

PARENTS AS RELATIONSHIP MODELS





Parents are key in teaching children appropriate relationship skills and expectations for relationships. One of the major ways children learn is by watching others. They observe what we do and often copy these behaviors without even realizing it. In other words, we set an example for how our children will act. Being a healthy role model in the home is one of the best ways to educate our children about relationships.

Sometimes we, as parents, may be in unhealthy relationships. If you need assistance with your relationship or want to refer to other resources on this topic, check out the resources found at the end of your handbook.

UNDERSTANDING PRE-TEENS AND TEENAGERS

The pre-teen and teenage years are a period of change. Our children are experiencing new and emerging attitudes and skills that lay the foundation for adulthood, even though they are not yet adults. They are adjusting emotionally to a place between childhood and adulthood. For example, you might see a child who wants to be like an independent adult one day but is very childlike the next.

During the pre-teen and teenage years, our children's relationships with others change. Our children are beginning to rely more on friends, though perhaps not as much as it feels like sometimes. They begin to explore the values and opinions of peers, want to spend more time with friends, and may even start talking or acting a lot like their friends.

Parents need to help pre-teens understand and negotiate the changes that occur during this period. We have heard from a lot of kids who say that parents and their opinions still matter. It may not seem like it at times, but children do want to know the opinions of their parents. Therefore, it is important not to give up on trying to stay close to your child and spending time together. Remember parents still matter.

Pre-teens and teenagers feel like their experiences are unique and no one can really understand where they are coming from. The pre-teen years are a really good age to show them that you can understand where they are coming from. To do this, try putting yourself in the shoes of your child. Also, think back to what it felt like when... (e.g., you did not get asked out, people laughed at you, you did not make the team, etc.)

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT MOVING FORWARD

- What are the characteristics of healthy relationships you model for your children?
- Which characteristics do you value and/or do you want your child to expect in a relationship?
- Are there aspects of your current or former relationships you want your child to avoid?
- What term(s) does your child use to describe his/her relationships with others?
- What term(s) does your child use to describe relationships where there is a romantic interest in the other person

INTERACTING POSITIVELY WITH YOUR CHILD

Positive attention to good behavior: Notice and appreciate good behaviors of your child. Use encouraging phrases (e.g., “You can do it!” “You are doing a really good job!”) to encourage your child to continue with the good behaviors.

Mutual respect: Let your child know that they matter. This does not mean that parent and child are equals but the child understands that their thoughts and feelings will be considered by the parent.

One-on-one time: Take an interest in doing something your child likes to do (e.g., going to see a movie).

Open communication: You and your child have an opportunity to speak and to be heard. You show an interest in what your child has to say.

Appropriate supervision and rules: Enforce the rules—children want and need rules. Always know where your children are, what they are doing, who they are with, and when they will be home.

ACTIVITY

Parenting Pie

In this activity, you will identify the ingredients you think are essential in the recipe for a good parent-child relationship.

Practice effective communication with your child, such as:

- Encourage conversation and do not monopolize.
- Really listen without interrupting.
- Make sure your words, body, and tone are all saying the same thing.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Use “I” messages to own your feelings.
- Stay in the present, focus on solutions.
- Be open to other views and respectful of them

Parents can assist their children in developing healthy relationships by:

- Being knowledgeable.
- Being approachable.
- Being understanding.
- Being respectful.
- Modeling healthy relationships.
- Communicating self-respect.
- Focusing on the positive.
- Discussing alternatives.
- Taking advantage of teachable moments

ACTIVITY

Starting a Difficult & Personal Conversation

Goal: The goal of this activity is for the parents to practice using good communication skills and opening the lines of communication to talk about difficult topics.

Introduction: Children are exposed to sex, drugs, dating, violence, and risky behaviors in their lives on a daily basis. Even if they do not have these things happening to them directly, they have friends who are likely affected by them. In fact, dating violence usually first happens when youth are around 12 years old, but it can begin earlier. In a 2017 survey, 1 in 12 youth reported being a victim of physical violence in a dating relationship. Unfortunately, exposure to some of these things can cause problems in children's lives and prevent them from reaching their goals in life. We know, however, that conversations with children about difficult topics can delay their engagement in the activity.

Instructions: Make a list of difficult topics that you would like to discuss with your child. You do not have to provide your child with all of the information you would like for them to have related to a particular topic, but you can start a conversation that will continue in the weeks, months, and years to come. When you begin the conversation with your child, remember to actively listen to your child's opinions. At the end of the activity, you and your child can complete the Communication Checklists and give feedback to each other on how you did. Remember, the more you practice talking with your child, the easier it gets, and it increases the likelihood that your child will come to you with any problems they are having. Remember, it is never too late to start talking.

Assessment: When the activity is completed, you and your child should complete the Communication Checklists to see how the conversation went. Remember, you do not have to use each skill in every conversation but try to use the skills as much as possible.

These are topics I want to talk to my child about...

I can start a conversation with my child by saying...
