

Core knowledge content

Healthy Relationships

Relationships can develop with a number of people, including family members, friends, teachers, peers, co-workers, and people you decide to date. Healthy relationships are important to everyone and can be rewarding.

Qualities of a healthy relationship:

Everyone has the right to be involved in healthy relationships, and these relationships have many qualities including:

- Respect
- Honesty
- Trust
- Doing things together and apart
- Intimacy
- Assertiveness
- Positive self-esteem
- Mutual as well as separate goals and interests
- Communication in all directions
- Equality: No one is the boss
- Safety - physical, sexual, and emotional
- Acts of kindness, caring and support

Signs of an unhealthy relationship:

- You depend on the other person to feel important
- Jealousy/insecurity/possessiveness, such as excessive calling, texting or emailing
- Inequality – believing one person has more rights than the other
- Constant shouting or name calling
- Lack of communication
- Violence
- Abuse (physical, verbal, emotional, financial)

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Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

Relationships

In a positive relationship, people can still be their own person, as well as when being part of a couple.

A healthy relationship makes a person feel good about themselves and their partner. They can have fun together and still be themselves. All relationships are different, but healthy relationships share at least five things in common - the **S.H.A.R.E.** qualities.

Safety: In a healthy relationship, a person feels safe. They do not have to worry that their partner will harm them physically or emotionally, and they are not tempted to harm them. A person can change their mind about something - like having sex - without being afraid of how their partner will respond.

Honesty: A person does not hide anything important from their partner, and can say what they think without fear of being ridiculed. They can admit to being wrong and working with their partner to resolve disagreements by talking honestly.

Acceptance: They accept each other as they are. They appreciate their partner's unique qualities, such as shyness or outgoing, and do not try to "fix" them. If there are qualities a person does not like about their partner, then maybe they should not be with that person.

Respect: Both partners think highly of each other. They do not feel superior or inferior to their partner in important ways. They respect each other's right to have separate opinions and ideas.

Enjoyment: A good relationship is not just about how two people treat each other - it also has to be enjoyable. In a healthy relationship, they can play, laugh together and have fun.

Loving someone means knowing who they are (their good qualities and their not-so-good qualities). It is respecting and often communicating their values, boundaries, choices and feelings. It means being respectful and trustful – knowing that their partner is emotionally there, even when they cannot be physically beside you.

A bad relationship is one in which a person does not feel that they can be themselves, or when they feel pressured into doing things they are not comfortable with or that they would not normally do. To be able to know when a relationship is bad, a person needs to know who they are, what they want and what they are comfortable with.

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Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

One type of unhealthy relationship is an abusive relationship. Abusive relationships revolve around control, fear and lack of respect. Usually, one partner has control while the other cowers in resentment or fear. Abusive relationships can involve threats, name-calling, blaming, guilt-tripping, jealous questioning, and violence.

A social worker and/or counsellor can help map out a strategy for leaving an abusive relationship and getting one's own life back on track. A health care provider can steer a person toward appropriate counselling services.

Factors that influence sexual activity for youth

There are many ways to express your affection for someone; spending time together, holding hands, hugging, kissing or some may choose to be sexually active. Choosing not to have sex does not mean you do not love each other. It just means that you express your feelings in other ways, and that is okay!

Peer pressure

The social influence a peer group exerts on its individual members, as each member attempts to conform to the expectations of the group. Like any situation, doing something because of peer pressure versus making one's own decision is not recommended.

It is important to emphasize that students need to do what is good and risk free for themselves. They need to consider all the factors involved including, but not limited to, the values and beliefs of their culture, family, community and the like.

Pressure from partner

Communication is very important in relationships. A person needs to make sure that they are comfortable with their decisions, and that the people involved both know what the other feels comfortable doing. A consent conversation includes asking, listening, and negotiating your boundaries and limits.

It takes a lot of courage to stand up for what a person believes in. Just because the person's partner feels ready to engage in sexual activities does not necessarily mean that they care about them.

Lines like these are not fair to anyone:

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Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

“You would do it if you loved me”

“Everybody’s doing it”

“Come on, it’ll feel good”

“I know you want it...stop teasing me”

Sexual coercion (encouraging/manipulating/convincing someone to have sex when they do not want to) is a serious issue with dangerous consequences. Forcing someone to have sex when they have said no is a crime.

Alcohol and drug use

Using alcohol or drugs of any type reduces one’s ability to make informed decisions. This reduced ability can lead to actions that are not reflective of one’s values.

Media (TV, movies, music, Internet, social media, etc.)

The media often provides an unrealistic portrayal of sexuality. Sexual activity is often portrayed as having no negative consequences. Also, media tends to portray sexual activity as being more prevalent than it actually is. Social Media is a big part of the lives of today’s youth. It is important to remember that when things are posted on to the internet that this is a permanent decision. Also images/pictures that are sexual in nature can be viewed as illegal if dealing with someone who is under age. Possessions of these files are illegal as well. It is important for youth to be aware of the consequences of their actions if the share/receive sexual images, not only of themselves, but also of others. These decisions can affect one’s life not only in the present but in the future as well. Internet safety is an important topic.

