the qualities that make a good friendship are also important for a healthy dating relationship. Equality, independence, and boundaries can be particularly important in adolescent dating relationships.

Signs of Unhealthy Relationships

- **Power Imbalance:** May include extreme jealousy, control (e.g., telling someone who to hang out with or what to wear), and excessive calling, texting, or messaging qualifier.
- **Fear and Violence:** May include making someone feel scared or nervous by being angry, rough or violent, and name-calling (e.g., lots of yelling or arguing, freaking out on the other person when there are disagreements, hiding things from someone to prevent angry outbursts).
- **Guilt and Blame:** May include making someone feel bad for saying "no", and not owning up to mistakes, while blaming the other person instead.
- **Unhealthy Boundaries:** May include not taking "no" for an answer, and threatening to share private information if the other person doesn't do what they want.
- **Lack of Independence:** May include becoming so involved with the other person that they start to lose themselves or forget who they are as an individual, and being clingy (e.g., wanting to be with someone ALL the time and not giving them personal space).

It is important to remember that adult relationships can be very different from adolescent ones. Below are some ways you can learn about the unique issues surrounding adolescent relationships.

- Ask your students what they think healthy and unhealthy relationships are.
- Ask them why they believe what they believe and where they are learning these ideas from (e.g., movies, song lyrics, music videos, friends, family, and so on). For example, you could ask, "What are your friends saying about dating relationships?", or "What do you think you are learning about relationships from the music you listen to or the music videos you watch?"

Be aware that your students may be receiving harmful ideas about what a dating relationship should be like. It is important to talk to them about it.

Tip #3:



Start Educating Young People Early

As adolescents mature, dating relationships become increasingly important. Ideally, educating adolescents about healthy dating relationships should start before they begin dating. This time before dating begins is critical for moulding healthy attitudes and behaviours, and for building the necessary skills related to dating relationships. The qualities that make a good friendship are also important for a healthy dating relationship. As such, younger students can begin by learning about what all relationships need to be healthy, with a focus on friends and family. And as they approach adolescence, educators can begin to talk about this information in the context of dating relationships.

Tip #4:

Provide Young People With Examples of Healthy Relationships

Young people who are provided with examples of healthy relationships are less likely to tolerate harmful or abusive ones, now and in the future. Use relatable examples, from media, television, music, and so on, to teach your students about healthy relationships. You can also use these examples to point out unhealthy or abusive relationships and provide them with accurate information. There are many myths and misconceptions about healthy relationships, including dating relationships. It is important to discuss these myths and misconceptions with your students.

Below are some suggestions for using relatable examples to teach your students about healthy relationships:

- Show your students popular music videos or allow them to explore song lyrics together. Ask them what kind of messages these videos/song lyrics are giving young people about relationships. You could also ask your students to rewrite harmful song lyrics into ones that exemplify healthy relationships.
- When students have disagreements, facilitate a discussion and help them engage in healthy conflict resolution.

You can also use your classroom interactions to model healthy relationships and teach your students how to deal with conflicts in positive ways. For example, respect your students by listening carefully to what they have to say. Let them know that their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs are important. Show your students that healthy relationships are supportive relationships by celebrating your students' successes, assisting them in times of need, and so on.

It is also important that adolescents know how to have healthy online relationships. Talk with your students about what healthy relationships are when hanging out online, including healthy boundaries. “Hanging out” online means communicating/talking (e.g., texting, messaging, sharing pictures) with someone through your phone, tablet, laptop, or other device. You can ask your students to think about what they want and what they are okay with when hanging out online. Examples include:

- Will they post their relationship status?
- Do they want the person they are dating to tag them in pictures?
- When is it okay for the person they are dating to text them? Will the person they are dating expect a text back right away?
- Is it okay for the person they are dating to know their social media passwords, or to use their phone, tablet, and other devices?

Tip #5:



Create Opportunities for Skill-Based Learning

Although providing information to young people about healthy relationships is important, they must also be taught the skills necessary to build healthy relationships. If young people lack the skills to build healthy relationships, they may be left to guess, experiment, or do what their friends are telling them to do. Skills, like effective conflict management, are important for adolescents to develop in order to form and maintain healthy relationships.

Healthy relationship skills include:

- communicating one's own feelings and needs clearly and respectfully
- trying to understand and respect the other person's feelings and needs
- using calm, nonviolent ways to deal with disagreements
- effectively communicating one's own boundaries and respecting the other person's boundaries
- making decisions that are good for oneself in relationships

Skill-building components that use role-play, modeling, and rehearsal can increase the likelihood of behaviour change. The following are some examples of how to teach your students about healthy relationship skills.

- Have your students act out a scenario involving a conflict between two or more people. Examples include spreading rumours about someone, encouraging someone to post an embarrassing picture of another person at a party, accusing a partner of cheating, and so on. Through role play, have your students respond to this conflict using positive and negative forms of communication. Positive communication involves being assertive (e.g., telling someone confidently what you think, feel, and want, while still showing respect). Negative communication often involves passive communication (e.g., not saying directly what you think or want, using uncomfortable body language) and aggressive communication (e.g., demanding your way while ignoring the other person's feelings).

