

Developing Healthy Relationships: Preparing Your Child Before They Start Dating Workshop Guide

Developed by
Start Strong Boston - Boston Public Health Commission
and Futures Without Violence, formerly Family Violence Prevention Fund.

This workshop also relied on exercises developed by Start Strong Austin - SafePlace.

Support for this project was provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
as part of *Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships*.

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships
Futures Without Violence
100 Montgomery Street, The Presidio
San Francisco, CA 94129
415-678-5500
www.startstrongteens.org

We welcome your usage of these materials and have provided them in an editable format, for your convenience. Please credit Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships/Futures Without Violence upon duplication, and acknowledge if materials have been altered from their original form.

**The Communities of the
*Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships Initiative***

Start Strong Atlanta

Emory University
404-712-8730
<http://startstrongatl.org/>

Start Strong Austin

SafePlace
512-356-1623
www.startstrongaustin.org

Start Strong Boston

Boston Public Health Commission
617-534-5674
www.facebook.com/healthyboston

Start Strong Bridgeport

RYASAP
203- 579-2727
www.myspace.org

Start Strong Bronx

Bronx-Lebanon Hospital
718-299-1893
www.startstrongbronx.org

Start Strong Idaho

Idaho Coalition Against Sexual Assault &
Domestic Violence
208-384-0419
www.startstrongidaho.com

Start Strong Indianapolis

Indiana University Health
317-924-0904
www.startstrongindy.com

Start Strong Los Angeles

Peace Over Violence
213-955-9090
www.youthoverviolence.org

Start Strong Oakland

Family Violence Law Center
510-208-0220
<http://www.myjane.org/>

Start Strong Rhode Island

Sojourner House
401-861-6191
www.hkupwithrespect.org

Start Strong Wichita

Catholic Charities
316-258-9878
www.startstrongwichita.org

Developing Healthy Relationships: Preparing Your Child Before They Start Dating

Background

During adolescence, youth move to establish more independence from their parents and family and show greater closeness to their peers. This is part of the normal separation from parents in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Although this transition is often a time of strained relationships, research indicates that parents and adult caregivers remain critically important in the lives of youth. Youth who are more connected to parents and adult care givers tend to demonstrate healthier behaviors, including less violence¹².

Some parent/caregivers are struggling with their own histories of violence, including ongoing abusive relationships. This can impact a parent's willingness and ability to connect to their child to discuss healthy and unhealthy relationships, however, the importance of open, forthright communication about relationships may be even more important in these family situations. Youth who have experienced family discord, including violence, tend to express high acceptance of violence among peers and intimate partners.³⁴⁵ A child or youth's experience with domestic violence or conflict at home, as well as being victims of physical or sexual abuse or neglect, or parental mental illness or substance abuse can increase a youth's own risk for adolescent dating violence.⁶⁷⁸⁹¹⁰¹¹

Parent/Caregivers may be aware of the phenomenon of dating violence, however, it is likely they underestimate their own child's involvement in, or vulnerability for, abusive relationships. Research conducted for the Start Strong Initiative by Hart Research Associates reported that parents do not think of their middle school children, particularly their 11- and 12-year-olds, as "dating" or in "romantic" relationships. However, many youth this age are beginning to try out romantic interactions

¹ Leadbeater BJ, Banister EM, Ellis WE, Yeung R. Victimization and relational aggression in adolescent romantic relationships: The influence of parental and peer behaviors, and individual adjustment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 2008; 37:359-72.

² Pflieger JC, Vazsonyi AT. Parenting processes and dating violence: The mediating role of self-esteem in low- and high-SES adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence* 2006;29:495-512.

³ Kinsfogel KM, Grych JH. Interparental conflict and adolescent dating relationships: Integrating cognitive, emotional, and peer influences. *Journal of Family Psychology* 2004; 18:505-15.

⁴ Foshee VA, Bauman KE, Linder GF. Family violence and the perpetration of adolescent dating violence: Examining social learning and social control processes. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1999; 61:331-42.

⁵ Simons RL, Lin KH, Gordon LC. Socialization in the family of origin and male dating violence: A prospective study. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1998; 60:467-78.

