

SESSION 9: CHOOSING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier session, you learned about parenting as a team. You saw what happens when parents separate and allow bad feelings about their relationship to affect their child. However, when parents recognize they share the goal of raising a healthy and happy child, they can learn to communicate and cooperate as a team. In this session, you'll do some thinking about relationships.

You've experienced many kinds of relationships in your life – friendships, family relationships, teacher-student relationships, and so on. When it comes to romantic relationships, there's probably tremendous variation among you and your peers. Some people have been dating for a while, while others haven't even thought about it.

It's normal for people to have had different levels of experience with romantic relationships. Each person is an individual with different interests, personalities, families and cultural backgrounds.

Regardless of your personal experience, working through this section of the student workbook will increase your awareness of what's involved in creating healthy relationships. It will also help you be more aware of things that are important to you. This is information you might be able to apply in your life right now...or you might store it away and put it to use later.

What makes a relationship healthy? Think over all the relationships you've read about in this program. Which of those relationships were healthy? What are the factors to consider when determining if a relationship is healthy or not?

ACTIVITY: The Relation-SHIP

Imagine that a relationship is like a ship floating on waves and rough waters. What are the characteristics in the relation-SHIP that would keep it afloat? For example, mutual trust is very important. Each person in a relation-SHIP must trust the other to do what he or she says, to be honest, and to maintain confidences. Trust is something that's earned. You have to find out over time if a person is trustworthy. And it must be mutual – meaning it must go both ways. You must be trustworthy and your partner must be trustworthy.

Mutual trust is already on the list below. List other characteristics that would help keep a relation-SHIP afloat:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------|
| 1. <u> <i>Mutual Trust</i> </u> | 5. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 6. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 7. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 8. _____ |

Now that you've written your list, consider the following. How do the two lists compare?

ACTIVITY: The Relation-SHIP *Continued*

CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY DATING RELATIONSHIPS

- 1. Respect.** This starts with respecting yourself and knowing your own worth. It also means accepting each other's opinions, values, limits, need for individual time, and so on.
- 2. Equality.** This is at the center of a healthy dating relationship. Power is balanced in the relationship. Neither person has unfair advantage over the other due to age, power or maturity. During the teen years when one partner is three or more years older, the relationship is often unequal.
- 3. Open Communication.** Communication is good. Both people talk and listen. It's important to be able to say what you're really thinking and feeling – to be open, clear and honest.
- 4. Honesty and Accountability.** Telling each other the truth, keeping your word, being faithful, and being able to admit when you're wrong increases trust.
- 5. Trust and Support.** Trust must be strong and both partners must feel safe. You learn to trust by observing over time and in different situations that you can depend on someone. It takes time to build trust. You should want the best for each other and offer encouragement when needed.
- 6. Negotiation and Conflict Management.** People who are dating recognize when they have conflict and manage it without violence. Managing conflict is a skill you can learn and practice. Communication is especially important when there is a conflict. Listen to each other, respect differences, compromise, talk about past disagreements and figure out what to do differently in the future.
- 7. Shared Responsibility.** People who are dating make decisions together and have give and take in the relationship. They share the costs of hanging out and having fun together and do things that are enjoyable for both people. Relationships should be mutual, not one-sided.
- 8. Friendship, Admiration and Affection.** Friendship is the basis of the relationship. The person you're dating should be someone you like, admire and respect. Never try to change your boyfriend or girlfriend or to be someone that you're not. Spend time enjoying similar interests and keep the friendship alive.

ACTIVITY: The Relation-SHIP *Continued*

Now rate the following list of relationship characteristics using a scale from 1 to 5 (*with 1 = Not Important and 5 = Very Important*). Place a number in the right hand column beside each characteristic to indicate how important you think it is for developing and maintaining a healthy dating relationship.

Not at all Important

Very Important

1

2

3

4

5

Relationship Characteristic	Level of Importance Rating
Mutual trust	
Partners close in age	
Partners have equal say in decisions/control of relationship	
Open and honest communication	
Similar values	
Love and affection	
Conflict is managed well	
Non-violent	
Have fun together – are friends	
Give each other space and freedom	
Mutual respect	
Friends and family support the relationship	

Think about different kinds of relationships and how your criteria for a boyfriend or girlfriend might change as relationships get more serious.

ACTIVITY: Your Personal Relationship Continuum

CASUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Casual relationships might include phone, text or online relationships, “group dating”, or non-exclusive one-on-one dating. If you were going out casually with someone, are there any character traits that the person must have? Are there any qualities that the person might have that would be totally unacceptable to you? We’ll call those your “non-negotiables.” *List them here.*

MUST haves:

MUST NOT haves:

SERIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

In serious relationships, couples have typically been dating on a regular basis over a long period of time; they’ve often made a commitment to be exclusive; and the relationship is probably seen by both families as a committed relationship. What are non-negotiable qualities a serious boyfriend or girlfriend must have?

