

TIPS for
Talking

With Your Child

**How to Build Healthy Relationships,
Including Dating Relationships**



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our goal is **healthy** children

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

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TIPS for Talking With Your Child

How to Build Healthy Relationships, Including Dating Relationships

The idea of talking to your children about relationships, especially dating relationships, may make you feel uncomfortable. You may be unsure about what to say or how to say it. This booklet is designed to help you educate your children 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 parents to talk with their children about healthy relationships?

Teaching children 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 adolescents understand what healthy dating relationships are, they are less likely to tolerate unhealthy and potentially abusive relationships.

It is important that these conversations happen 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.

It is common for parents to experience some anxiety when their children begin dating. This anxiety may be felt for several reasons, including a lack of knowledge and feeling unequipped to talk about dating. However, research shows that children do want to learn about important topics, such as dating, from their parents. Without information from supportive and informed adults, they are left to develop their own assumptions about relationships and dating by talking to their friends or watching the latest TV shows and movies. This can often lead to myths and misconceptions. As such, parents are in a position to positively influence their children's attitudes and behaviours towards dating relationships.

As you begin to talk with your children about relationships, remember that it is okay for you to not have all the answers. If you do not know the answers to questions that your children ask, be honest and let them know that you will find out the answer and get back to them. You and your children can also search together for the answer. This will help your children understand that it is okay not to know all the answers and that it is important to find accurate information.

A few notes about terminology

This resource uses the term “parent” to refer to primary caregivers of children, acknowledging that children’s primary caregivers may be someone other than a biological parent.

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 booklet, 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).

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TIP #1

Build and Maintain Strong
Relationships With Your Children

As children become adolescents, they can start to separate from their parents. However, a strong parent-child relationship is extremely important at this point in life.

Research shows that meaningful parent-child relationships help children succeed in life and overcome challenges. For example, a strong relationship with your children will help them form healthy relationships with friends and dating partners, learn how to manage their emotions, and find healthy ways to manage conflict.

Conversations about dating relationships, and any other topic, are a lot easier when you have built meaningful relationships with your children. The following are tips for building meaningful relationships and for staying connected with your children.

- Learn about what your children are interested in and spend time doing these things together. If you pay attention to your children's interests, you will show them that you care about them.
- Have an adolescent-friendly house and make your children's friends feel welcome.
- Show your children that their thoughts and feelings are important to you by listening to what they are saying. To reassure your children that you are listening to them, you could say, "I really appreciate the information you have shared with me and I want you to know that I'm here to support you." It is important to remain calm even when you don't think the same way as them.
- Encourage your children to participate in making decisions that will affect them. For example, you could invite them to help decide how your family will spend time together or what their curfew will be. Allowing your children to share some control with you will help them feel empowered and know that their opinions are respected.
- Show your children that they can count on you and trust you. For example, even when they've done something you don't agree with, let them know that you still love them and are there for them.



- When you make a mistake, it's important to say sorry. Don't make excuses. Say exactly what you've done wrong and if possible, make it up to your children. For example, if you are always late, start showing up on time. If you have said hurtful things, acknowledge that what you said is hurtful and that you will stop saying these things.
- Help your children grow by expanding their possibilities. This could mean exposing them to new ideas, experiences, places, or introducing them to others who can help them grow. With the support of caring adults, adolescents can safely explore and expand their horizons.
- Hold your children accountable to boundaries and rules. Know where, how, and with whom your children spend time. This should be done in the context of an open, loving parent-child relationship, where they do not feel like their independence is being taken away.





TIP #2

Enhance Your Own Knowledge About
Healthy Relationships

When parents have accurate information, they are able to positively influence the knowledge and behaviours of their children. Conversations with your children about healthy relationships will be a lot 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 children about the signs of an unhealthy relationship. Below are common features of healthy relationships and signs of unhealthy ones.

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 calling, texting, or messaging too much.
- **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).

One way to better understand what your children are learning about relationships is to learn about their interests. What kind of music do they listen to? What is their favourite TV show, movie, or video game? Be aware that your children may be receiving harmful messages about what a dating relationship should be from these, and other, sources. It is important to talk to them about these messages.

