Core knowledge content

Healthy Relationships

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

Qualities of a healthy relationship:

Everyone has the right to be involved in healthy relationships, and these relationships have a lot of 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.
- Gossiping about the other partner/relationship.
- Jealousy/insecurity/possessiveness
- Believing one person has more rights than the other.
- Shouting or yelling when you are angry at your partner.
- Using the silent treatment.
- Pesterling your partner until you get what you want.
- Pouting to get what you want.
- Excessive calling, texting or emailing.
- Lack of communication.
- Inequality
- Violence
Relationships

In a positive relationship, a person can still be their own person, as well as 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 , 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 and their not-so-good qualities. It is respecting and often communicating their values, choices and feelings. Love means respecting space and time - knowing that their partner is emotionally there, even when they cannot be physically beside you. A person may or may not choose to start a sexual relationship even when they feel they love that person. Remember that there are many ways to express your affection for someone; choosing to be sexually active is just one of those ways. Choosing not to have sex does not mean you do not love each other. It just means that you have found other ways to express your feelings.

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.

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**

**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 family, community and the like.

**Pressure from partner**

Communication is very important in relationships. A person needs to make sure that they are both comfortable with their decisions, and that the people involved both know what the other feels comfortable doing.

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:

“You would 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. A person’s body is their own territory, for them to treat as they see fit.

**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 decide against becoming 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.

**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 or convictions.

**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. Internet safety is an important topic for youth to be aware of. These decisions can affect one’s life not only in the present but in the future as well.

**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 in a spirit of cooperation. The absence of “yes” always means no.

Clothing can represent culture and belief. It is important to respect other’s values and beliefs around clothing.

**Hormones/attraction**

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 sexuality, they should ask a parent 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 cannot choose to practice abstinence later.

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 has to make for themselves. Prior to making that decision, a person should consider all of their beliefs, values, feelings, benefits 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?”

“What do I want to do this?”

“Are we going to use 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.

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.

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 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 won't 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 how close they really are.

**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, for all intents and purposes, are “under construction” during adolescence. When it comes to deciding whether to ride in a car driven by an intoxicated friend, an adult can usually put aside their desire to conform and is more likely to make the rational decision against drunk driving. However, a teenager may not be capable of such a coolly rational approach, and the emotional feelings of friendship may be likely to win the battle.

**Consent**

Consent for any sexual activity must be freely given. 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. More information can be found in the Supplemental Content. As well, consent is not considered to be freely given if it follows from threats to personal safety, or threats to harm others. 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)
- Sexual Health Centres (https://www.niagararegion.ca/living/health_wellness/sexualhealth/sexual-health-centres.aspx)
- Youth hotline (Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868; Youth Line (LGBTQ): 1-800-268-9688)

Supplemental content

Sexual behaviours

Most students at this age are not sexually active and students should not feel pressured to become sexually active before they are ready. Adolescents may feel that many of their peers are sexually active because of stories they hear and media influences that portray young people who are sexually active. However, in the most recent Canadian Community Health Survey (2009/2010), in response to the question “Have you ever had sexual intercourse?” 30% of 15 to 17 year-olds and 68% of 18 to 19 year-olds reported that they had had intercourse (Roterman, 2012).

Postponing sexual involvement is not always easy. Adolescents may find themselves in situations where they may feel they have no choice but to continue even when they feel they should stop. Allowing them opportunities to discuss scenarios and develop strategies to cope with these situations will provide them with skills and knowledge they will need before they find themselves involved in high risk behaviours. Unprotected vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse and oral sex are potential high risk activities. Students need to be aware of the risk factors involved in these behaviours including pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Adolescents’ concept of showing affection for another often leads to the misconception that engaging in sexual intercourse is the “ultimate” and only way to show true love.

While postponing sexual involvement is the norm for this age group, some adolescents do choose to become sexually active for a variety of reasons. It is important that all students understand the risks involved with being sexually active.

Until this stage of development students were dependent on adults, particularly their parents. Parents have taken care of almost all their needs, from food and shelter, to love and approval.
Their parents may still regard them as a child because they are still growing. However, as they mature, students will probably want to begin making some more grown up decisions for themselves. They will begin to solve their own problems and to make decisions that may affect them when they are adults.

Teachers should help students make the connection that the same skills learned in making decisions can be used when making decisions about becoming sexually active, dating and relationships and substance use/misuse just to name a few.

Understanding sexual health can be complicated for youth. It is important that they have a good understanding of themselves before getting involved with someone else. It is not just about making a decision whether to engage in sexual activity abstain or postpone sex. It is also about things such as physical readiness; engaging in safer sex and avoiding consequences such as pregnancy or STIs; sexual orientation and gender identity; understanding of their bodies, including what gives them pleasure; and the emotional implications of sexual intimacy and being in a relationship. It includes moral and ethical considerations as well as a person’s family values and religious beliefs. It also involves the need to respect the rights of other people.

With their limbic system on full alert and their prefrontal cortex still under construction, adolescent brains are simply not yet equipped to think through things in the same way. The parts of the brain responsible for more "top-down" control, controlling impulses, and planning ahead—the hallmarks of adult behavior—are among the last to mature.

