

Healthy Boundaries Help to Prevent Abuse

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Our lives are made up of a series of relationships—including relationships between family members, colleagues, peers, acquaintances, mentors, our friends and other people in our lives. Each relationship can have a profound impact on us, whether we realize it or not. Healthy relationships and boundaries are extremely important, because they can help to both prevent and stop abuse. Today, teens, especially, are told (through media, movies, friends, social media, etc.), to *not* set or maintain boundaries, and can ultimately be entangled in unhealthy relationships as a result. Unhealthy relationships can involve abusive behaviors, and the ever-present risk is that abusive behaviors could escalate into violence and sexual abuse. However, when a youth understands appropriate boundaries, and has healthy relationship examples in his/her life, it helps the youth to be better prepared when faced with a situation that could involve abuse. It might also be beneficial to have a refresher for yourself, too, since you are a primary model for teens on relationships.

This article explores healthy and unhealthy types of relationships, and supplies conversation tips to help keep you and the youth you care about healthy and safe.

What is a healthy relationship?

Healthy relationships contain appropriate boundaries that both people set and honor. They're supportive, honest and respectful of feelings, goals and space. You feel valued, you listen to one another, compromise, and treat the person the way you want to be treated. Healthy relationships have specific characteristics that you should always expect—which should be present whether you're in-person, or communicating electronically:

- **Mutual respect:** in that both people are kind to one another, and value the other person.
- **Freedom to be yourself:** where both people can express themselves without fear of judgment or criticism. No one loses themselves or their identity, and both are free to dress the way they want, spend time apart from the other person, pursue goals, hobbies, new friendships, etc.
- **Boundaries:** setting expectations and communicating [boundaries](#) is an important aspect of any relationship, as is honoring someone else's boundaries. You don't need to share every aspect of your life with anyone, and should keep some things private. No one feels pressured to do anything they don't feel comfortable with. Physical and emotional boundaries are respected, and space is given when needed.

- **Communication:** Both individuals should be willing and comfortable with speaking honestly about their feelings, listening and working together on problem solving. It's ok to disagree or get angry and fight—as long as it's fair and respectful. Healthy disagreements involve compromise; one person doesn't make all of the decisions or “get their way.”

How do you know if you're in an unhealthy relationship or situation?

Relationships aren't always perfect; minor behaviors, like jealousy once in a while, don't make the relationship unhealthy. Some unhealthy behaviors might happen, and they *might* be ok if they aren't frequent OR violent. Conversely, there are certain behaviors that are clearly abusive and problematic, such as physical violence, emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse or exploitation. But, sometimes it isn't so black and white, like when it comes to isolation, intimidation, manipulation, bullying, etc. Unhealthy relationships can also be referred to as abusive ones—but try not to focus too much on the terminology. Instead, think of how that particular relationship makes you feel:

- Do you feel bad about yourself, *like you aren't “good enough”*?
- Does it *hurt* to be around that person?
- Does it seem like *your feelings don't matter*?
- Do you feel anxious that *you might do something wrong* to set them off?
- Do you worry a lot about *how the person will react*?

If yes to any of these, then it might be an unhealthy relationship and it may be time to get help. It's important that to recognize the warning signs and find a way to get out before they get worse or escalate into violence. Abusive behaviors often won't stop on their own.

Red flags:

Sometimes we might be concerned that a youth in our life is already in a bad situation. These red flags are behaviors that should lead you to suspect there could be a problem. It may not be abuse, but does need additional attention or help:

- Sudden behavioral or attitude changes (different from mood swings)
- Avoidance of loved ones or activities (especially if they loved an activity and no longer want to participate)
- Grade changes
- Unexplained injuries, scratches, bruises, burns, “branding”/tattoos (or wears clothing inappropriate for weather)
- Makes excuses for other person's inappropriate behavior
- Acts or looks afraid or uncomfortable around the person
- Changes in hygiene

If you're concerned your youth is in an unhealthy situation, you're going to need to speak with them about it. It may help to write down your concerns ahead of time so you have them clearly laid out. You'll want to keep the emotion out of your conversation so that you can communicate calmly about it. Do keep in mind that if you suspect a child or teen is being abused by an adult, you'll need to communicate with the Child Protective Services [in your state](#).

Communication tips:

Now that there's a better understanding of healthy relationships and red flags, it may be time to work on communicating the information to the youth in your care. When gearing up to speak to someone about healthy relationships, ensure that you aren't talking "down" to them. Make sure they know that you believe they're smart, they matter, and they know how to make good choices! You can also explain that as youth are faced with an increasing responsibility to make their own decisions, it helps to have additional resources to make more informed decisions that involve boundaries within their relationships.

- Begin with asking them if they admire anyone else's relationship, and why? It could be a relationship between peers, a "dating relationship," a mentoring one, etc. Help them to identify the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships as outlined above.
- Conversely, ask them if they know anyone who is in a situation that is unhealthy (including [friendships](#) or relationships).
- Ensure that you listen to their perspective in the conversation. The best conversations involve listening and giving both people an opportunity to be heard and understood.
- Do not blame the youth or any victims of abuse. It can be really confusing to be in a relationship where one is mistreated, and it's easy to feel shame or guilt. Abuse is always the fault of the person abusing—there are no exceptions to this rule.
- Ask if they know [what to do](#) if they're faced with an abusive situation. Do they have the courage to communicate with a safe adult in the event that they, or their friends, are involved with unhealthy relationships?
- Focus on the goal, and tell them, as many times as you think they need to hear (and then ten more times on top of that), that they deserve to be in good, safe and healthy relationships. Abuse is NEVER ok. You don't deserve to be treated poorly—no one should.

Learning how to be in a healthy relationship might take work! Recognizing the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, and learning how to set boundaries and expectations for how others should treat you is essential for

healthy, happy and safe relationships. As a caring adult, you can help youth to understand the difference through your communication with them—both the verbal type of communication, and the communication where you show by example. Healthy relationships lead to having happy lives.