Healthy Relationship Skills

It is also important that adolescents have the skills they need to make healthy relationship choices. Skills, like effective conflict management, are important for adolescents to develop in order to form and maintain healthy relationships. Healthy relationship skills include:

- communicating 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

Remember, if your children have a clear understanding of what a healthy relationship is and the necessary skills to build such relationships, they will be less likely to tolerate harmful or abusive relationships now and in the future.



TIP #3

Start Educating Your
Children 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.

Research shows that children are often more willing to participate in these conversations before they have become romantically involved. As a parent, you may also find it easier to talk about dating relationships with your children before they start dating. The qualities that make a good friendship are also important for a healthy dating relationship. As such, you can begin by talking with your children about the qualities that all relationships need to be healthy, with a focus on friends and family. As they approach adolescence, you can begin to talk about this information in the context of dating relationships.

These early conversations can provide a basis on which to build the more difficult discussions that come later. So don't wait until after they start dating. Begin the conversation early so that your children are better equipped to have healthy dating relationships.

If you have not yet started to have these conversations, it is okay. Remember, it is never too late to start having conversations related to healthy relationships. For those who are already engaged in dating relationships, such education can better equip them to recognize healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns and to deal with unhealthy relationships.



TIP #4

Provide Your Child With Examples
of Healthy Relationships

Use everyday opportunities from your own life, television, music, and so on, to teach your children about healthy relationships. For example, if an issue comes up during a television show, use this opportunity to talk to your children and provide them with accurate information. Address common misconceptions. There are many myths and misunderstandings about healthy relationships, including dating relationships. It is important to discuss these myths and misunderstandings with your children.

Examples of everyday, teachable moments include:

- a friend or family member's breakup
- talking during a commercial break about a romantic moment in a television show
- listening to music in the car and discussing song lyrics and what they mean
- discussing what your child is learning at school about relationships

You can also use your personal life to model healthy relationships and teach your children how to deal with conflicts in a healthy way. For example, if you get in an argument with your partner, try to work it out calmly through discussion, instead of yelling and calling each other names. In your discussions with your children, respect them by listening carefully to what they have to say.

Parenting can be stressful at the best of times; continuously supporting your children's needs can feel overwhelming. All parents make mistakes, and even the most loving parents can react with hurtful words or actions. It is important that you apologize and make amends. Your children will see how you react to situations and follow your lead.

It is also important that adolescents know how to have healthy online relationships. Talk with your children 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 a phone, tablet, laptop, or other device. You can ask your children to think about what they want and what they are okay with when hanging out online. For example:

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







TIP #5

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, like dating violence. This is one reason why talking with your children 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.

If your children bring up a subject that you are uncomfortable with or discuss behaviours that you may not approve of, try to find the positive in the situation. For example, you could say "Thank you for sharing this with me. I appreciate your honesty." You can then use the opportunity to share information about your values and expectations for your children's behaviour. For more information about how to share your values with your children, refer to Tip 8 in this booklet.

Focus on talking with your children about healthy relationships instead of potential harmful consequences.



TIP #6

Create a Safe Space to Allow for Open
and Honest Communication

Create an environment where your children feel safe to talk openly about relationship issues. To allow for effective communication between you and your children, try your best to:

- **Listen more and talk less.** Listen patiently and calmly when your children talk, and ask for more information. For example, you could ask, “What do you know about ... (dating relationships, etc.)?” or “How do you feel about ... ?”
- **Control emotional reactions to your children’s ideas and refrain from criticizing.** If you react emotionally (e.g., anger, fear, disbelief, belittling) to what your children are sharing, they may become defensive, reducing the effectiveness of the conversation. If your children share information that is inaccurate, use the opportunity to provide accurate information or look up accurate information together.
- **Be honest.** For example, if you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. Tell your children that you will look it up or that you can look it up together.
- **Keep the conversation informal or casual.** This can be done by using everyday opportunities to raise issues related to dating relationships, as opposed to sitting your children down for a formal talk.
- **Leave the conversation open for future conversations.** For example, you can ask, “Is there anything that you would like to know more about?” Remind your children that you are available whenever they have questions.
- **Use humour, where appropriate.** Talking about dating can be embarrassing and uncomfortable. Using humour can go a long way towards making it easier to talk about these topics. This doesn’t mean that your conversations with your children need be like a comedy routine – it is important that your children understand that the information being shared is important. However, it does mean that you can use humour to lighten the mood.