Clothing/appearance

While clothing can send messages, it is important to emphasize that interpreting these messages as consent for sexual activity is wrong. Consent is not given by clothing or appearance. Consent can only be given verbally, cannot be given in advance and can always be withdrawn. The absence of “yes” always means no.

Clothing can represent culture and belief. It is important to respect other’s values and beliefs regarding their choice of clothing.

Hormones/attraction

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Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

Natural and common responses to hormones and attraction do not necessarily equal natural and common actions. Having sexual feelings can be normal, however a person is not required to act on these feelings if one is not ready, if it is not appropriate, or not consented to.

Curiosity

Becoming sexually active should happen when someone is ready. Not when someone is curious. If a student has questions about sex, they should ask a parent/guardian, health care professional or supportive adult in their life for an open, honest answer.

Prior sexual activity

Abstinence is a choice. Having been sexually active once, or even many times, does not mean that a person can choose to practice abstinence later. It is important to you to understand the consequences of being sexually active. Abstinence is the only safest and effective way at preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Seeking acceptance/love/comfort

Often, troubling situations and low self-worth can lead a person to seek acceptance, love and comfort in ways they would otherwise not be comfortable doing. Becoming sexually active is not a healthy way to solve problems or to gain acceptance and can decrease self-esteem.

Readiness for sexual activity

There are many messages related to intimate activities; it seems everywhere a person looks, someone is trying to tell them something different about “sex”. Some religions ask that a person wait until marriage. On television, “sex” is used in its messaging to sell many different things, from cars to clothes to pop. The media coverage is full of celebrities engaging in all kinds of inappropriate sexual behaviours and activities.

Choosing when to be sexually active is a complicated issue; it means taking responsibility for one’s choices and actions. Deciding if, when and with whom, a person wants to be intimate with are tough decisions that they have to make. Parents may forbid it and friends may warn against it, but in the end it is still a decision that the person will make for themselves. Prior to making that decision, a person should consider all of their beliefs,

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Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

values, and feelings, along with the benefits, drawbacks and consequences of engaging in sexual activity. Some questions they might want to ask are:

“Eventually I may want to become sexually active, does that mean I’m ready to be sexually active now?”

“Why do I want to do this?”

“Are we going to use any form of protection (i.e., condoms, birth control)?”

“What is my partner’s sexual history?”

The decision to become sexually active, or to have sex with a particular person, is a choice that is different for everyone. Pressure to have sex, and pressure to wait, come from everywhere. How a person was brought up, their religious beliefs, peer pressure, what their friends or other people their age are doing, and a person’s previous relationships and/or sexual experiences may all be things to think about.

Relationship–partner pressure/partner agreement

Decisions about sexual relationships should be made equally by partners. These decisions should reflect the values and wishes of both partners. It is important to respect a partner’s decision to not become sexually active, and important to understand that a person deserves to be treated with respect if they want to be abstinent and/or decide against being sexually active. If both partners want to proceed with becoming sexually active, this decision comes with responsibilities and possible consequences. It is essential to ensure that sexual activity is as safe as possible. Both partners should discuss their sexual boundaries and limits, as well as provide consent and discuss the potential consequences of being sexually involved with a person.

Communication

The ability to communicate effectively is an important skill for students to have. Communication is the exchange of thoughts, ideas or feelings between two or more people. It is a basic component of human relationships. Communication is a two way process involving the sending and the receiving of a message.

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Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

People communicate nonverbally (facial expressions, posture, hand movements) and verbally (talking). Listening is just as important as expressing ideas when interacting with someone. A healthy relationship takes time, work and communication.

Bad communication is one of the biggest problems for many couples. It is important that partners discuss sexual limits with each other. Open communication about these limits will allow the couple to know what is or is not acceptable behaviour. Having conversations like this might be a little embarrassing at first, but if a couple does not discuss their limits and comfort level then they will not be able to make the best decisions for their relationship.

There are still many people who say, “I could not possibly talk like that with my partner!” And in some cases, this may be true. If that is the case, it is a good idea for a person to take a look at their relationship and determine how healthy it is, in terms of communication.

Decision-making

When making a decision it is always important to be aware of all the possible consequences. A person then needs to consider what can be done to prevent these consequences. Only after investigating all of this, can a person make a wise, informed decision. It is important to recognize that different cultures and religions support various values that influence individual decisions.

Adolescents need guidance as their brains develop, especially in the realm of controlling emotional impulses in order to make rational decisions. Their brains are ‘under construction’ during adolescence, and until young adulthood. When it comes to decisions that involve peer pressure, a teenager may not be capable of such a rational approach, and the emotions and feelings of friendship may get in the way.