⁶ Lavoie F, Hebert M, Tremblay R, Vitaro F, Vezina L, McDuff P. History of family dysfunction and perpetration of dating violence by adolescent boys: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 2002; 30:375-83.

⁷ O'Keefe M, Treister L. Victims of dating violence among high school students. Are the predictors different for males and females? *Violence Against Women* 1998; 4:195-223.

⁸ Howard DE, Wang MQ. Psychosocial factors associated with adolescent boys' reports of dating violence. *Adolescence* 2003;38:519-33.

⁹ Wolfe DA, Scott K, Wekerle C, Pittman AL. Child maltreatment: Risk of adjustment problems and dating violence in adolescence. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 2001; 40:282-9.

¹⁰ Fang XM, Corso PS. Child maltreatment, youth violence, and intimate partner violence - Developmental relationships. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 2007; 33:281-90.

¹¹ Hussey JM, Chang JJ, Kotch JB. Child maltreatment in the United States: Prevalence, risk factors, and adolescent health consequences. *Pediatrics* 2006;118:933-42

in the 'social safety' of a group of friends. "Hanging out" with friends at the mall or the movie theatre is a form of dating.

Many parents feel their children are not ready to hear about the "scary" issues of violence and sex. Parents express discomfort about broaching these topics with their 11- and 12-year-olds, as they don't think their children are ready for them. Some parents say they are waiting for their children to bring up these issues.

Parent/caregivers play a critical role in providing a good example and teaching young people the importance of respectful, honest romantic relationships, how to make responsible decisions regarding relationships, how to resolve conflicts and how to say 'no. Even when parents think their children are not listening to or watching them, they often are. Part of our challenge is to help parents overcome their tendency to wait for children to initiate the conversation and help them find the right language to have conversations about healthy relationships and create a comfort level among parents so that they will see this issue as relevant.

WORKSHOP GUIDE

Overview

During this workshop, parents will have the opportunity to voice concerns and questions about their middle schoolers' peer relationships. The workshop is designed to encourage discussion about bullying, negative peer pressure, harassment, rumors, racial slurs, sexting/cyberbullying, fears about dating and teen pregnancy, etc. The goal of the workshop is to help parents understand the importance of discussing romantic relationships and offer practical guidance for how to engage their youth in the discussion about healthy relationships.

Session Objectives

- Explore parents' concerns about their children's peer and dating relationships
- Increase parent awareness about dating among middle school youth
- Identify characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationship
- Expand parents' understanding of the need to preemptively build skills during tween years to build healthy relationships and prevent teen dating violence in the future.
- Increase parents' skills, comfort and intent to discuss these issues with their youth.

Materials:

- Relationship behavior cards
- Tape
- Signs: "Healthy" & "Unhealthy"
- Definition of Teen Dating Violence (see pages 5-6)
- Definition of a Healthy Relationship and Unhealthy Relationship
- Role-Play cards
- "Relationship Building Blocks" worksheet (PDF document)
- Healthy Relationship Quiz (PDF document)
- Conversation Starters
- "Parent Commitment and Tips" worksheet
- Workshop Evaluation Form

I. ICEBREAKER: (5 min.)

- Welcome parents and thank them for coming. Tell them that the next hour or so will be an opportunity for them to learn and practice new skills to help their teens engage in healthy relationships.
- Ask participants to introduce themselves and share their favorite subject from school.

II. INTRODUCTION: MIDDLE SCHOOL MEMORIES (10 min.)

Explain that middle school is a difficult time in a young person's life. New schools, new friends and new expectations around relationships make it a difficult time for even the most resilient teen.

Directions:

- Tell participants that you want them to think back to when they were in 7th or 8th grade. Ask them to turn to the person to the right or the left of them and answer the following questions (you may want to write them on the board or on a piece of chart paper or put them in a Powerpoint):
 - What clothes were you wearing?
 - What "technology" were you using?
 - Who did you look to for advice (adults and peers)?
 - What did "dating" mean?
 - What do you think "dating" means for middle school students today?
- After a few minutes, ask if anyone would like to share his or her answers. After a number of people have shared, explain that many people remember middle school as a time of exploration and of defining their identity. Their children are probably experiencing some of the exact same things they went through in middle school. Technology may be evolving but many aspects of teen relationships have remained the same.

