

PROMOTING HEALTHY DATING RELATIONSHIPS

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“I think you’re supposed to get shot by an arrow or something, but the rest isn’t supposed to be painful” – Manuel, age 8

Our young friend, Manuel, may have wisdom beyond his years in his summation of dating relationships. Youth are increasingly more engaged in “dating” relationships at younger ages, although that connotation has become an ever-broadening category. With the acquisition of another developmental task comes the challenge of assimilating the new skill and the dynamics involved in its successful utilization. This challenge can be addressed with the assistance of significant adults in a youth’s life – “Education is, and has always been, about preparing students for the life and the world that awaits them”. (President’s Message, CTF, July 08) Relationships are an important ingredient of that life and that world.

As youth move from childhood into adolescence, new kinds of relationships are formed which begin to develop new dimensions and dynamics. The newness of intimate youth relationships, particularly dating relationships, creates both vulnerability and opportunities for growth. The vulnerability lies in societal understanding of gender-based violence, primarily against girls. “We need to understand the nature of gender-based violence and the extent of sexism that allows perpetrators to target girls/women. Some of the issues that must be confronted are so deeply ingrained in our society that the tendency is to ignore or minimize them.” (Jaffe & Hughes, FORUM, Fall 2008) Thus comes forth the opportunity for growth - to address societal woes with awareness, education and mobilization of action. Identifying the numerous influences on gender socialization, for both genders, is paramount. Gender socialization of young people is multi-dimensional and profound. The most significant agents are:

- family
- peers
- educators
- media
- culture

These agents act individually and as reinforcements of one another. Each can have a significant positive, constructive influence that promotes the unique identity of young people and their full capacity, or a negative influence that is rigid and limits the potential of young people. In recent years educators have accepted the challenge of bias-free educational materials, non-traditional roles and careers planning as well as awareness of teaching styles. Through public pressure the media is responding



with a higher degree of integrity in programming. Although this media response is promising, young teens aged 13 to 15 years rank the entertainment media as the top source of information about sexuality and sexual health.

Intimate youth relationships, including close friendships and “romantic” or dating relationships, are particularly complex because they frequently involve a unique degree of intimacy and intensity. Individuals also possess particular characteristics and traits, and have been socialized to believe and act in certain ways. As well, dating relationships are infused with significant cultural and social values, personal and family expectations, and the element of sexuality.

While highly prized by youth, dating relationships pose significant challenges because adolescents often do not possess adequate communication and social skills to handle their complexity. Normal development stages create challenges as adolescents strive for intimacy, but with care and support, healthy youth relationships are a possibility and an important part of a teen's life.

Several factors interact to make each relationship unique. Three factors have a particularly profound effect on the health of every relationship:

- communication
- the power balance
- self-esteem

These foundational factors are often challenging for adults to manage. Understanding these factors can be even more difficult for youth who are developing and refining their identities, learning new ways of relating to their peers, and often experiencing fluctuating self-esteem in response to the ups and downs of adolescent relationships and experiences.

Skilled communication is the foundation of a healthy relationship. Thoughts, emotions, values, intentions, dreams, and expectations are shared and understood. Strengths and weaknesses are accepted. While it may seem obvious that interpersonal communication is essential to building intimacy, maintaining trust and understanding another's world, this skill is rarely taught to young people. Instead, communication is learned in the family, usually from parents or caregivers. Whether good or bad, effective or ineffective, these learned skills become habits that can determine the nature of all future relationships. (BC Council for Families, 2001).

Attitudes about each partner's role also have an important impact on the balance of power. Equal-power relationships are fostered by attitudes that promote both personal and gender equity in tasks performed, in setting career goals, and in establishing nurturing roles. In egalitarian relationships, both males and females initiate together, plan together, contribute to expenses and nurture each other. Increasingly in western society, adults and adolescents are embracing these values and are moving away from traditional social norms.

