

# Talking to your child about dependable relationships





# Introduction

## WHY SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS?

Talking about relationships with a teenager isn't always easy! But research shows<sup>1</sup> that experiences at home, especially in childhood, make a difference to our future health, work and happiness: families can support us to develop the skills, confidence and resilience needed to thrive. Considering and experiencing what safe, nurturing and dependable relationships look like can help young people create and maintain these kinds of relationships for themselves, setting them up for a healthier, happier future.

This guide has been created to help you inform your child's learning about relationships, including how to support teaching in school. Covid-19 has had an impact on all our relationships, and raised challenges and questions for everyone.

**The guide will help you have conversations with your teen about healthy, dependable relationships and what they might one day want for themselves.**



## HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS?

Children and young people form their values, expectations and understanding about relationships of all kinds from everything role modelled around them. Their perceptions of healthy relationships are based on their personal family experiences, as well as images and stereotypes of 'ideal' relationships in the media.

Every relationship experience affects the way our brain learns, develops and grows. If a young person doesn't feel they are safe and loved, have positive relationships role models, or doesn't fit the media stereotypes, not only might they question, but their brain may restrict their ability to form such relationships as they get older.

**In reality, there is no one 'normal' or 'ideal' relationship, and no 'right' way for a relationship to be, but there are essential aspects of safe, healthy and dependable relationships which young people can recognise, consider and value for themselves.**



1. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). From Best Practices to Break-through Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families. [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu) and [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing)

# RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION IN SCHOOL

Since September 2020, Relationships, sex and health education (RSHE, also called PSHE) has been statutory in all secondary schools in England. Schools must publish their RSHE policy for anyone to view (e.g. on their website), and consult with parents and carers on what they teach. If you don't know what your child is learning about relationships in school, you can ask to see the school's policy, curriculum or lesson materials.

Broadly, statutory Relationships and sex education teaches about families of all kinds, healthy and safe friendships on- and offline, and sexual relationships. The emphasis throughout is on mutual respect, honesty, consent and responsibility. There is a link to the full guidance in the Resources section.

It's useful to know what your child is learning about relationships in school, as your own conversations can support, reinforce or arise from these lessons.

## Starting and continuing to talk: tips

It is never too early to consider what works for us in our relationships – even young children can talk about how friendships make them feel. Some teenagers may already be in a romantic relationship that they feel committed to; others may be questioning a friendship or starting work relationships. Discussions about principles and values can apply to all the types of relationships we may experience.

To build trust and enable discussions to feel more natural, it is vital to keep lines of communication open:

often parents and carers rush to 'fix' things quickly or giving their own opinions about what to do, which can lead to a child or young person feeling shut down or misunderstood and are then less likely to listen to the support and guidance given. Try to show that you empathise with your child's point of view: if your child feels listened to, and that their opinions are accepted and respected, they will be more likely to want to talk with you, and be honest with themselves about their needs and ambitions.

Here are some ways to do this:

# 1 WHEN SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS?

Talk when your teen is relaxed and calm, and open to having a chat. If they're hungry, or tired, or you interrupt their favourite show, you probably won't get very far! If it's not the right time for them, respect their feelings if they say they don't want to talk at that moment.

## 2 BE HONEST

If they ask, be as honest as you can about your own views and feelings, but also give a reason for these. So if they ask about your relationships choices, explain why these were/are right for you. You could explain why particular relationships didn't work for you, but also why others make you feel safe and fulfilled. Honesty will help your child trust you and respect what you say, and be more likely to continue the conversation with you in future.

## 3 AVOID INTENSITY

A good time to bring things up can be while you're doing something else: perhaps when you're walking, cooking dinner, or on a car journey – not having to look at one another or focus on just one conversation can lessen the intensity and help thoughts flow more freely. Use opportunities – if they had a relationships education lesson that day, ask what it involved and continue the conversation from there.

## 4 'DISTANCE' THE CONVERSATION

Use someone else's experiences: soaps, dramas or book storylines, or a news story about a celebrity relationship can all be ways in to a discussion. Taking the spotlight off your child can help them think about their own values and choices without the added pressure of a situation being about them.