III. FOCUS ACTIVITIES:

A. What We Know: (5 min.)

- Acknowledge that while we don't know the exact numbers of preteens and younger teens who are experiencing dating violence, a survey commissioned by Love Is Respect and Liz Claiborne Inc. found that:
 - 20% of children between the ages of 11 and 14 say their friends are victims of dating violence,
 - 40% of children between the ages of 11 and 14 in relationships know friends who are verbally abused, and
 - 34% of teens that are sexually active by age 15 have been physically abused.
- These statistics tell us that we need to start talking to our teens early so that they have the ability to recognize signs of an unhealthy relationship and the skills to engage in healthy relationships even before they start dating.

B. The Relationship Spectrum: (15 min.)

Preparation: Cut out behavior cards from template (see page 9) and have them on hand. Tape up “Healthy” sign (see page 11) at one end of the classroom, tape up “Unhealthy” sign (see page 12) at another end of the classroom.

Tell workshop participants it is important for us all to have some shared definitions around the topic of teen dating violence prevention and healthy relationship promotion. The following activity will help us:

- Identify the types and range of behaviors that often occur in teen relationships
- Develop shared definitions of teen dating violence, healthy relationships, and unhealthy relationships

Directions:

- Give each parent one of the “Relationship Behavior” cut-out cards. If the group is large, people may need to work in pairs.
- Ask them to read the behavior listed on their cards, and, as a group, line themselves up between the “healthy” and “unhealthy” signs in the room based on where they think that behavior fits along the spectrum. Have them remain standing in this line.
- Ask each person to read what is on their card in order from “healthy” to “unhealthy”

Discussion Questions:

- How was this challenging? Were there any cards that were especially difficult to put in order, or didn’t seem to fit?
- At what point along this spectrum do you think the behaviors begin to become unhealthy?
- At what point along this spectrum do you think the behaviors begin to become abusive?
 - Allow for disagreement and dialogue, this exercise is meant to elicit different opinions.
 - After discussion, allow participants to return to their seats for debrief.

Debrief/Definitions:

- Stress that one important take-away from this activity is that unhealthy and abusive behavior can take many different forms depending on the relationship: emotional, physical, and sexual forms of violence may be present. As is the case with bullying, in teen dating violence, emotional and verbal forms of abuse may be just as damaging as the physical abuse.
 - Post up **definitions**
- Our definition of **teen dating violence** is: “Teen Dating Violence describes actual or threatened acts of physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal harm, including stalking and economic coercion by a current or former partner, boyfriend, girlfriend or someone wanting a romantic relationship. It can occur among heterosexual or same-gender couples. It can also include using internet, social networking sites, phones, or text messaging to harass, pressure or victimize.”¹²

¹² Definition from www.startstrongteens.org

- Our definition of a **healthy relationship** is: “A relationship in which both partners are equally empowered. Healthy relationships contain trust, communication, respect, space, and boundaries.”
- Our definition of an **unhealthy relationship** is “A relationship in which one or both partners feels disempowered. Unhealthy relationships are deficient in any of the following: trust, communication, respect, space, and boundaries.”
- One way to think about the difference between unhealthy relationships and teen dating violence is that teen dating violence is a specific type of unhealthy relationships, where the unhealthy behaviors occur regularly in a patterned or cyclical manner.”
- This activity demonstrated that abusive behaviors exist on a spectrum, and there is often a gray zone between when a relationship is unhealthy and when it starts becoming abusive.
- This entire workshop is meant to help you develop ways to talk to your teen about healthy and unhealthy relationships, and to begin having an ongoing conversation early on, even before clear warning signs of abusive patterns surface.

C. Practice Makes Perfect: Relationship Role-Plays (25 min.)

Tell participants that they will now have the opportunity to role-play some of the challenging relationship scenarios that may come up as their teen goes through middle school.