**Alcohol and drug influences**

The use of alcohol and drugs reduces decision-making abilities required to say no to sexual intercourse or to practice safer sex. A Canadian study conducted in 2010 indicated two-thirds of grade 9 and 10 students had reportedly tried alcohol at least once (Freeman et al., 2011). Furthermore, approximately 15-20% of grade 10 males and 5-10% of grade 10 females reportedly drank beer at least once per week whereas 10% of grade 10 males and females reported drinking liquor at least once per week. Of those students who consumed alcohol in the past year, over half of grade 10 students (56% of males; 54% of females) reported binge drinking, where they consumed five or more drinks (four or more for females) on one occasion in the previous 12 months (Freeman et al., 2011).

A 2010 study of Canadian students indicated 26-28% of grade 9 and 10 students reported use of marijuana in the last year. Of those who had used marijuana, 12% of males and 10% of females had reportedly used marijuana three or more times in the previous 30 days (Freeman et al., 2011).

Adolescents who drink alcohol or use drugs before engaging in sexual intercourse are less likely to use protection such as condoms and therefore increase their risk of pregnancy or developing STI
Consent

The age of consent refers to the age at which people are able to make their own decisions about sexual activity. In Canada, the age of consent was raised from 14 to 16 in 2008, with the passage of the Tackling Violent Crime Act. However, some exceptions to this age of consent remain. Unmarried persons under the age of 18 cannot consent to anal sex. Someone under the age of 18 cannot legally consent to have sex with a person in a position of authority such as a teacher, health care provider, coach, lawyer or family member. As well, 12 and 13 year-olds can consent to have sex with other youth who are not more than 2 years older than themselves. There is also a provision called the 5 year peer group provision, which means that youth aged 14 or 15 will be able to consent to sex with partners who are no more than 5 years older than themselves.

The Criminal Code of Canada states that persons under the age of 18 cannot engage in anal intercourse except if they are legally married. For those over the age of 18, anal intercourse is legal only when it is practiced in private between 2 consenting adults. This section of the Criminal Code has been declared unconstitutional by federal courts of appeal, as well as by courts of appeal in Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec. The courts in this case ruled that a higher age of consent for anal sex, than for vaginal sex, discriminated against gay men and violated the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom.

As long as the Criminal Code remains unchanged, the possibility that people could be charged with this offence still exists. Therefore, gay rights activists are lobbying to have a uniform age of consent for both anal and vaginal sex. Activists have also objected to the fact that anal sex is the only sexual activity in the Criminal Code that is limited to two consenting partners.

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 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.

**Child pornography**

The Canadian Criminal Code defines child pornography as pictures, films, videos or other visual representations that show persons under the age of 18, or persons who are depicted as being under the age of 18, engaged in sexually explicit activities. These images can also be considered pornographic if they show the sexual organs or the anal region of a person under 18, or of someone who appears to be under 18, for expressly sexual purposes. Child pornography can also include written or audio material that describes or records sexual activity with a person under the age of 18, or with a person who appears to be under 18. It is an offence to possess, create, advertise or distribute any material that meets this definition of child pornography. It is also illegal to counsel or encourage illegal sexual activity with someone under the age of 18. Illegal sexual activity could include anal sex, sex with a person of authority, or sex for the purposes of prostitution.

The interpretation of this definition of child pornography is not always clear cut. For example, it is legal for youth 16 and over to engage in sex but it is illegal for them to send pictures of themselves in sexual situations over the internet. However, pictures of nude children that have no sexual intent, such as pictures a parent might take of a child in the bath, are not considered pornographic. The definition of sexually explicit is not clearly stated in legislation and is open to interpretation. Photographs or images that some would define as artistic could be labeled as sexually explicit by others.

The concept of advocating illegal sexual activity can also cause confusion in certain situations. Some might argue that educational materials that counsel gay youth on safe sex practices are actually forms of child pornography, since they advise youth under 18 on ways to safely practice anal sex. Sexual health material that describes sexual practices, and is aimed at youth under 18, could be interpreted as pornographic by some. These are examples of extreme interpretations of the concept of child pornography but they highlight some concerns that sexual rights advocates have with how the legislation could be applied.

**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). There is physical abuse which is any act that results in a 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. It is a pattern of ongoing behaviour that interferes with healthy development and 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. Sexual abuse would be the 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 to be healthy and unhealthy characteristics of a relationship. Students may define what they perceive to be healthy or unhealthy characteristics based on their own values, beliefs and relationship experiences.
I out of every 2 sexual assaults occurred because alcohol was involved.

If someone suspects that they are in an abusive relationship, there is a good chance that they are. Perhaps they know deep down that they’d be better off without the relationship but are afraid to leave it. They may depend on their partner’s income, may fear being on their own, or may rationalize the relationship as “better than nothing.” In the long run, however, an abusive relationship does far more damage to self-esteem than the absence of a relationship (and the opportunity to find a healthy one).

**Resources**

Alberta Health Services. *Teaching Sexual Health.* [www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

Kids Help Phone. [https://kidshelpphone.ca/](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](https://www.niagararegion.ca/living/health_wellness/sexualhealth/sexual-health-centres.aspx)


**References**


Talking About Sexuality in Calgary Communities Teens and Trends: Get the Facts on Teen Sexuality For Professional Reference Alberta Health Services