

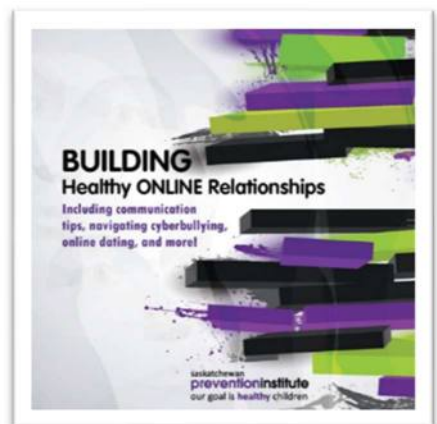
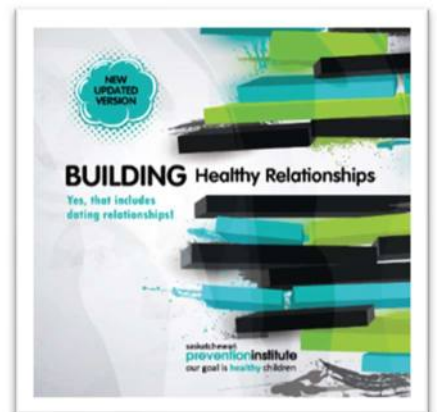


Tips for Talking with Your Students

Building Healthy Relationships (In Person and Online)

This guide is designed to help you educate your students about healthy relationships, including additional resources and information to support your teaching. It is important that youth are provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to build healthy relationships both in person and online.

The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute has two related booklets for use with youth, available for free order or download. The first booklet, *Building Healthy Relationships: Yes, that includes dating relationships!* (<https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/building-healthy-relationships-yes-that-includes-dating-relationships/>) provides information about how to build healthy relationships of any kind (e.g., friendships, relationships with family), as well as information specific to healthy dating relationships. The second booklet, *Building Healthy Online Relationships* (<https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/building-healthy-online-relationships/>) provides information about online safety and communication, as well as navigating cyberbullying, online dating, sextortion, grooming, and more. In addition, the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute's downloadable resource *Understanding and Teaching About Consent* (<https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/understanding-and-teaching-about-consent/>) provides definitions, explanations, and resources to help educators teach youth about consent.



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

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

The use of online technology has created new modes of communication (e.g., texting and online chats, social media, online communities, online games, livestreaming, and video apps) for youth to build relationships, form social networks, and create an online identity. Research shows that nearly all Canadian youth use the Internet daily and report being connected with family and peers online almost constantly. While the use of online technology can increase feelings of connectedness and support, it can also result in negative outcomes like cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and online sexual exploitation. It is important to teach youth knowledge and skills specific to online relationships to help ensure they are well-prepared to navigate potential harms they may encounter online and are able to develop relationships that enhance their well-being.

Schools are in a unique position to provide adolescents with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes required for 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 health, social studies, and other relevant classes. This information helps youth to avoid the negative outcomes of unhealthy relationships (e.g., depression, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, dating violence) and increases the likelihood of positive outcomes linked with healthy dating relationships (e.g., increased support, better communication and negotiation skills, empathy).

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 begin to navigate independence 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 ability to persevere in the face of challenging life situations.

Conversations about topics like dating 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 students 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.
- 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.
- Young people have a lot to teach adults. Be attentive to the ways you learn from your students. Let them know when you have learned something from them and that you are excited about it.
- When students 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 students’ 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.

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. 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.¹

Tip #2: Enhance Your Own Knowledge About Healthy Relationships

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, signs of an unhealthy relationship, and the unique issues surrounding adolescent relationships (both in person and online). The resources mentioned at the beginning of this guide will provide you with the foundational knowledge needed to begin teaching about healthy relationships.²



¹ For more information on ways to build meaningful relationships with your students, see the Search Institute’s *Developmental Relationships Framework* (<https://searchinstitute.org/resources-hub/developmental-relationships-framework>) and other relevant resources for educators.

² There are several other resources listed at the end of this guide to further enhance your knowledge about healthy relationships.

Below are some ways that you can learn about the unique issues surrounding adolescent relationships.

- Ask your students what they think healthy and unhealthy relationships are (both in person and online). Include a discussion about 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). 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.
- Ask your students how they think online relationships differ from in-person relationships. Encourage them to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- Discuss identity and reputation with your students. Ask your students to compare their real-world identity and online identity (e.g., characteristics of each, how each is formed, etc.).
- Talk about the pressures your students may feel online. Remind students that it is normal to feel pressured to show a perfect version of themselves online and that what they see online is edited and filtered – not reality.

Tip #3: Start Educating Young People Early

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. The natural interest of adolescents in dating relationships means that they are particularly receptive and motivated to gain knowledge and skills related to relationships. 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.



#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 relationships, 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.

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 look like when hanging out online, including healthy boundaries. 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 online?
- What photos are they comfortable posting online? What photos do they want to be tagged in?
- Is it okay for the person they are dating to know their social media passwords or use their phone and other devices?
- When will they unplug from technology? How will they communicate this to people in their lives?

Constant access to technology can make navigating boundaries online particularly difficult. It is important that your students understand the need to develop personal boundaries with their technology and with others online. Remind your students that constant communication (e.g., excessive calling, texting, or messaging) can be a sign of an unhealthy relationship.



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 these skills, they may be left to guess, experiment, or do what their friends are telling them to do.

Healthy relationship skills include:

- communicating one's own feelings and needs clearly and respectfully
- trying to understand and respect other people's feelings and needs
- using calm, nonviolent ways to deal with disagreements
- effectively communicating one's own boundaries and respecting other people's boundaries (i.e., consent)
- 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.