Adolescents' self-esteem is especially vulnerable to damage by negative interactions with peers or in a dating relationship. In adolescence, and in particularly young adolescence, youth are struggling with their identity, and tend to value themselves as they perceive they are valued by others. The dating climate experienced by a youth may promote self-confidence or increase self-doubt. Fear of rejection plays a significant role in the lives of young people, even though the rejection itself can lead to self-analysis and a stronger sense of identity in the long run.

Parents and significant adults have an influential role in guiding adolescents through healthy dating relationships. Discussion and modeling of the three main factors conducive to a healthy relationship is encouraged. Empowering our children with knowledge and skills about healthy dating relationships will enable them to detect and prevent abusive situations.

Both girls and boys report using abusive behaviour towards their dating partner. In focus groups, the most commonly asked question is 'How do you know when it's abusive?' The adolescents really don't have good barometers for a healthy dating relationship. Good discussion starters are provided in the following format.

What are Your Rights in a Relationship?

You have the right...

- to express your opinions and have them respected
- to have your needs be as important as your partner's needs
- to grow as an individual in your own way
- to not take responsibility for your partner's behavior
- to not be physically, emotionally, or sexually abused
- to break up and fall out of love with someone and not be threatened.¹

Are You Being Abused in Your Dating Relationship?

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Are you frightened by your partner's temper?
2. Are you afraid to disagree?
3. Are you constantly apologizing for your partner's behaviour, especially when they treated you badly?
4. Do you have to justify everything you do, every place you go, or every person you see to avoid your partner's anger?
5. Does your partner put you down, but then tell you that they love you?
6. Have you ever been hit, kicked, shoved, or had things thrown at you?
7. Do you not see friends or family because of your partner's jealousy?
8. Have you been forced into having sex when you didn't want to?
9. Are you afraid to break up because your partner has threatened to hurt you or him/herself?

¹ Intermedia Inc. *Dating Violence: The Hidden Secret Student Handout* Copyright Taylor/ Zitner (source: Promoting Healthy Dating Relations, RespectED document, 2008)

Are You Being Abusive in Your Dating Relationship?

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do you constantly check up on your partner and accuse them of being with other people?
2. Are you extremely jealous or possessive?
3. Do you have an explosive temper?
4. Have you hit, kicked, shoved, or thrown things at your partner?
5. Do you constantly criticize or insult your partner?
6. Do you become violent when you drink or use drugs?
7. Have you threatened your partner to get them to have sex with you or intimidated them so they are afraid to say no?
8. Have you threatened to hurt them?
9. Have you threatened to hurt yourself if they break up with you or leave?

Recognizing Assaultive Behaviour

The abused may:

- believe one must be in a relationship
- “walk on eggshells” to prevent partner’s anger give up friends and enjoyable activities for the relationship
- be unable to share worries and feelings about the relationship with partner
- be unable to express dissimilar opinions
- rationalize inappropriate behavior
- believe one can help or reform their partner
- believe that jealousy is a sign of love
- believe negative messages about oneself
- be unable to set and communicate sexual limits
- accept sexual pressures
- blame self for relationship problems
- believe in traditional roles
- use alcohol/drugs

The abuser may:

- control the relationship with threats and intimidating body language
- become angry easily; transform other emotions into anger
- criticize partner’s friends and behaviour
- feel depressed but unable to talk about personal feelings
- be a “bad loser”
- ignore, ridicule partner; limited eye contact or stares
- approve observed violence, justify it
- become excessively jealous
- have experienced family violence
- comment inappropriately about sex, partner’s body
- pressure partner beyond defined limits; does not respect “no”
- blame others for problems
- believe in traditional roles
- use alcohol/drugs

Prevention education empowers adolescents by helping them:

- define the components of a healthy relationship and understand anger, power and control issues
- recognize and combat negative influence agents
- gain an understanding of healthy relationships
- understand the risk factors of alcohol and drug use and how they relate to relationship violence
- recognize clues of violent behaviour²

About the Author

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² Excerpts from *Promoting Healthy Dating Relationships* document. More information on Promoting Healthy Dating Relationships is available on the Canadian Red Cross: RespectED Web site at www.redcross.ca/respected