Directions:

- Divide parents up into groups of three people. One person plays a teen, another is the parent and the third is the observers
- Explain that each group of three will receive three scenarios. Each scenario should take approximately 2-3 minutes.
- Pass out the Role-Play cards (see page 15) to each group of three.
- Ask participants to begin their role-plays.
- At the end of each role-play, the observer should give feedback to the person playing the parent. They can provide feedback on tone of voice, body language, listening skills, etc.
- Participants should switch roles and then start the second (and third) role-plays following the same process as the first.

Discussion:

- Which was the harder role to play, the parent, the child or the observer? Why?
- Was there a scenario that you found particularly challenging?
- What are your strengths in talking about healthy or unhealthy relationships?
- What are your particular challenges in talking about healthy/unhealthy relationships?

D. Relationship Building Blocks: (10 min.)

Tell participants that we all have our strengths and challenges around talking to our teens about their relationships. What is important is that the lines of communication remain open and that you make a conscious effort to improve your relationship communication skills. Explain that they will now be looking at a tool that they can use to acknowledge, assess and improve on their relationship communication skills with their teen.

Directions:

- Pass out copies of the ‘Relationship Building Blocks’ worksheet.
- Ask participants to take a few minutes to answer the questions on the worksheet. These questions will help them gauge how comfortable they are talking to their teen about relationship issues.
- When participants have completed the worksheet, ask if anyone would like to share something that they marked as “already doing”.
- Next, ask if anyone would like to share something the marked as an activity they will try in the future.
- Lastly, ask if anyone would like to share something they marked as an activity that they feel uncomfortable with and will need to support around.
- Explain that they don’t need to do all of the activities on the sheet perfectly. What’s important is that they are making the effort and using multiple strategies to support their teens in engaging in healthy relationships.

IV. CLOSING/CHECK-OUT: (10 min.)

Tell participants that you hope that they have come away with some new ideas, new skills and new ways to talk to their teens about engaging in healthy relationships.

Additional tools for them to use:

- *Healthy Relationship Quiz (see PDF document)*: Participants can use this quiz with their teen to talk about the healthy relationship characteristics that they think should be in any relationship.
- *Conversation Starters (see page 16)*: Participants can use these conversation starters to engaging their teen difficult relationship issues.
- *Parent Commitments and Tip (see page 17)*: Participants can use this form before they leave to jot down some of the conversations they want to have with their teen.

Closing Questions:

- Ask participants to identify one topic/skill/issue around healthy relationships that they are willing to talk to their teen about in the next week.
- Ask participants to imagine us having a meeting a year from now. What new healthy relationship skills would their teens have? What new skill would they have?
- Administer to participants the Workshop Evaluation Form (see page 18) for the session.

Thank participants for attending!

RESOURCES

National Dating Abuse Helpline. Call toll free at 1-866-331-9474 or TTY 1-866-331-8453 or online at www.loveisrespect.org.

What Parent Need to Know about Teens: Facts Myths and Strategies. Publication by David A. Wolfe, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. www.camh.net contact: publications@camh.net

The Amazing Adolescent Brain: What Parents Need to Know. Publication by Linda Burgess Chamberlain

A Parent's Guide to the Teen Brain (website). Partnership for a Drug Free America in partnership with Treatment Research Institute and WGBH Educational Foundation.

www.drugfree.org/TeenBrain/index.html

"A Parent's Handbook", Start Strong Idaho, 2010 (www.startstrongidaho.com)

StartStrongParents.org

RELATIONSHIP BEHAVIOR CARDS AND KEY

My partner listens to me when I'm upset.	My partner gets jealous of my opposite sex friends, s/he thinks they are flirting with me.
My partner trusts me to hang out with friends of the opposite sex.	My partner tells me s/he needs to know where I am at all times.
Me and my partner hang out together, but also have our own separate hobbies.	When my family or other friends want to spend time with me, my partner tells me that they are too controlling.
My partner supports me in my personal and academic goals.	My partner asked me to quit my clubs and hobbies to spend more time with him/her.
Sometimes me and my partner get bored with one another.	My partner tells me I'm ugly, and that I'm lucky to have him/her.
Me and my partner talk about problems in our relationship, but usually only whenever there is an issue.	My partner screams at me when s/he gets upset, but later apologizes.
My partner shows affection, but sometimes it's annoying when s/he does it in public.	My partner hits me when s/he is angry.
My partner makes fun of me in front of friends sometimes, but s/he says it's just teasing.	My partner tells me if I don't have sex with him/her, s/he will spread rumors about me.
My partner gets upset if I don't return phone calls right away.	When my partner and I got in an argument, s/he sent private pictures and text messages of mine all over the school.
My partner says we need to hang out every day.	My partner threatens to kill him/herself if I leave him/her.