- Invite your students to engage in a conversation about any given topic and have them demonstrate active listening by:
 - ❖ listening attentively to others and reflecting back their most important thoughts and feelings. For example, after listening to what the other person has said, they could respond “Thank you for sharing. What I heard when you were talking was ... (paraphrase the person’s thoughts and/or feelings). Does this match what you think and/or feel?”
 - ❖ giving brief verbal affirmations throughout the conversation, such as “I see”, “Thank you”, “Sure”, etc.
 - ❖ showing others that they understand and accept them with nonverbal forms of communication, such as appropriate eye contact (looking right at the person), body posture (body facing the person), facial expressions, and so on.
 - ❖ asking for clarification if necessary. For example, they could ask “What do you mean when you said ...?”

Tip #6:

Focus on the Positive

Research shows that adolescents’ natural interest in learning about relationships may decrease if they are always receiving messages about the potential dangers associated with dating relationships, such as dating violence. This is one reason why talking with your students about how to build *healthy* dating relationships may be more effective in helping them to build positive relationships and avoid the harmful consequences of unhealthy relationships. Researchers suggest that this approach is more inviting and less stigmatizing than focusing on the potential harms associated with dating relationships. In addition, education that focuses on building healthy dating relationships may be especially effective in terms of primary prevention (e.g., preventing violence in relationships before it occurs).

Tip #7:



Integrate Healthy Relationship Education into Existing School-Based Curriculum

Always be looking for opportunities to teach your students about healthy relationships. Consider the ways you can integrate healthy relationship education and skill-building into existing school-based learning, such as sexual and reproductive health education, language arts, social studies, psychology, and so on. Learning how to build healthy relationships isn’t a one-shot deal. It takes time and practice. Research shows that programs with repeated exposure to information delivered over time have better results than single sessions that raise awareness or discuss the topic.

Benefits of repeated exposure to information:

- ensures your students are remembering and understanding the information you provide
- increases comfort level of students when providing education related to sensitive topics
- allows you to build on earlier discussions, both by repeating previous information and by providing more details

It is also important to include caregivers in education and prevention strategies, as they also influence adolescents' behaviours and attitudes towards relationships, including dating relationships. If parents are made aware of what their children are learning at school about healthy relationships, they can reinforce this messaging at home. Educators may also wish to refer parents to helpful resources so that they can effectively and accurately communicate healthy relationship information to their children. Educators can refer parents to the booklet, *Tips for Talking with Your Child about How to Build Healthy Relationships, Including Dating Relationships* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-302). This booklet is designed to help parents educate their children about healthy relationships. It also provides parents with additional resources and information in case they need more support.



Tip #8:

Pay Attention and Know What to Do

Look for warning signs that young people may be in unhealthy relationships. Take note of major changes in their behaviour (e.g., young person becomes depressed, anxious, easily angered, stops participating in extracurricular activities, has unexplained marks or bruises). If young people come to you and want to talk about an unhealthy relationship, listen carefully to what they say and acknowledge their feelings. Support them to deal with the situation. This may involve encouraging and guiding them to make positive changes in the relationship. You can also refer them to other supports, such as a school counsellor or the confidential Kids Help Phone (www.kidshelpphone.ca or 1-800-668-6868).

Additional Resources for Educators

Canadian Resources

- *Fourth R* is a Canadian initiative designed to help youth develop healthy relationships and reduce risk behaviours. Resources and training materials are available for educators and other frontline professionals who work with adolescents. Programs with culturally relevant content are also available. (<https://youthrelationships.org/>)
- *Healthy Youth Relationships Lesson Packages* are available from Red Cross for Grades 7-8, 9-10, and 11-12. (<https://shop-magasiner.redcross-croixrouge.ca/category/244/healthy-youth-relationships>)
- *Healthy Youth Relationships – Youth Facilitator Training* from Red Cross trains and certifies students as Youth Facilitators; in this role they can co-facilitate with teachers. (www.redcross.ca/crc/documents/What-We-Do/Violence-Bullying/HYR-for-Schools_One-Pager_EN-PDF.pdf)
- *Healthy Youth Relationships – For Youth* is a free online course from Red Cross, designed to help adolescents gain the knowledge and skills to develop healthy relationships and prevent dating violence. (<https://myrc.redcross.ca>; select the program 'Respect Education', select the category 'Healthy Youth Relationships', select the delivery method 'Online', and then click the search tab to access 'Healthy Youth Relationships – For Youth')

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute Resources

- *Building Healthy Relationships: Yes, that includes dating relationships!* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-301)
- *Helping Adolescents Develop Healthy Dating Relationships: An Evidence Summary* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-536)
- *An Environmental Scan of Canadian Resources Designed to Foster Healthy Adolescent Dating Relationships* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-532)

Other Resources

- *Loveisrespect.org* is a website designed to help young people prevent and end abusive relationships, and build healthy relationships. Loveisrespect also has Educator Toolkits available. (www.loveisrespect.org/educators-toolkits/)
- *Date Safe Project* focuses on giving people, including young people, positive skills for developing healthy relationships. (www.datesafeproject.org/)
- *Search Institute* is an organization that bridges research and practice to help young people be and become their best selves (www.search-institute.org/). The Search Institute believes that relationships with trusted adults are critical to young people's development and provides information on how educators can build meaningful relationships with their students. (www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/)

1319 Colony Street, Saskatoon, SK S7N 2Z1
Bus. 306-651-4300 Fax. 306-651-4301
www.skprevention.ca

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