

# HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

CONVERSATION STARTER GUIDE FOR PARENTS

**Break** the Cycle

PRODUCED BY: BREAK THE CYCLE &  
THE LOVE IS ADVOCACY YOUTH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TEAM  
WITH SUPPORT FROM

  
loveisrespect.org



It is never too early to learn the skills necessary to have healthy, safe, and fulfilling relationships. As a parent/guardian, these are values you can help instill in your children through casual conversation spanning a lifetime.

We've created a quick conversation starter guide to help you begin navigating conversations about healthy relationship throughout your child's life, even if your child is not ready for "romantic/intimate" relationships yet.

### **PARENT WARM-UP ACTIVITY: "WHEN I WAS YOUNGER..."**

When you were your child's age, who was your ideal couple? (this could be a couple on TV, celebrities, or people you know personally): \_\_\_\_\_

What characteristics were the most important to you in a romantic partner? \_\_\_\_\_

What was your idea of a good date? \_\_\_\_\_

How often did you talk to someone you were dating? \_\_\_\_\_

When did you feel it was appropriate to kiss someone you were dating? \_\_\_\_\_

When did you feel it was appropriate to have sex with someone you were dating?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Dating has changed, but what we want in a relationship has stayed the same. We still want to date someone who we can have fun with and trust, so it helps to think about what you thought when you were your child's age to better understand what your child may be thinking or experiencing. Conversations around healthy relationships can start at any age, and it is never too early to help instill the foundation of a healthy relationship in your children, whether they are currently dating or not.

Use the simple conversation guide below to help start conversations with your child at different points in their life, using various scenarios to help them develop the skills to have healthy and safe relationships free from fear.



## ELEMENTARY YEARS: AGES 5-9

### **Disagreements and Emotions**

At some point in their early childhood years, your child will be upset with a friend, teacher, or family member. In these situations, it is important for your child to identify their feelings and address their problems without violence. How does this situation make them feel? What can your child do to make the situation better? This is an excellent opportunity to talk to your child about concepts like anger management, compromise, empathy, and communication.

### **Body Boundaries**

We all have different ways that we like to show affection and appreciation. Some people love hugs, while others prefer high-fives or fist bumps. Respect your child's preferences about touch, and help them find ways to communicate their boundaries with others. Similarly, talk to your child about respecting other people's boundaries too, making sure they ask permission before they touch another person. Remember: everyone is the boss of their own body!

### **Identifying "Safe" People**

What does it mean to feel safe? When we are safe, we are calm and relaxed. We do not expect to face danger or hurt. If your child feels unsafe or uncomfortable, who can they safely go to? If someone is not respecting their body boundaries, who can they safely tell? Help your child identify "safe" people. Examples of these people might be family members, teachers, school counselors, or coaches.

## PRE-TEEN YEARS: AGES 10-12

### **Friends and Fights**

As your child enters middle school, they may begin to see the formation of cliques and friend groups. Unfortunately, they might also see and experience bullying or social exclusion. Ask your child about what they like in a friend. Do they meet their own expectations of a good friend? Ask your child about respect. Do they treat others with respect, even people who are not their friends? Knowing how to develop healthy friendships lays the foundation for developing healthy romantic relationships.

### **Assessing Relationships**

Your child may start to notice relationships - whether in real life or in the media. Ask them their thoughts on these relationships, both positive and negative. Continue to talk to your child about body boundaries. Whether another person is a romantic partner, a friend, or a stranger; everyone is the boss of their own body! No one should pressure them to do something that makes them feel uncomfortable.

### **Building Capacity**

As your child grows up, you may not be the first person that they go to for advice. If your child is too embarrassed to talk to you about an issue, where can they go? Build on the conversation about identifying "safe" people by also discussing accessible and reliable resources in school, at the library, or even online. Finally, make yourself available as a listening ear whenever you can.



