

A PARENT'S HANDBOOK

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR
CHILDREN ABOUT DEVELOPING
HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



DEAR PARENT OR GUARDIAN:

Eleven-year-old Michael giggles when his buddies refer to the girls in their class as “bitches,” but deep down it makes him uncomfortable. Thirteen-year-old Jessica feels conflicted about the kiss she gave to Tyler after he bought her a soda. He bought her something, so, she wonders, does she owe him a kiss? Twelve-year-old Debbie sighs when she checks her email — it’s filled with 15 mean-spirited messages from a boy at school who claims he likes her.

It’s tricky business raising pre-teens these days. The good news is you have kids that mature earlier, are more independent and have access to the greatest quantity and quality of information ever available. The bad news is you have kids that mature earlier, are more independent and have access to the greatest quantity and quality of information ever available.

It is with this contradiction in mind that we decided to create this booklet, “A Parent’s Handbook: How to Talk to Your Children About Developing Healthy Relationships.” Our goal is to help adults create an environment in which they can give their pre-teen boys and girls the skills with which to have positive, healthy relationships with peers and in dating situations. We expect that implementation of these skills will help to prevent relationship violence and break the cycle of abuse.

We hope that with the help of this handbook and the love and support of parents and other important adults in their lives, pre-teens can grow up to become strong men and women who engage in balanced, rewarding and loving relationships. In addition, by using the techniques and examples found in this handbook, you will have laid a strong and lasting foundation for effective communication between you and your children. As parents, it’s okay not to have all the answers—we’ve provided a list of resources for that—it’s more important that you ask the questions.

OTHER HANDBOOKS IN THE LOVE IS NOT ABUSE SERIES:

[A Woman’s Handbook: A Practical Guide to Discussing Relationship Abuse](#)

[A Teen’s Handbook: What You Need to Know About Dating Violence](#)

[A Parent’s Guide to Teen Dating Violence: 10 Questions to Start the Conversation](#)

[Tough Talk: What Boys Need to Know About Relationship Abuse](#)

HOW TO START THE DIALOGUE

While it's not easy to bring up such topics as drugs, drinking, sex and ways to relate positively to peers, parents have an obligation to create an open environment in which to start the conversation. Here are six steps to encourage your kids to talk about difficult issues.

- 1. Keep an Open Environment** — Be available to listen to your children. Give them plenty of opportunities to start a talk and don't criticize them for having questions, even if they raise ideas that are disturbing to you. Note that big ideas often begin as little thoughts slipped in the middle of a conversation about something else.
- 2. Give Your Undivided Attention** — When the opportunity presents itself, focus your attention on the conversation and your child. Don't let other things distract you or divide your concentration. If it's really a bad time to talk, schedule and keep another time, but first make sure that waiting is okay with your child.
- 3. For Important Topics, Start the Talk** — If you think it's difficult for an adult to raise certain topics, imagine how hard it must be for a child.
- 4. Talk with Your Kids On Their Level** — Use examples from TV, movies, even your own experiences when you speak to your child. Keep your ideas clear and be sure that they relate directly back to your example.
- 5. Talk Often** — Frequent chats are a great way of communicating, reinforcing your values and letting your kids know that you are interested in their lives.
- 6. Understand the Questions and Answer Honestly** — If you're not sure what your child is asking, say so. Once you understand the question, answer honestly and assure your child that you can come up with a solution together.

Don't be upset if your child is more comfortable talking with an aunt, uncle, family friend or teacher. In fact, encourage them to do so and keep in mind that the important thing is having someone to turn to for advice.

DEFINING HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Studies have shown that aspects of domestic violence can appear long before anyone is married or even dating. As pre-teens enter into more complex and intimate relationships, it is critical to help them define what constitutes healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

A healthy relationship has open and honest communication and an even playing field on which partners share power and control over decisions.

An unhealthy relationship has an imbalance in which one partner tries to exercise control and power over the other through threats, emotional abuse and physical abuse. At its most extreme, an unhealthy relationship can include name-calling and insults, withholding of money or other resources, threats to isolate a person from friends and family, coercion, violent acts, stalking and significant physical injury.

TEN TIPS FOR TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

It's best to help set some guidelines and realistic expectations for your child about things like dating before they actually begin. While a good dating relationship can serve as a model for wonderful future relationships, a bad experience can start a negative pattern of relationships. What follows are ten ways you can help kids prepare for the good and the bad of dating relationships.

