

Healthy Relationships for Teens

Palo Alto Medical Foundation

Defining a Healthy Relationship

So how can you create and maintain healthy relationships?

This is where The ABCs comes in.

A is for awareness
B is for balance.
C is for conscious choices.

A is for awareness

Awareness means:

1. Using what you know to respect others and demand respect.
2. Awareness is knowledge of the consequences of unhealthy relationships and recognizing danger signs, as well as knowing what your boundaries are. Preventing violence by recognizing a lack of power and respect, requiring that you apply the knowledge you have to change unhealthy relationships into healthy ones.
3. Basically, awareness means **knowledge of all aspects of a relationship**. This knowledge can be gained through teachers, counselors, older friends, the Internet and books all can help you find the information you need.

B is for balance.

Balance means being in synch with your partner and having a relationship that is not one-sided -- meaning that one person has more control or power than the other.

Communication is key to staying in balance.

You have to both listen and talk to what somebody else wants, and they'll listen to what you have to say. Both people need to recognize that they **each have valuable opinions, and then work together to balance their desires**. You and your friends probably have similar interests, but you are not completely the same.

The same is true for your family and your boyfriend or girlfriend. You can certainly do things together, but remember that you can have different interests, too. Make sure you have time to do these things. If you change in a relationship and adopt all of the other person's favorite things, hobbies and lifestyle, the relationships become unbalanced, and it is a very bad sign.

C is for conscious choices.

Conscious choices include being able to decide what **the next step in a relationship is, making sure things don't "just happen,"** which is a common excuse teens use for getting into emotional or sexual situations they don't know how to handle. Choices mean being able to take control.

In order to be **aware, balanced, and make healthy choices,** you need the building blocks of The ABCs: communication, trust and respect. They are the keys to a healthy relationship and are at the base of The ABCs.

Family

We first learn about loving and caring relationships from our families. Family is defined as a domestic group of people with some degree of kinship, whether through blood, marriage or adoption. Ideally each child is nurtured and respected and grows up to care for others and develop strong and healthy relationships. This does not mean that it is always easy to make and keep friends; it just means that we share the goal of having strong relationships.

"Family" includes your siblings and parents, as well as relatives who you may not interact with every day, such as your cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents and stepparents. These are probably the people you are closest to and with whom you spend the most time. **Having healthy relationships with your family members is both important and difficult.**

Families in the 21st century come in all shapes and sizes: traditional, single parent, blended (more than one family together in the same house), and gay and lesbian parents—just to name a few. No matter the "type" of family you have, there are going to be highs and lows—good times and bad.

Many times, however, **families become blocked in their relationships by hurt, anger, mistrust and confusion.** These emotions are natural and normal, and few families do not have at least a few experiences with them. The worst time for most families, is during a divorce.

By making a few simple changes in the way we look at the world and deal with other people, it is possible to create happier, more stable relationships. Families need to be units of mutual caring and support; they can be sources of lifelong strength for all individuals. It is never too late to begin the process of improving family relationships—even if they are already of good quality—by developing some simple skills.

Whereas in other situations you can step back and assess the relationship, it is often hard to do this with your family. Your family may be a constant presence in your life, so when an argument or issue arises, it may seem impossible to handle. Remember that communication is key to resolving conflict. While it may seem that your siblings are constantly present to annoy you or boss you around, they are also there to communicate. Use your family's presence to your advantage—**communicate with each other, and develop ways to value boundaries,** and build trust and respect.

Friends

Everyone needs friends, and you probably have always had at least one. A friend is defined as a person you know well and regard with affection, trust and respect. As you get older, some of your friendships will start to change, and some may grow deeper. You might also begin to know many more people, although not all of them will be your close friends. Chances are you will also start to spend more time with your friends, and maybe talk on the phone more. **Changes in relationships are natural but not always easy.**

Making and keeping friends can be particularly tough if you are shy or unsure of yourself. The best way to make new friends is to be involved in activities at school, extra-curricular activities, and in the community where there are other people your age. Another way to make friends is to be friendly and helpful to other people. Talk to people, get to know them and find out if you have something in common with them.