KEY:

There is no one correct order; the parents in your workshop might order the cards very differently. Here is a rough guide of how the behavior cards might be ordered during the activity

HEALTHY

- My partner listens to me when I'm upset.
- My partner trusts me to hang out with friends of the opposite sex.
- Me and my partner hang out together, but also have our own separate hobbies.
- My partner supports me in my personal and academic goals.
- Sometimes me and my partner get bored with one another.

UNHEALTHY

- Me and my partner talk about problems in our relationship, but usually only whenever there is an issue.
- My partner shows affection, but sometimes it's annoying when s/he does it in public.
- My partner makes fun of me in front of friends sometimes, but s/he says it's just teasing.
- My partner gets jealous of my opposite sex friends, s/he thinks they are flirting with me.
- My partner gets upset if I don't return phone calls right away
- My partner says we need to hang out every day.

ABUSIVE

- My partner tells me s/he needs to know where I am at all times.
- When my family or other friends want to spend time with me, my partner tells me that they are too controlling.
- My partner asked me to quit my clubs and hobbies to spend more time with him/her.
- My partner tells me I'm ugly, and that I'm lucky to have him/her.
- My partner screams at me when s/he gets upset, but later apologizes.
- My partner hits me when s/he is angry.
- My partner tells me if I don't have sex with him/her, s/he will spread rumors about me.
- When my partner and I got in an argument, s/he sent private pictures and text messages of mine all over the school.
- My partner threatens to kill him/herself if I leave him/her.

HEALTHY

UNHEALTHY

Unhealthy Relationship:

A relationship in which one or both partners feels disempowered.

Unhealthy relationships are deficient in any of the following: trust, communication, respect, space, and boundaries.

Healthy Relationship:

A relationship in which both partners are equally empowered. Healthy relationships contain trust, communication, respect, space, and boundaries.

Source:

Leon, Kim. (2009). *Teen Dating Violence*. Retrieved from MissouriFamilies.org web site:
<http://missourifamilies.org/features/adolescentsarticles/adolesfeature10.htm>

ROLE-PLAY CARDS

Scenario 1:

Parent: You find your child's love letter in their coat pocket.

Child: There's a cute guy/girl at school that you like but some of the things they're saying to you in the note make you uncomfortable. Now your parent found the note.

Scenario 2:

Parent: Your child has brought home their new boyfriend/girlfriend home for dinner for the first time. After he/she leaves, you want to have a conversation about their relationship.

Child: you bring your boyfriend/girlfriend over for the first time. You're both really nervous but you also both agree it is necessary.

Scenario 3:

Parent: Another parent has come up to you in a grocery store and told you that their son was dating your daughter. This is the first you are hearing of the relationship.

Child: You've been hiding the fact that you have been dating an older guy from your parents. You wanted to tell them eventually but they found out before you could let them know.