## TEEN YEARS: AGES 13-17

### **Navigating Relationships**

During this age range you may start seeing dating and relationships popping up in your child's life or social circles. Whether or not your child is currently in or looking for a relationship, this is a great time to begin delving into conversations about what a healthy romantic relationship looks like. This can help your child to develop healthy expectations and boundaries when it comes to relationships they choose to be in. Ask your teen about what they're seeing at school. Are their friends in relationships? Does it seem like their friends that are dating still have their own life, or are they only talking to or hanging out with the person they're with? Do they encounter problems in their relationships? If so who do they go to, how can or does your child help? All of these questions can help your child figure out what healthy and unhealthy behaviors may look like, as well as how they can be a supportive friend. Remind them that they can support their friends, but also to reach out to their friends, their family, and other trusted adults for support as well.

### **Only They Know What's Right for Them**

By this point your child has likely seen hundreds of examples of "first kisses," whether in TV shows, movies, school dances, or school halls during lunch. This is a good opportunity to talk to your child about consent, or giving or getting permission before something happens. Do people ask for consent before kissing someone? Why or why not? Talk to your child about why it's important to make sure everyone is enthusiastic and excited about what's about to happen, but also remind them that no one needs to do anything in any relationship that they don't want to. They know what's best for them, and what they are or are not comfortable with!

### **Accessing Support**

Sometimes children may feel like they're the only person experiencing something, and that feeling can be isolating. After watching an episode of your favorite show together where a character goes through a breakup, or after overhearing drama about a couple at school on the car ride home, remind your child that if they ever need help that you are there for them. Creating a judgement free zone where your child knows that they can come to you when they need support is important. Also, ask them about other people they may feel comfortable going to for help. Have they ever talked to the school counselor? Are there any teachers at school they feel comfortable talking to? If they go to their friends with a problem, what will their friends say?



## YOUNG ADULTS: AGES 18+

### **Boundary Setting**

As relationships grow, setting and discussing clear boundaries becomes increasingly important. How much time should people in a relationship spend together? Do they have their own space? Their own friends? Ask your child about their relationship, whether they're still keeping up with other friendships, or who else they have to talk to. If they're not in a relationship, ask them how much time they think they should spend with a romantic partner. Does their partner come to their classes or their job? How do they talk about these boundaries? Setting boundaries isn't always easy, but it's important to remind your child that they get to decide what they need from their relationship, and that their partner should respect their needs.

### **Continuous Consent**

People sometimes, incorrectly, assume that if two people are married, or if two people are dating long term, they don't need to ask for consent anymore. This isn't true for many reasons, sometimes people change their minds. Has your child ever changed their mind about something? Or agreed to do something but as the time neared somehow found other things they needed to do instead and then cancelled? Use these instances as an opportunity to speak with your child about continuous consent. Just because they agreed to get dinner with you once doesn't mean they always need to agree to do so. Ask them if they always ask or are asked when going out? Before having sex? Before kissing? Checking in with a partner each time makes sure that everyone involved is into what's happening, and it is a good skill to have in any relationship, no matter how serious!



### YOU HAVE OPTIONS

While we never want to anticipate unhealthy or abusive behaviors in a relationship, they can and do happen. If your child ever discusses any behaviors in their relationship that may be unhealthy or abusive, you can always remind them that they have rights, both morally and legally, in their relationship. Having a conversation about local and national organizations that provide support can help normalize accessing those resources down the line. Additionally, states have different laws when it comes to dating violence, domestic abuse, and sexual assault. Reviewing the laws that apply to your region can also help reaffirm that no one, under any circumstance, deserves abuse, and that legally, they have options. Ultimately, it is their choice whether or not they want to stay in a relationship, but it is imperative to remind your child that they also have rights and that you will support them no matter what they decide. Being transparent with your child can make you and professional organizations an accessible resource down the line.

### WHO CAN HELP?

#### Mental Health

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
suicidepreventionlifeline.org  
1-800-273-8255

#### Crisis Text Line

Text HELLO to 741741

Who else?

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#### Dating Abuse & Sexual Violence

loveisrespect.org  
1-866-331-9474  
Text loveis to 22522

#### National Domestic Violence Hotline

thehotline.org  
1-800-799-7233  
RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)  
1-800-656-4673

Who else?

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#### LGBTQ+ GLBT Hotline

glbthotline.org  
1-888-843-4564

#### The Trevor Project

www.thetrevorproject.org  
1-866-488-7386

Who else?

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#### In Your Life (friends, family, medical professionals, local emergency lines, etc)

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