



How to Talk to Your Children about Healthy Relationships

Susan Sugerman, MD, MPH

Girls to Women Health and Wellness - Dallas, Texas

KEEP IT IN PERSPECTIVE

Know yourself The humility of our own self-awareness as parents can guide us to teach our children without judgment; it can guide us to anticipate potential problems before they happen and help us gently steer our youth to make their own best decisions.

Consider your reaction to the documentary. What resonates as familiar from your successes or your failures?

Consider your current relationships. How different (or similar) are they compared to those profiled in the film?

Consider your own adolescence, particularly your lessons in love and sexuality. Did you make any mistakes? Do you have significant regrets? What would you have done differently in your own life if you had it to do over again? What support would you have needed to make these changes?

Assess your own values before you talk to your kids. Make sure that you can explain your reasoning and support it with examples. How do you expect men and women to act? How should people behave when they disagree? How should decisions be made in a relationship?

Understand that NOT talking about relationships and sexuality is destined to cause problems. Do not avoid this discussion.

- Talking about sex does not encourage kids to have sex. (Data from the US and Europe confirm this.)
- Creating an environment where children can openly discuss these important aspects of their lives from an early age increases the chances of them coming to you in times of crisis, when your support can be lifesaving.

Understand your role in guiding your children.

- It is not your job to be the expert at relationships.

- It is your job to help your children think through their questions and concerns in ways that lead them to formulate solid, clear ideas about what they deserve and should expect in their relationships, so they can make independent, safe, and appropriate decisions.

Know your child Children’s awareness and interest in relationships and sexuality vary greatly by age and developmental status. Children of the same age may be in very different places developmentally. Within the same child, different aspects of their development (e.g. physical) may be out of sync with others (e.g. cognitive or emotional).

- Take the age, specific concerns, and prior experiences of your child into account when discussing relationships and sexuality.
- Try to find out what he or she already knows, has heard about, or thinks about a particular topic before launching into complex explanations they may not be interested in or ready to hear.

Validate your child’s feelings and experiences. These are meaningful events to them, even if they seem insignificant or immature to you.

Try to understand what your child is asking you. Rephrase their questions when possible (“Are you talking about ...?” or “Are you asking about why ...?”). Your child may be checking a fact, testing your knowledge, or satisfying a curiosity. Quite often, your child is trying to make sure she or he is “normal.”

Remember that in stressful situations (or when discussing stressful topics), even very advanced thinkers become more concrete in their thought processes. (Keep it simple). Keep your answers short. Limit yourself to the few key concepts necessary to address the concern. Giving a long-winded lecture will lead kids to tune you out.

Children are sensitive to unspoken communication. Be aware of your body language. Present yourself as calm, open, and non-judgmental. Remember to smile and keep things light and humorous to ease tension. Avoid sarcasm at all costs. Children and even teens often don’t get it. Under stress, they may take seemingly funny remarks personally.

Consider what might happen if you do not talk with your child. If a child doesn't learn about sexuality from you, he or she will learn about it somewhere—from friends, magazines, television, or other sources. This information could be incorrect or confusing, and it may not be aligned with your beliefs.

Know your role in talking to your child. While it is initially your responsibility to care for your child, you want them to eventually be able to take care of themselves. Information from you helps your children to do this. Research shows that uninformed children are at greater risk for early sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases (including AIDS), pregnancy, sexual exploitation and abuse.

TEACH, DON'T TELL

What, Who, When, Where, Why, and How

What is a healthy relationship? Help kids to understand the difference between healthy and 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 and emotional 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.

Establish safe channels for talking about relationships and sex:

- Let your children know that it's okay to raise any and all issues with you, including sexual issues.
- Take your lead from what they do and say.
- Don't blame children or make them feel guilty or ashamed when they share information that seems inappropriate.
- Do your best to understand your child's point of view and see the world through his or her eyes.

Let them know what you hope for them in their relationships. Be clear about minimum expectations of appropriate treatment:

- Let your kids know they deserve to feel good about their relationships and to be treated fairly and kindly.
- Give them clear examples of what constitutes appropriate behavior in a romantic or sexual relationship.
- Talk to them about the standards of conduct that you expect from them.

Teach children how to have positive relationships:

- Give your children many direct opportunities to experience positive and caring relationships at home and at school.
- Help children express and receive appropriate positive affection, both physical and emotional, with important people in their lives.
- Share stories about yourself and experiences you had at ages similar to your child's age.