Peer pressure can play a major role in friendships. If someone is vulnerable to peer pressure, the relationship is not balanced. Remember that you have the right and duty to stand up for what you believe is right. Express yourself with your friends. You have the freedom to say "no" if you disagree. If you are scared of losing a friendship by standing up for what you believe is right, then you are in an unstable friendship. **True friends listen to and respect each other's opinions.**

Standing up for yourself may cause tension in a friendship, but it is OK as long as you have the skills to handle the situation. Remember to communicate your ideas while respecting your friend's opinion. **By mutually supporting each other, whether or not you agree, your friendship will be more stable.**

Below are tips for keeping friends.

- Be supportive.
- Be encouraging.
- Do not tease or belittle.
- Cooperate.
- Compromise.
- Be considerate.
- Talk openly about disagreements.
- Apologize when you hurt them.

Casual Relationships

Casual relationships are those you have with the people you encounter every day -- who are not friends, family members or people with whom you have an intimate relationship. For example, one person may be a teacher or some new guy or girl you don't yet know. You might wonder why it is important to have a healthy relationship with someone you barely know.

Well, **all relationships start with a casual relationship.** An unhealthy casual relationship without mutual respect will lead to a friendship or an intimate relationship without respect. The precedents that you set at the beginning of a casual relationship do not disappear.

These relationships can occur on both a professional level, including teachers, clergy and medical professionals, or as acquaintances, such as people you know and recognize in passing.

It is important to maintain healthy relationships with the professionals who serve you. These are probably people you look up to for their skills and education, and by showing your respect and learning from these individuals, you will develop important skills that you can apply in your other relationships.

While you may not love learning about the Civil War, your history teacher could be a valuable resource in writing a college recommendation letter. And while doctors' appointments may be unpleasant, it is your doctor who makes sure that you stay healthy and fit. By respecting the professionals you interact with, you not only benefit yourself, but you also help your other relationships. By learning professional communication skills and trusting those with more experience, you learn to be a balanced member of an intimate relationship.

Casual acquaintances are simple relationships that are easily maintained. When you pass someone you recognize on the street, by simply respecting the person and smiling or saying hello, you are communicating in an appropriate manner. By portraying yourself in public as polite and friendly, people will be drawn to you and you will likely have healthier intimate and romantic relationships.

Romantic Relationships for Teens

In thinking about the different types of relationships, it is important to realize that you can have an intimate relationship with anyone. An intimate relationship is one in which you can truly be yourself with someone who you respect and are respected by in return. It is an emotional connection that can also be physical. It does not have to be in the context of a romantic or sexual relationship.

Many people think that "intimate" means being physically intimate, such as being in a sexual relationships. However, an intimate relationship can be with anyone who you are really close to and with whom you can be completely open and honest. Intimate relationships afford you the opportunity to grow as an individual.

Now let's talk about romantic relationships, which, unfortunately, are not always intimate relationships. In a healthy romantic relationship, both partners respect each other and have their own identity. Each partner is an entire individual, not simply part of a couple. Just as peer pressure can negatively impact a friendship, partners can overpower each other and create instability in a romantic relationship. Teens are growing and developing in many ways during the adolescent years, especially emotionally. It is important for teens to evaluate the relationships they are in to be sure they are healthy and positive.

As preteens become teenagers and enter adolescence, new kinds of relationships emerge. Friends may find themselves attracted to each other in ways they were not before, and they may become closer, or grow apart depending on interests, values, choices, and goals. Relationships are bound to change during the teenage years, especially in the area of friendships and romance.

Red Lights of an Abusive Relationship

Does the other person:

- Put you down?
- Get extremely jealous or possessive?
- Constantly check up on you?
- Tell you how to dress?
- Try to control what you do and who you see?
- Have big mood swings?
- Make you feel nervous (like you are walking on eggshells)?
- Criticize you?
- Threaten to hurt you?

Abuse always escalates, and it rarely gets better. If you experience any of these things, you may be involved in an unhealthy relationship. Knowing these warning signs can help act as red lights in your relationship. You can stop and figure out if your relationship is abusive before things get out of control.

Not all of these signs will be in every abusive relationship. **If one or more of these warning signs exist in your relationship, it doesn't necessarily mean that your relationship is abusive, but your relationship may not be as healthy as you deserve it to be.**