## **5** MODEL BEHAVIOUR

Consider your own behaviour, both with and in front of your children at home, and in your relationships with other people. It is confusing for children if you are discussing with them one way of behaving, but they are witnessing or experiencing the opposite. If you don't talk about relationships at all it could imply that they shouldn't be discussed, or don't matter.

## **6** LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGEMENT, BLAME OR SHAME

When you're talking, show that you are listening to what your child is saying, and try not to judge, shame, or dismiss their comments or questions. If they feel that you aren't interested, or don't take their opinions or questions seriously, they will be less likely to want to talk to you another time, or may feel confused about whether what they think or believe is 'right'.

However, if you do feel worried or concerned about anything they have shared, you could help them explore what might have influenced their thinking, or why they might feel that way. There are links to specialist organisations in the 'Resources' section if you need to know more, or have particular concerns.

## **7** CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES

Help your teen understand that the images and stereotypes they see around them are often used to sell a product or promote a certain lifestyle, and are not reflections of real life and experiences. Reassure them that dependable and healthy relationships come in different and diverse shapes, sizes and types, and that there is no 'normal'.

## IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN

- How has not seeing people face-to face affected your relationships? (*of all kinds - family, friendships, teachers etc.*)
- Have certain relationships been affected more than others? Why is that? How do you feel about that?
- What has helped keep friendships/relationships going even though you can't be together?
- What are the important things that keep a relationship going generally/make it a good one?

## HEALTHY, POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

- What words would you use to describe a healthy, positive relationship? (*e.g. kindness; feeling listened to; respect; honesty; mutual consent; sharing interests*)
- What makes a relationship a good one for the people in it? (*could discuss how it makes people feel and behave*)
- What is it about [a particular] relationship that makes it good for both of you? (*e.g. how it makes you both feel; what do you give to one another*)

## DEPENDABILITY AND COMMITMENT

Dependability in and commitment to a relationship will mean different things to different people. Considering questions about what a dependable relationship looks like can help form values around commitment.

- If a relationship is a 'dependable' one, what does that mean? (e.g. *how do you know if you can depend on someone?*)
- Which of your relationships are dependable? Why do you think that? What words would you use to describe 'commitment'? (*caring; focussed; wanting to do it; work*)
- What is your biggest commitment at the moment? How do you show commitment to it?
- How do people show commitment to one another?
- What influences the way you think about relationships and what you'd like for yourself?

## FUTURE RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY AMBITIONS

- What would make you feel ready to commit to a relationship in the future?
- What do you think people need to give to dependable/committed relationships? (e.g. *time, understanding, perseverance, trust*)
- What would be a 'red line' for you in a relationship that showed it wasn't dependable?
- What might having your own family look like for you? (*explore whether this means with or without children*)
- What would you want to feel or know before making decisions about creating a family?
- What do you think you'd want your own family relationships to be like?

# RESOURCES

Further guidance about healthy relationships, for both parents and young people, including where to seek help if needed:

- Brook: [www.brook.org.uk/topics/relationships/](http://www.brook.org.uk/topics/relationships/)
- Childline: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- The Centre for Emotional Health [www.emotionalhealth.org.uk](http://www.emotionalhealth.org.uk)
- FFLAG resources about LGBTQ+ young people (for parents & young people) <https://www.fflag.org.uk/resources/>
- Mental Health Foundation: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/nurturing-our-relationships-during-coronavirus-pandemic>
- NSPCC: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/>
- Women's Aid/links for young people: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/useful-links/#1448372815565-a55f2f9e-d763>
- Parentkind: [www.parentkind.org.uk/Parents/Free-learning-resources-for-children](http://www.parentkind.org.uk/Parents/Free-learning-resources-for-children)

Government publications – curriculum guidance and parent guide:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>
- [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/907640/RSE\\_secondary\\_schools\\_guide\\_for\\_parents.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907640/RSE_secondary_schools_guide_for_parents.pdf)

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