- 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. Using role play, have your students practice using positive communication (e.g., being assertive by telling someone confidently what they think, feel, and want, while still showing respect). To avoid blaming others, have your students use “I” statements. For example, instead of blaming: “You make me so angry! You’re always late!” encourage students to try: “I feel worried and upset when you’re late. Try to be on time, and please let me know if you’ll be late.”
- Talk to your students about the importance of planning ahead for difficult conversations, whenever possible. This includes picking the right time and place, staying calm, and taking breaks as needed throughout the discussion.³
- Have your students consider ways they will keep their identity safe and set boundaries online. Allow them to practice how they will communicate their boundaries online by drafting messages in a document. Students should consider strategies for effective communication online (e.g., use of emojis; waiting to post/send, especially when angry or upset; asking for clarification). Remind students that online communication can be challenging because of the lack of nonverbal cues.

Tip #6: Focus on the Positive

Research shows that adolescents’ natural interest in learning about relationships may decrease if they only receive negative messages (e.g., the potential dangers of dating, like 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. 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).

When discussing signs of unhealthy relationships and associated negative experiences (e.g., dating violence, cyberbullying, online grooming), try to avoid the use of strong negative language and victim-blaming such as, “This is an extremely dangerous situation to put yourself in.” Instead, communicate the potential harms to students in a neutral way and ensure they are provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate difficult situations. Reinforce to students that experiencing unhealthy relationships is not their fault, and that support is available. Ensure students are well-informed about school and community-based resources and services that are available to provide support.

³ For further information, visit Kids Help Phone at <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/8-tips-for-difficult-conversations-with-friends/>.

Tip #7: Integrate Healthy Relationship Education into Existing School-Based Curriculum

Regardless of the classes you teach, there are always 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 does not happen in one session. 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
- encourages students to apply knowledge and skills to new contexts and topics, allowing them to form connections between concepts and strengthen their understanding

It is also important to include parents and 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 can refer parents to the booklet, *Tips for Talking with Your Child about How to Build Healthy Relationships, Including Dating Relationships* (<https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/tips-for-talking-with-your-child-how-to-build-healthy-relationships-including-dating-relationships/>). This booklet is designed to help parents effectively and accurately educate their children about healthy relationships. It also provides parents with additional resources and information in case they need more support.



Tip #8: Know the Signs and What To Do

Know the warning signs that suggest young people may be in unhealthy relationships. Take note of major changes in their physical appearance, relationship dynamics, and behaviours with peers or in the classroom. Specific signs to watch for are included in the table below.

Signs of Unhealthy Relationships and Youth Dating Violence

Changes in physical appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stops wearing makeup or wears a lot more• Starts wearing baggier clothes• Frequent bruising• Self-harm behaviours
Relationship lacks balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constantly checking in with texts and sending photos to prove location• Makes excuses for other's behaviour• Extreme jealousy and control• Belittled or called names• Unhealthy boundaries and lack of independence
Changes in behaviour with peers or in the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Loss of friendships and isolation• Late or absent from school or activities• Unable to concentrate and reduced academic performance• Passive, compliant, withdrawn or bullying and acting out• Anxious that partner will show up or know where they are

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 navigate the situation. This may involve encouraging and guiding them to make positive changes in the relationship. You can also refer them to other supports in the school or community, such as a school counsellor or the confidential Kids Help Phone (www.kidshelpphone.ca, 1-800-668-6868, or text CONNECT to 686868).

Additional Resources for Educators

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute Resources

- *An Environmental Scan of Canadian Resources Designed to Foster Healthy Adolescent Dating Relationships* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-532)
- *An Environmental Scan of Online Resources Related to Sexting* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-540)
- *Building Healthy Online Relationships* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-304)
- *Building Healthy Relationships: Yes, that includes dating relationships!* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-301)
- *Grooming Evidence Summary* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-543)
- *Helping Adolescents Develop Healthy Dating Relationships: An Evidence Summary* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-536)
- *Understanding and Teaching About Consent* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-533)
- *Youth and Sexting Information Sheet* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-542)
- *Youth Dating Violence Fact Sheet* (www.skprevention.ca, search 7-544)

Canadian Resources

- *Cybertip*, operated by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, is Canada's tipline for reporting online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. In addition, the website includes resources, research, and campaigns focused on online harms (<https://www.cybertip.ca/en/>).
- *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/>).
- *Get Cyber Safe* is a national public awareness campaign created to inform Canadians about cyber security and ways they can protect themselves online (<https://www.getcybersafe.gc.ca/en>).
- *Media Smarts* is a Canadian organization dedicated to enhancing digital media literacy. Resources and lessons are available for educators and parents (<https://mediasmarts.ca/>).
- *Need Help Now* helps teens stop the spread of sexual pictures or videos and provides support along the way (<https://needhelponow.ca/app/en/>). The website also includes downloadable resources for youth (https://needhelponow.ca/app/en/downloadable_resources-youth) and information for parents (https://needhelponow.ca/app/en/parent_info-talking_tips).
- *Prevnet* is dedicated to providing evidence-based information on healthy relationships, bullying, cyberbullying, teen dating violence, and more (<https://www.prevnet.ca/>).
- *Protect Kids Online* is an organization to help parents/guardians stay informed about the online interests of youth, the potential risks that youth face online, and prevention strategies to keep youth safe online (<https://protectkidsonline.ca/app/en/>).

Other Resources

- *Loveisrespect.org* is a website designed to help young people prevent and end abusive relationships, and build healthy relationships (<https://www.loveisrespect.org/>). Loveisrespect has information for educators to support students, including Healthy Relationship Educators Toolkits for middle school and high school (<https://www.loveisrespect.org/supporting-others-dating-abuse/supporting-a-student/>).
- *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/).