TIP #7

Keep the Conversation Going

Repetition is an important part of all learning. Expect your children to ask questions repeatedly; this is particularly true for younger children. Remain calm, and continue to provide consistent, accurate information. Repetition helps to ensure that your children are remembering and understanding the information you provide. Repetition also helps to increase the comfort of talking about dating relationships with your children.

Other benefits of repetition:

- allows you to build on earlier discussions, both by repeating information and by providing more details
- increases the likelihood of an ongoing conversation, showing your children that they can talk to you about issues related to relationships at any time
- allows your children to feel closer to you and feel more able to communicate about relationships and in general
- ensures your children are remembering and understanding the information you provide

Try, and try again. If a conversation does not go the way you hoped, you will have other opportunities. Have more than one conversation. This will give you many opportunities to get it right and improve upon what did not go well the first time. If your children refuse to take part in these conversations, try again at another time or provide your child with books or websites containing accurate information. Remind your children that you are there if they ever have questions.



TIP #8

Communicate Your Own Values

One of the many benefits of parents educating their children about healthy relationships is that they are able to share their own values, beliefs, and expectations as part of their communication with their children.

Before you share your values related to relationships with your children, it is important that you think about your values and determine why they are important to you. Your children may challenge you on your values, so it is helpful for you to understand why you believe the things you do. Your children may not agree with your values, even after you explain your reasoning. If this happens, it is important to listen and stay calm. This will show your children that you are open to their thoughts and ideas. This will also increase the likelihood that they will continue to talk to you and come to you for information and support. Use this opportunity to share accurate information if your children are misinformed.

Share your values honestly and be sure to model them in your own life. Remember, your own behaviour is another way you communicate your values to your children.

**Think about your own values
and why they are important to
you.**



TIP #9

Pay Attention and Know What to Do

Look for warning signs that show that your children may be in an unhealthy relationship. The following are some warning signs that your children may be in an unhealthy relationship:

- has unexplained marks or bruises
- emails or texts excessively
- is depressed or anxious
- stops participating in extracurricular activities or other hobbies/interests
- stops spending time with friends and family
- begins to dress differently

If you think that your child is in an unhealthy relationship, talk to him or her about it. Ask her how she feels about her relationship and listen without judgement. Focus on supporting your child, as opposed to criticizing his dating partner. If your child does not feel comfortable talking to you, try not to get offended. Encourage your child to talk to another trusted adult or help your child seek guidance from places like confidential counselling services or the Kids Help Phone (www.kidshelpphone.ca or 1-800-668-6868).

If you think your children are in unhealthy relationships, talk to them about it, and let them know you are there to support them.

Additional Resources for Parents

There are many resources available if you have questions or need more information. You can speak with your healthcare provider, community organization, or refer to one of the resources listed below.

ParentFurther is a Search Institute resource that helps families strengthen relationships through shared activities. (www.parentfurther.com)

Loveisrespect is a website designed to help young people prevent and end abusive relationships and build healthy relationships. (For information for parents, refer to <http://www.loveisrespect.org/info-parents/>)

Date Safe Project focuses on giving people, including young people, positive skills for developing healthy relationships. (For information for parents, refer to <https://www.datesafeproject.org/parents/>)

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)

Helpful Resources for Adolescents

Kids Help Phone provides free online and telephone counselling to children and youth. Children and adolescents can talk with a counsellor online at www.kidshelpphone.ca or call 1-800-668-6868.

Loveisrespect is a website designed to help young people prevent and end abusive relationships and build healthy relationships.
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