Tips for Talking to Your Young Teen about Relationships

1. **Encourage open, honest, and thoughtful reflection** about healthy relationships and teen dating violence and possible interventions. Allow teens to clarify their values and expectations for healthy relationships. Allow youth to debate those issues to come to their own understanding, rather than dismissing answers as “wrong”. Communication with your child about relationships as an on-going process rather than a one-time conversation.
2. **Be an effective parent** balances sensitivity with firmness; adapt to the changes faced by your tween; talks openly and respects differences of opinion, is strong enough to make unpopular decisions; and doesn’t always get along with or agree with their tween. Teach – don’t just criticize.
3. **Understand your teen’s development** and how it affects your relationship. Adolescence is all about experimentation. From mood swings to risk taking, “normal teenage behavior” can appear to be anything-but-normal, however, new research reveals that brain development during these formative years play a significant role in shaping your teen’s personality and actions. Knowing what’s normal is key so you can better understand and guide your teen.
4. **Understand the pressure and the risk your teen faces.** There are new and increasing pressures and expectations, such as sex, substance use and avoiding abuse from peers or dating partners. Teens often voice the concern that their parents take the time to listen and help solve situations that matter to them. Think in terms of reducing harm vs. zero tolerance.
5. **Take a clear stand** against disrespect, abuse of power, any forms of violence, or use of abusive or inappropriate language with a firm and clear message.
6. **Make the most of “teachable moments”** to discuss healthy and unhealthy relationships --- using TV episodes, movies, news, community events, learning about friends’ experiences, etc.
7. **Discuss how to act as a healthy bystander or ‘upstander’ and friend** when teens observe unhealthy behaviors in their peers.
8. **Accentuate the positive.** Talks about relationships need not focus solely on risky behavior or negative consequences, but should also address factors that promote healthy adolescent development and positive outcomes (i.e. academic success, relationships should be fun and fulfilling, supporting etc.)
9. **Be an active participant in your teen’s life.** Encourage your teen to be involved in extracurricular activities. Find outings that you can share with your teen. Explore ways to know more about their friends and interests.
10. **You know that there is no magic pill, no simple method that works every time.** You will make mistakes. The best we can do is help them make the most responsible choices possible by maintaining a balance between being sensitive to their desires and needs, yet firm in providing guidance and direction.

Relationship Conversation Starters: Talking to Your Young Teen

1. What are your friends' dating relationships like? What are the words that your friends use for dating? What is the difference in these terms and how long do your peers stay together. Do they make a commitment to each other? Are there certain things that boys want that girls don't? Are there things girls want in these relationships that boys don't want?

Actions and Talking points:

- Compare their notions about the roles of males and females.
 - Mutual respect should be a key part of any relationship.
2. What are some examples of someone saying or doing something that crosses your personal boundaries? Everyone has a right to communicate how they want to be treated by others. What can you say and do to communicate your personal boundaries? When does playing or teasing become too much and is no longer fun?

Actions and Talking points:

- Personal boundaries help define your expectations about how you want to be treated in a respectful, non-threatening and comfortable way on your own terms.
 - Everyone has a right to communicate how they want to be treated by others
 - Communicating personal boundaries includes telling others your expectations and expressing when your boundaries have been crossed.
 - Everyone has different personal boundaries and it's important to treat a person how they want to be treated.
3. All relationships are unique. But what do you expect from someone you would go out with? What do you think makes a relationship healthy? What do you think healthy relationships look like, feel like, and sound like?

Actions and Talking points:

- In a healthy relationship there should be respect, safety, support, individuality, fairness and equality, acceptance, honesty and trust, communication and it should be fun.
 - Encourage emotional awareness – the ability to recognize moment to moment emotional feelings and to express all feelings (good and bad) appropriately.
4. *For youth who are starting to date or have friends that are, the following question may be appropriate to pursue.*

Have you ever seen any kind of abusive behavior between two people who are going out?

Actions and Talking points:

- Compare your teenager's definition of "abusive behaviors" or "violence" to that of your own.
- Look at warning signs from the perspective of a potential abuser. Don't look the other way if you see warning signs in your child. Reach out to help him or her recognize potentially unhealthy or abusive behaviors.

I Will Talk to my Child about Healthy Relationships

Date: _____

A. What is one thing that I can do with my child over the next week or two?

B. What are 2 other things that can do in the next couple of months?

C. A reminder to myself about what I've learned:

WORKSHOP EVALUATION FORM

Date: _____

1. Did this workshop meet your overall expectations?

YES **NO**

2. Do you think you will talk to your child about healthy relationships?

YES **NO**

3. Do you feel more competent to talk to your child with the information and skills you learned today?

YES **NO**

4. How much of the information presented was helpful to you?

Not much **Some of it** **Most of it**

5. Do you have any further comments or suggestions:

Thank you for your feedback!