Consent

- Consent for any sexual activity must be freely given (verbally)
- Consent is not considered to be freely given if it follows from coercion; threats to personal safety or threats to harm others.
- Consent cannot be given by someone who is intoxicated, unconscious, or otherwise considered incapable of giving their consent.
- The age of consent in Canada is 16; however, there are close in age expectations for 14 or 15 year olds and 12 or 13 year olds

- A 14 or 15 year old can consent to sexual activity as long as the partner is **less than five years older** and there is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or any other exploitation of the young person. This means that if the partner is 5 years or older than the 14 or 15 year old, any sexual activity is a criminal offence.
- There is also a "close in age" exception for 12 and 13 year olds. A 12 or 13 year old can consent to sexual activity with a partner as long as the partner is **less than two years older** and there is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or any other exploitation of the young person. This means that if the partner is 2 years or older than the 12 or 13 year old, any sexual activity is a criminal offence.
- Once sexual activity has begun, consent can be withdrawn at any time, and this can be indicated with either words or actions.

No always means no, even if the person has initially agreed to sexual activity.

Sources of support

- Parents/guardian, other trusted adult family member (e.g. aunt, uncle, grandparent, godparent, step-parent)
- Teachers, counselors, child youth workers, school nurse, religious leader
- Health care providers (Doctors, nurse practitioners, pharmacist, nurse)
- [Niagara Region Sexual Health Centres](#)
- [Kids Help Phone](#) 1-800-668-6868; Youth Line LGBTQ: 1-800-268-9688
- [The Niagara Sexual Assault Centre \(CARSA\)](#) (niagarasexualassaultcentre.com)

Supplemental content

Sexting

The practice of [sexting](#) refers to the creation and distribution of sexual images or text through the use of digital media such as cell phones, email, instant messaging or social networking sites. Some recent studies of sexting and youth focus only on the use of cell phones to send and receive information, while other studies include a wider range of digital media. Studies that report on the prevalence of sexting among youth often do not specify exactly what constitutes a sexually suggestive image or text. One person's idea of sexually suggestive is not necessarily the same as another person's definition. It is therefore

Teaching Tool

Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

difficult to draw conclusions about how many young people have engaged in sexting, when the concept itself is not clearly defined.

When young people under the age of 18 send sexual images of themselves or of a partner who is under the age of 18, there is a possibility that they could be charged with distribution of child pornography as defined by the Criminal Code. There have been cases of this happening in the United States, however, to date there have been no such cases in Canada. However, there remains the possibility that some cases of sexting involving youth under the age of 18 could be prosecuted under the current Criminal Code of Canada.

Internet luring

In 2002, the crime of internet luring was added to the Criminal Code of Canada. This means that it is against the law to use a computer to communicate with a person under the age of 16, or to communicate with someone believed to be under the age of 16, for the purposes of arranging or encouraging a sexual offence. For sexual offences involving prostitution, pornography, anal sex or sex with a person in a position of authority, the age of consent is 18. It is not a defense that the accused believed that the young person was over the age of 16 or 18, depending on the offence, unless every effort was made to confirm this fact.

Abuse

There are many different types of abuse. They can be broken down to include neglect, which can be further broken down to either physical which is a failure to meet the child's physical needs (adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, health care and safety) or it can be emotional, which is a failure to meet the child's emotional needs (affection and belonging).

Physical abuse is any act that results in physical trauma or injury to any part of a child's body (hitting, burning or shaking). It may happen once or many times. Emotional abuse is attacking the child's self-concept and self-worth, which will interfere with healthy child development. It may take various forms including but not limited to: verbal attacks, threats, humiliation, unrealistic expectations, rejection, inappropriate accusations, corruption (allowing a child to use alcohol or drugs, participate in criminal activity), being ignored, isolated or restrained, exposure to violence or severe conflict and chronic exposure to alcohol/drug abuse.

Teaching Tool

Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

Sexual abuse is an inappropriate exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity or behaviour caused by anyone, including a parent, relative, friend, or stranger. It can take on many various forms including any sexual touching or intercourse, obscene phone calls or e-mails, exposure to pornography or flashing, sexual exploitation (engaging a child in sexual activities for exchange of money, gifts, shelter, food, etc.; using a child in pornography; luring a child via the internet for sexual purposes).

Signs of abuse may include:

- Hinting or talking directly about abuse
- Unexplained and/or repeated bruises or injuries in places not normally injured
- Burns that leave a pattern outlining the object used to make the burn (iron, rope)
- Being continually hungry, unsuitably dressed for the weather and/or always dirty
- Being left alone often as a young child
- Being aggressive, angry, hostile, withdrawn or afraid
- Difficulties concentrating
- Refusing to participate or dress appropriately for physical activities
- Showing unusual knowledge of sexual matters or acting out sexually
- Repeatedly running away from home
- Poor school attendance

It is important for students to be able to identify what they consider healthy and unhealthy characteristics of a relationship. Students may define what they perceive to be healthy or unhealthy characteristics based on their own cultural beliefs, values, and experiences.

Resources

Alberta Health Services. Teaching Sexual Health. (www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

Kids Help Phone. (<https://kidshelpphone.ca/> or 1-800-668-6868)

Niagara Region Sexual Health Centers
(https://www.niagararegion.ca/living/health_wellness/sexualhealth/sexual-health-centres.aspx)

Physical & Health Education Canada. Always Changing.
(<https://phecanada.ca/programs/always-changing>.)

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Grade 8: Healthy Relationships

Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, Sex & U. (<http://www.sexandu.ca>)

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