MUST haves:

MUST NOT haves:

ACTIVITY: Your Personal Relationship Continuum *Continued*

MARRIAGE

Marriage is a legal relationship that's designed to be "for the rest of your life." Couples agree to a permanent commitment; often there's an engagement; usually a legal ceremony is planned; couples live together and often raise a family together. What are your non-negotiables for a spouse?

MUST haves:

MUST NOT haves:

SHARING PARENTHOOD

What kind of person would you want to share parenthood with? What are your non-negotiables? What qualities must the person have? What qualities would be unacceptable?

MUST haves:

MUST NOT haves:

ACTIVITY: Your Personal Relationship Continuum *Continued*

Questions to Consider

- What characteristics become more important to you as a relationship becomes more serious?
- What are the big differences between someone you would go out with casually and someone you would have a child with?
- What can you do to make sure you don't end up sharing parenthood with someone you're just going out with on a casual basis?

Relationship experts say that commitment and faithfulness are important in a marriage.

Do an Internet search to find out what research says about the impact of commitment and faithfulness on marriage. Provide a short summary below.

Commitment:

Faithfulness:

BUILDING RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Marriage and family therapists tell us that many marriages and committed relationships break up because couples don't know how to communicate effectively and don't know how to manage conflicts.

The good news is that communication and conflict resolution are skills that can be learned and practiced. By working together, a couple can learn the relationship skills to build and maintain a healthy relationship.

You don't need to be in a romantic relationship to work on your communication or conflict resolution skills. Being able to communicate and work out conflicts respectfully will help you at home, with friends, at school and on the job.

ACTIVITY: Communication Exercise

This simple communication exercise can enhance communication between two people in any kind of relationship. Practice this exercise with a friend so you'll remember how to do it. Then try using this technique the next time you are discussing something important with someone in your life. *Hint: It's especially useful when one of you is upset or sad or when you disagree about something.*

Follow these directions:

- Person A makes a statement (what s/he thinks, what s/he feels, what s/he wants, etc.). *Pointers: Keep it short. Speak for yourself only—don't assume you know what the other person thinks or feels.*
- Person B listens carefully to person A. *Pointers: Pay attention. Don't interrupt. Focus on your partner's message. Try to see things from your partner's point of view.*
- Person B repeats back to person A what was heard and asks if it is correct. *Pointers: Stick to what you heard. Show empathy. Wait for your turn to give your point of view.*
- Person A either confirms or corrects.

EXAMPLE:

(A) Mary: I feel hurt when you flirt with other girls. It makes me think you don't want to be with me.

(B) Joe: So you believe I don't love you when I look at other women?

(A) Mary: Yes, even if it's silly, that's how it makes me feel.

(B) Joe: Well, I'm glad you told me. It's no big deal to me but I see it really bothers you. So, I'll try to cut back the looking, but remember that I'm choosing to be with you, not them!

(A) Mary: I appreciate your trying to do that for me.

ACTIVITY: Communication Exercise *Continued*

GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CONFLICT Some important things to know about conflict in relationships:

- All relationships have some conflict. Conflict in and of itself is not bad – it’s how we react to the conflict that can be negative or destructive.
- Too much conflict is bad. It’s bad for the adults in the relationship, and it’s especially bad for any children that are in the picture.
- It’s OK and normal to have conflict as long as you have some skills and strategies to work through the conflict.
- It’s important for people in a serious romantic relationship such as marriage to do positive things for one another and to build a foundation of positive feelings. This way, when conflicts do arise, they don’t suck all the energy out of the relationship.

Here are some ways to manage conflict:

- **Prevent it from happening in the first place.** Be respectful. When you have a problem with something the person is doing, voice a complaint rather than a criticism. Understand the difference between a complaint and a criticism. Here’s an example:

Complaint: *I get uncomfortable when you talk to your friends about the details of our relationship.*

Criticism: *What’s wrong with you? You’re always telling other people our business! I’m never telling you anything important again!*

- Avoid name-calling, blaming, put-downs, using the words “*always*” and “*never*”.
- Avoid being defensive or “flipping the script” (sidestepping or changing the topic) if your boyfriend/girlfriend voices a complaint.
- Use good listening skills. Make sure that you understand what your boyfriend or girlfriend is saying, especially when discussing a difficult issue.
- Build a foundation of positive feelings with one another. Tell each other what you appreciate. Look out for each other. Strive to have more positive than negative interaction.
- If an argument is escalating, do something to lower the intensity; for example, hold up two fingers as a peace sign or make a friendly joke.
- De-brief after any conflicts.
 - ~ Sit down and talk about what happened.
 - ~ Take responsibility for your role in the problem.
 - ~ Discuss what both of you can do to make it better in the future.