



ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: STRATEGIES FOR TRUSTED ADULTS

Romantic relationships are a natural and normal aspect of adolescent development. They help young people develop new skills and explore their values. When given support to develop healthy relationship skills, young people become more prepared to effectively navigate healthy relationships in adolescence and in adulthood. Trusted adults in young peoples' lives are in a unique position to guide and support this learning while minimizing potential harm.

No one enters a relationship as an expert. Young people need experience, which can include healthy risk-taking,¹ practice in developing skills, and gaining a sense of their relationship values, needs, and priorities. Even when adolescent relationships are positive overall, young people may have difficult experiences, such as disagreements and break-ups. These challenges provide as much of a learning opportunity as the positive aspects of romantic relationships. Supportive, approachable adults can help adolescents navigate these experiences.

What is a Healthy Romantic Relationship?

Healthy relationships can take on many forms, depending on a person's experience, values and goals. Although there is no single definition of a healthy relationship,² research suggests there are common qualities that are important, such as equality, honesty, respect for one another, and physical safety.³ Behavioral skills that support these qualities can be practiced and enhanced in adolescence, not only through romantic relationships, but through relationships with family, friends, teachers, and other supportive adults.

Trauma and Adolescent Relationships

Young people who experience trauma may face unique barriers to experiencing healthy relationships. Trauma can break down trust and make it difficult for a young person to feel safe.⁴ Adults who wish to support adolescents in developing healthy relationship skills can benefit from understanding trauma, stress, and how these forces influence young people's choices. Adults can help adolescents build resilience to trauma by establishing safety and trust and empowering and supporting young people in their other relationships.⁵

The Role of Trusted Adults

Resilience literature suggests that young people are better able to succeed in the face of adversity when they have at least one stable and meaningful relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult.⁵ Further, research tells us that when an adolescent is connected to multiple support systems (such as family, peers, school staff, and community members), they are more likely to engage in behaviors that protect their sexual and reproductive health.⁶ In this light, a trusted adult—someone a young person trusts and can go to for support—is a valuable touchpoint in a young person's relationship journey. The list on the following page suggests actions that adults can take to support adolescents as they navigate their relationships.

QUALITIES OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Equality

Honesty

Trust

Safety

Respect

Clear Communication

Comfort

Independence

Humor

CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRUSTED ADULT

As a trusted adult, it is important to:

Model and draw attention to healthy relationship qualities

As a trusted adult, you can model healthy relationship qualities in your interactions with young people. Model consent by making sure young people give the OK if you are doing something that involves them. Draw attention to healthy relationship qualities demonstrated in the examples seen in current shows, movies, music, etc. Ask the young person how they might approach a situation or challenge presented in current events or the media.

Take adolescent romantic relationships seriously

Anticipate that young people will engage, or are engaging, in romantic relationships. Embrace the fact that this is an important part of normal adolescent development. Check your assumptions (for example, don't assume a romantic relationship means a sexual relationship).

Listen with an open mind

Avoid distractions when a young person shares a comment, question or concern. Check for understanding before you respond and reflect without judgment. Allow the adolescent to take the lead in the conversation as their concerns may be different from what you anticipate.

Communicate and follow through authentically and honestly

Use open-ended questions; come from a place of curiosity and non-judgment that invites discussion and reflection. Show young people that you will keep what they say in confidence. If you have limitations related to confidentiality (for example, you are a mandated reporter) let them know what your limitations are. Recognize if you are uncomfortable with a certain topic or don't know how to answer a question. You can say you want some more time to think about it and will come back to the topic when you are ready. Always follow through on promises and/or answers to questions—this builds trust and models good communication skills.

Acknowledge successes and encourage reflecting on mistakes

Adopt a growth mindset; encourage reflection and learning. Point out when you see or hear a young person doing something positive, like initiating a conversation about boundaries, or reflecting on their emotions. Unless someone's safety is being threatened, be open and nonjudgmental when young people share and reflect on mistakes they have made in their relationships. This can be a time of deep learning and growth, especially with support from a caring adult.

Understand the role stress and trauma play in decision-making and relationships⁴

Understanding how trauma and stress can affect individuals, relationships, and organizations helps to reframe otherwise confusing or aggravating behavior. This helps us recognize trauma's effects more accurately, which leads to more compassionate, strength-based, and effective responses that promote healing, rather than reactions that inadvertently re-traumatize and cause harm.