Tell the whole truth...good and bad:

- 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; could we talk about this?”).

Explain the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness. One of the best skills parents can teach their 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.

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.

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 shoulder?
- 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.

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.

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 situations. State each person’s point of view honestly and discuss options that allow both people to “win.”

Teach problem solving:

- Recognize that every difficult situation is not a crisis.

- 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.

Use examples from popular culture, media, current events, and peers interactions. Remember that conversations about celebrities or generic 3rd parties are less personal and easier to handle than direct comments about teens' own experiences.

Be willing to use examples from your own life, to admit your own mistakes, and to show what you've learned from them:

- Acknowledging your own failings makes you more credible as a source for advice and helps kids face their own faults with the promise of doing better the next time.
- Teens are terrified of being judged for not being "perfect" or for making a less-than-stellar decision, especially when it comes to relationships and sexuality.

Give them an out. Be willing to be the "bad guy" that your child can blame to get out of a difficult situation.

- Offer to intervene at any time they feel their safety is threatened or they hear that "little voice" inside their heads questioning the wisdom of letting a situation continue.
- Come up with a code word they can communicate to you by phone or text that says, "get me out of here" and allows them to save face ("I can't believe my mom is making me leave because I forgot to feed the stupid fish.").

Be the ultimate role model. Teens learn by observing those around them, especially their parents. It is critical that you respect yourself, your partner, and other people.

Who can your children turn to for help?

- **Parents** are the natural and logical source of good information for children about relationship and sexuality. It is our duty and privilege to teach them how to handle themselves safely in these arenas.
- On the other hand, it is important to recognize the roles of **other important, trusted adults**, such as other family members, mentors, schools, religious institutions, in the lives of our children. While children often turn to siblings or peers for information or support, those sources may provide misinformation, and they may not be able to respond appropriately to problem situations.

Make clear to your children which adults you trust:

- Tell them who they can turn to for questions or concerns about relationships and sexuality.

- Specifically state that you will honor their needs for confidentiality in the absence of true danger.
- Let them know that it is better that they turn to someone you both trust than to peers with incorrect information or, worse, to no one at all.

Share your values and concerns with other caring adults, including parents of your children’s friends.

- Let them know how you are trying to address your concerns, but don’t always expect agreement.
- Use specific examples of problem situations and how you handled them.
- Make sure they know where you draw the line, and that you plan to protect their child’s safety in similar situations.

When can you influence your children’s behavior?

Recognize that relationship skills don’t begin in adolescence but develop as a continuum across a lifespan. As such, there are opportunities everywhere on a daily basis to influence your children’s understanding of and behavior in relationships:

- Model healthy behavior in your own relationships on a daily basis.
- Recognize when other people in your child’s life are exhibiting positive relationship dynamics.
- Notice what happens in popular culture. Find opportunities from media and events that exemplify appropriate or inappropriate behaviors or problem-solving.

Be available at all times. Quality time is important, but quantity counts, too:

- Recognize unexpected opportunities to talk—walking the dog, sitting in the carpool line, getting ready for bed, waiting for an appointment.
- Don’t discount the value of **not** being “in-your-face.” Having a conversation while you are driving, for example, allows you to avoid eye contact and make talking about hard things a little easier (especially for boys).

Recognize when rage, anger, or avoidance are signs of wanting or needing to talk. Sometimes outbursts are cries for help or admission that things are out of control:

- Don’t tolerate disrespect; it is appropriate to set limits on a teen’s disrespectful behavior.
- Acknowledge that your child is upset about something, make a date to come back to address the issue later, and keep it!—parents lose their credibility with this “time out” approach if they do not follow through. (“I get that you’re upset about something, but I deserve to be spoken to in a respectful tone. Let’s both go to our rooms to calm down, and later, after you little brother goes to bed, we can have some tea and talk about it.”)

- **Do NOT talk when you are stressed or angry yourself.** No one thinks clearly when upset or stressed. Parents are likely to say things they regret to their children or to impose consequences that are unrealistic or unproductive when angry or upset. (“If you are 1 minute late for curfew, you’re not driving again until you’re 18, young lady!”)
- Take time to calm down, take a deep breath, acknowledge what is not wrong with the situation (or how it could have been worse), and make a plan to come address it when everyone’s blood pressure has returned to normal (see above!). (Do you really want to do all your own carpool and errands until she leaves for college?)