- 1. Assess Your Own Values Before You Talk to Your Kids** — How do you expect men and women to act? How should people behave when they disagree? How should decisions be made in a relationship? Make sure that you can explain your reasoning and can support it with examples.
- 2. Reveal the Unspoken “Rules of Dating”** — Give your kids clear examples of what is appropriate behavior in a dating relationship. Talk to them about the standards of conduct that you expect rather than letting locker room or slumber party talk be their only source of information.
- 3. Tell the Whole Truth...Good and Bad** — Pre-teens generally view dating very romantically. Support these expectations, but also be realistic with them about the bad things that can happen. Let them know that violence is never acceptable. Give them a few suggestions or phrases to help them get out of difficult situations (“I’m not ready to go that far,” or “I’m not comfortable, can we talk about this?”).
- 4. Teach Assertiveness, Not Aggressiveness** — One of the best skills parents can teach their pre-teens is to make their feelings known by stating their opinions, desires and reactions clearly. For example, if they don’t want to do something, they need to say so. Finally, when there is conflict— if things cannot be settled — encourage them to always take a break and cool down before feelings get hurt.
- 5. Teach Anger Control** — Help your kids recognize their personal warning signs for anger. Do they have clenched fists, gritted teeth, a red face, tensed arms and shoulders? Teach them to calm down by counting backwards from ten to one, deep breathing, visualizing a peaceful scene or happy memory, reassuring themselves that they’re in control, or, if all else fails, walking away.
- 6. Teach Problem Solving** — When confronted with a tough issue, have your child determine what exactly happened and what may have caused the situation. Then, ask them to think of several different ways in which it could have been

resolved, consider the consequences of each of the alternatives and discuss their choice.

7. Teach Negotiation — Help your children understand that compromising and taking turns are positive steps to a healthy relationship and that violence, threats and insults have no place in respectful negotiation. Teach your children to negotiate and acknowledge the situation. State each person's point of view honestly and discuss options that allow both people to "win."

8. Explain the "Danger Zone" — Teach them to recognize that thoughts of aggression are signals of frustration that need to be acknowledged and dealt with. Help your kids understand that any incident of violence in a relationship is a predictor of very serious problems that are very likely to continue and escalate.

9. Keep No Secrets — Secrecy that isolates kids from friends and family is not acceptable and can be the first sign of manipulation and coercion. Teach your kids that being strong means relying on the appropriate authorities, from parents and teachers to police, if necessary.

10. Be the Ultimate Role Model — Pre-teens learn by observing those around them, especially their parents. It is critical that you respect yourself, your partner and other people.

QUICK QUIZ FOR PARENTS AND KIDS

Take this quick quiz with your son or daughter to help you both determine your ideas about relationships.

1. Choose one couple you know who you believe has a healthy relationship. Choose one who you think has an unhealthy relationship. Why did you pick those you chose?
2. What's a healthy way to fight? What's an unhealthy way to fight? Can you think of a situation in your life where you fought unfairly? What could you have done to make it a fair fight?
3. What does it mean to stand up for yourself? If you're a girl, are you being strong or pushy?
4. What should you do if someone you're dating threatens you? Or tells you to keep quiet and not tell a soul, even though you know it is wrong?
5. Whose relationship would you most like yours to be like?

RESOURCE GUIDE

While the information in this handbook was developed to provide guidelines for talking with your children about healthy relationships, there will most likely be occasions when you may not have the answer to your child's question or the solution to a problem. Since it is impossible to anticipate every situation that may arise, the following are resources where you can get more information:

Emergency Help

911

National Dating Abuse Helpline

1-866-331-9474

1-866-331-8453 (TTY)

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

1-800-787-3224 (TTY)

WEBSITES

LoveIsRespect.org (www.loveisrespect.org)

Designed to be the ultimate online resource to educate and empower youth and young adults to prevent and end abusive relationships.

Break the Cycle (www.breakthecycle.org)

The organization works to engage, educate and empower youth to build lives and communities free from domestic violence.

Futures Without Violence (www.futureswithoutviolence.org)

Facts and statistics, local and regional hotline numbers, domestic violence education and prevention, and public policy information.

Girls Incorporated National Resource Center (www.girlsinc.org)

Statistics, research, information and resources on issues affecting girls.

The Whole Family Center (www.wholefamily.com)

Pages for parents and teens; myths, facts and statistics about relationships.

BOOKS

All That She Can Be: Helping Your Daughter Maintain Her Self-Esteem by Carol J. Eagle, Carol Colman (1994, Fireside).

Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul: 101 Stories of Life, Love and Learning, by Jack Canfield, et. al. (1997, Health Communications, Inc.).

But He Never Hit Me: The Devastating Cost of Non-physical Abuse to Girls and Women, by Jill Murray (2007, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.).

How to Talk to Your Kids About Really Important Things: For Children Four to Twelve, by Charles E. Schaefer, Theresa Foy Digeronimo (1994, Jossey-Bass Publishers).

In Love and in Danger: A Teen's Guide to Breaking Free of Abusive Relationships, by Barrie Levy (1998, Seal Press Feminist Pub.).

Keep Talking: A Mother-Daughter Guide to the Pre-Teen Years, by Lynda Madison (1997, Andrews & McMeel).

Raising a Thinking Child: Help Your Young Child to Resolve Everyday Conflicts and Get Along with Others, by Myrna B. Shure, Theresa Foy Digeronimo (1996, Pocket Books).

Strong Mothers, Strong Sons: Raising Adolescent Boys in the '90s, by Ann F. Carron (1995, HarperCollins).

Teen Tips: A Practical Survival Guide for Parents With Kids 11-19, by Tom McMahon (1996, Pocket Books).

All of the handbooks in our series, including statistics, quizzes and other special sections, can be downloaded on our website at www.loveisnotabuse.com