Healthy Adolescent Romantic Relationships—Critical Qualities

Quality ^a	What is it?	Why is it important? ^b	What are examples of how it might look, feel and/or sound? ^b
Equality	Partners share decisions and responsibilities. They discuss roles to make sure they are fair and equal.	Equality is an important foundation for a safe and healthy relationship. A lack of equality and unbalanced power dynamics can lead to abuse.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners feel heard. + Partners are comfortable speaking up. + Both partners compromise equally and have equal power to make decisions.
Honesty	Partners share their dreams, fears, and concerns with each other. They tell the truth about how they feel without fear about how the other will respond or judge them. They do not hide parts of themselves or their actions for fear of how the other will respond.	Honesty is an important quality for establishing intimacy and closeness in relationships. Being honest leads to good communication, which can strengthen many aspects of a relationship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Both partners are open about who they talk to or spend time with outside the relationship without fear of reaction. + Both partners take responsibility for their actions if they make a mistake.
Trust	Partners feel like they can count on each other and know the other person will be there for them.	While it takes time to build trust, especially if it has been broken in the past, it is a critical element for partners to feel safe and secure with one another.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners follow through with what they promise. + Partners respect each other’s privacy (online and offline). + Partners ask for consent to share pictures or experiences online.
Safety	Partners feel physically and emotionally safe in the relationship and respect each other’s need for space.	Nothing is more important than one’s own safety and security. If one doesn’t feel emotionally or physically safe in their relationship, then this is likely a red flag that needs to be examined.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners share their feelings, concerns, and desires without fear of emotional or physical harm. + Partners can negotiate conflict and disagreements without feeling threatened (emotionally or physically).

Quality ^a	What is it?	Why is it important? ^b	What are examples of how it might look, feel and/or sound? ^b
Respect	Partners treat each other like they want to be treated and accept each other's opinions, friends, and interests. They feel comfortable creating boundaries and respect each other's boundaries.	Supporting teens to practice mutual respect is important for establishing physical and emotional safety in relationships. When respect is present in a relationship, each partner will value the other's beliefs and opinions. Respect is also a good foundation for honesty, trust, and communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners' language lifts each other up rather than puts each other down. + Boundaries are understood and honored. + Partners stand up for each other and listen to each other's thoughts/opinions.
Clear Communication	Communication involves the use of words and body language to convey thoughts, feelings, and needs. Partners express what they need in a respectful way. Partners listen to each other. They may not always agree with what is being said but respond in respectful and considerate ways.	Clear communication is important for strengthening the connections between people and managing conflict in relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners talk and listen to each other without distraction. + Partners use "I" statements to convey what they want, need and feel (such as, "I want," "I need," "I feel"). + Both partners speak honestly and directly; they do not use the silent treatment, threats, or passive aggression to get their way.
Comfort	Partners feel safe with each other and respect each other's differences. They realize when they are wrong and are not afraid to say, "I am sorry." Partners can be themselves with each other.	Comfort is an important foundation for trust and clear communication. When each partner feels comfortable with the other, they will be able to communicate to resolve conflict.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners feel safe and secure enough to take healthy risks (like sharing personal thoughts/feelings) and make mistakes. + Partners feel like they can be themselves without judgment.

Quality ^a	What is it?	Why is it important? ^b	What are examples of how it might look, feel and/or sound? ^b
Independence	Neither partner is dependent upon the other for an identity. Partners maintain friendships outside of the relationship. Either partner has the right to end the relationship.	Independence allows for partners to maintain their own interests and relationships with family and friends.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners feel confident that they can spend time apart from the other without losing their relationship. + Partners feel like their unique interests are supported. + Partners accept when other demands (such as school, family, or friends) take priority over the relationship.
Humor	The relationship is enjoyable for both partners. Partners laugh and have fun.	When partners share moments of laughter and fun, it affirms each individual and the relationship. This is an important component of bonding and feeling secure with one another.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Partners can laugh together. + Partners feel joy spending time together.

- a. Definitions reprinted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Choose respect action kit: Helping preteens and teens build healthy relationships. Atlanta, GA: CDC; 2005
- b. Importance of qualities and examples drawn from: 10 Signs of a Healthy Relationship. (2017). Retrieved September 5, 2019, from One Love Foundation website: <https://www.joinonelove.org/signs-healthy-relationship/>

Opportunities for a Trusted Adult to Provide Support

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2. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2011) Healthy Teen Relationships: Expert Recommendations to Improve Research & Practice on Adolescent Dating Relationships; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Expert Convening. Atlanta, GA: CDC.
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4. Dorado, J. S., Martinez, M., McArthur, L. E., & Leibovitz, T. (2016). Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS): A whole-school, multi-level, prevention and intervention program for creating trauma-informed, safe and supportive schools. *School Mental Health, 8*(1), 163-176.
5. Shonkoff, J., Levitt, P., Bunge, S., Cameron, J., Duncan, G., Fisher, P., & Nox, N. (2015). Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper 13. *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: Cambridge, UK*.
6. Markham, C. M., Lormand, D., Gloppen, K. M., Peskin, M. F., Flores, B., Low, B., & House, L. D. (2010). Connectedness as a predictor of sexual and reproductive health outcomes for youth. *Journal of adolescent health, 46*(3), S23-S41.