Where can you talk to your children? **Anywhere and everywhere--be flexible!** Take advantage of bedtime, driving in the car, running errands, etc:

- **Look for spontaneous opportunities to listen.** Offer to drive *home* from a party or event. Understand eye contact is not always necessary (especially with boys).
- **Create non-threatening situations that promote comfort, minimize anxiety.**

Why should you talk to my children?

Relationships with other human beings are critical to our very survival as individuals and as a society. Without the support of others we cannot weather the daily trials of life, let alone the major stressors and traumas.

- Explain to your children that committed relationships help them work through the stresses and traumas of life as well as provide happy, healthy lives.
- Explain that life is not always about being happy. Often our lives are defined by the hard times, how we handle them, and how the people we keep close to us help us to cope with them.

And most importantly, **How** do you talk to your children?

Be an “askable” parent. Know that listening is the most important part of communication. Never laugh at a child’s question, even in response to the child’s cuteness. Understand that your child wants communication but doesn’t expect you to have all the answers.

Give them your undivided attention. Let them know you have time for them now, or else arrange a time to come back to them later. Put away the phone, turn away from the computer, and close the door to avoid distractions. Let them know they matter and that you can make time when something is important to them.

Be the sounding board, not the judge and jury. Allow them to reach their own conclusions. Exercise caution in expressing criticism or opinions. Teens often recognize

their own mistakes as they think out loud. If they have made mistakes, chances are they already know what you think and how you feel. Most of the time kids feel disappointed enough in themselves long before we open our mouths.

Keeps the ball rolling by curbing the interruptions. The key to getting a teen to open up is to say very little. Respect silences. Kids don't process as fast as adults. Filling in silences can derail their train of thought.

Get beyond the "Just say NO" approach. When possible, try working out solutions with your children. When you do need to set limits or say no, try to do it in a constructive way rather than a punitive way:

- Create a give-and-take process of working out problems together.
- Talk about the problem together in a way that helps your child see both of your perspectives.
- Look for one or more possible solutions that take into account both of your views.
- After your child has tried out the solution, talk together about how well it worked.
- Encourage your child to come up with strategies about how to make it work better next time.

Try to understand what your child wants from you. What your children want most from you is not your advice. If your child wants your opinion or advice, she or he will ask you directly. What children want more than anything is for you to "get" them or, at least, to know that you're trying to understand where they're coming from.

Above all else, be nonjudgmental. Children need validation of their feelings, needs, and experiences. Most of the time, they are smart enough to eventually see the good as well as the not-so-good aspects of their relationships with only minimal reflective questioning from a loving adult. Quite often, they have already judged themselves harshly for their mistakes. The last thing they need is for the parent they look to for support to "rub it in."

Be the consultant not the coach or the therapist. When you see your child struggling, ask, "How can I be most helpful to you?" or "How are you thinking of handling this?" By coming to their own conclusions and developing a plan of action, they increase their competence at handling adult problems. This only increases their confidence that they have the skills necessary to survive in the real world and helps them to make even better, more self-protective decisions the next time around.

Remember that the purpose of talking with your children about these issues is the ultimate transition of responsibility from parent to child.

Even if you are uncomfortable, remain focused on the desired outcome. The purpose of these conversations with your child is to

- Answer questions.
- Eliminate fears.
- Build self-awareness and self-confidence.

Ultimately, parents want for their children what their children want for themselves:

- To be good people (initially defined by parents, later defined by self)
- To be able to take care of themselves (initially parent's responsibility, later their own)

Resource List and References

- www.iwannaknow.org
- So Sexy, So Soon, Levin and Kilbourne, Ballantine Books, 2008
- www.loveisnotabuse.com
- Roots and Wings: A Parent's Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens, AAP 2006 by Kenneth Ginsburg, MD, MEd, FAAP
- National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-866-799-SAFE (7233)
1-800-787-3224 (TTY)
- National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline
1-866-331-9474
1-866-331-8453 (TTY)
- Love Is Not Abuse (www.loveisnotabuse.com)
Education, statistics, research, resources, and curriculum for educating teens and families about relationship abuse.
- Family Violence Prevention Fund (www.endabuse.org)
Facts and statistics, local and regional hotline numbers, domestic violence education and prevention, and public policy information.
- The Empower Program (www.empowered.org)
The Empower Program's mission is to work with youth to end the culture of violence.
- Girls Incorporated National Resource Center (www.girlsinc.org)
Statistics, research, information and resources on issues affecting girls.