

Talking to Your Teen About Healthy Intimate Boundaries

Having good boundaries is super important for maintaining healthy and respectful relationships. When you help your adolescent learn how to set good boundaries with their romantic partners, you're setting them up for success in building safe and healthy relationships.

Plus, it provides a great opportunity to have open and honest conversations with your teen about their relationships. This way, they'll feel more comfortable coming to you for advice and support in the future.

This tip sheet will explain how to talk to your teenager about:

- Understanding what boundaries are
- Figuring out where their boundaries lie
- Communicating those boundaries to a partner
- Managing and resolving conflict in a relationship in a healthy manner

You can help your teen understand boundaries and develop healthy relationships by being a good role model. Teens look to adults for guidance on how to handle relationships, so it's important to practice what you preach. Lead by example and show them how it's done!

How to help your teenager establish healthy boundaries

Want to help your teenager navigate their boundaries in a relationship? A great starting point is simply asking them what makes them comfortable. Encourage them to think about what level of independence they prefer, how they feel about displays of affection and what they're willing to share with a partner.

You could also share some of these examples of healthy boundaries in relationships to get the conversation flowing:

- **Encourage independence.** Stress that socializing with friends independently for both them and their partner is important in a relationship. Teenagers should feel empowered to spend time with friends of all genders without requiring permission from their partner.
- **It is healthy to have individual time and space within a relationship.** Teenagers should feel comfortable communicating their need for personal time and space to their partner without feeling obligated to constantly be together.
- **Establishing boundaries regarding sharing personal information online is valid.** Discussing what is acceptable in terms of social media connections, sharing devices and posting about the relationship is a necessary conversation for a healthy relationship.

Setting boundaries around sex and intimacy

Adolescents may express interest in exploring sexuality, particularly within the context of romantic relationships. While discussing the concept of consent may present some discomfort or awkwardness, engaging in these conversations is essential in guiding teenagers toward safe, positive and respectful sexual interactions when they're ready.

For additional guidance on educating your teen on the importance of consent, read this Military OneSource article titled [Support Your Teen to Have Safe and Healthy Relationships](#).

You can assist your adolescent in preparing for discussions about sexual boundaries by addressing the following topics:

- **Defining sexual boundaries:** Explain to your teen the importance of communicating with their partner about their comfort levels and preferences regarding sexual activities.
- **Flexibility of sexual boundaries:** Inform your teen that it's acceptable to change their boundaries if they feel uncomfortable or no longer wish to engage in certain activities. Emphasize that they always have the right to make decisions about their own body and sexuality.
- **Consent and communication:** Stress the significance of obtaining enthusiastic and voluntary consent from both parties before engaging in any sexual activity. Remind your teenager that they have the right to stop at any time if they feel uncomfortable, and that consent is ongoing and can be revoked.
- **Avoiding transactional attitudes toward sex:** Discourage the belief that sex is a form of currency or a means of reciprocation for gifts or expressions of affection. Pay attention to your teen's language around physical intimacy and directly address the subject when they express beliefs in reciprocation.
- **Self-reflection before engaging in sexual activity:** Encourage your teen to ask themselves important questions, such as their reasons for wanting to engage in sex and the physical activities that precede it. Ask them about their feelings of safety and any feelings of pressure or anxiety. This self-reflection can help them determine if they are ready for sexual activity and what boundaries they are comfortable with.
- **Practicing safe sex:** Educate your teenager about safe sex practices, contraception methods and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Encourage open communication with their partner about protective measures if they are contemplating sexual activity.

How to communicate boundaries in a relationship

Guidelines for effectively communicating boundaries in a relationship:

- Encourage your adolescent to understand that strong relationships are built on clear and open communication. Emphasize the importance of discussing personal boundaries with their partner to ensure mutual understanding and respect. Support your adolescent in initiating honest and constructive conversations with their partner about their preferences and expectations in the relationship.
- Suggest that they organize their thoughts beforehand to articulate their boundaries effectively. Additionally, encourage them to explain to their partner the significance of these boundaries for them.
- Emphasize the importance of mutual respect in relationships and remind your adolescent to listen to and honor their partner's boundaries. By demonstrating respect toward their partner's boundaries, they are setting a positive example for the type of behavior they expect in return.

How to manage difficulties in a relationship

Every relationship has some difficulties, and sometimes boundaries can be crossed. At times, we don't always know where the line is until we cross it. If this happens, you can advise your teen to:

- **Identify the root cause of conflict.** This is crucial. It is important they recognize that disagreements may not always stem from the surface issue being discussed. For instance, a dispute over spending time with a friend of the opposite sex without prior notice could be masking deeper concerns about trust and fidelity. Encourage your adolescent to reflect on their emotions during arguments to uncover underlying issues.
- **Resolve conflicts with open communication.** It is essential for individuals to express their feelings and concerns to their partner in a composed manner. It is advisable to address issues when both parties are calm, rather than in the heat of the moment. You may also direct them to [Support Your Teen to Have Safe and Healthy Relationships](#).
- **Engage in discussions with their partner.** This helps to determine what is significant to each of them and where they can be flexible. In a healthy relationship, compromises are necessary. It's important for all parties to consider each other's needs and find a middle ground.

How to spot an unhealthy relationship

Not all relationships are healthy, and at times individuals may not respect boundaries, even when clearly communicated. It's crucial to have open discussions with your teen about the essential aspects they should not tolerate in a partner, including one who:

- Disregards things they have identified as being important to them
- Is controlling and dictates what they can do and who they see
- Is verbally and/or emotionally abusive
- Makes them feel disrespected
- Is not truthful and open with them
- Engages in physical violence and/or abuse
- Does not respect boundaries around what they are comfortable doing sexually

Communicate to your teen the importance of establishing and enforcing personal boundaries. If someone is crossing those boundaries, it may be necessary to reevaluate the relationship and offer your support if needed. Encourage them to prioritize their well-being and seek out relationships that are built on respect, and let them know that unhealthy relationships can often start off very positive and slowly become toxic over time.

It may be best to consider ending the relationship if they:

- Are unable to resolve conflicts without compromising their boundaries
- Find themselves making excuses for their partner's behavior/choices
- See a cycle of a honeymoon feeling followed by tension building that leads to an explosive fight, then back to a honeymoon feeling

If you are worried that your child is in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, reach out to your local [Family Advocacy Program office](#) or call 800-342-9647. For more information, view the following Military OneSource articles: [Support Your Teen to Have Safe and Healthy Relationships](#) and [Teach Your Kids Healthy Body Boundaries](#).