



# Student Health CONNECTION

A resource for school staff and teachers



## Healthy RELATIONSHIPS

Adolescence can be an exciting time of firsts. First day of high school. First time driving. First job. And for many teens, a first date. According to Canada's National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth **71% of respondents reported that they had dated by the age of 15.**

A romantic relationship can provide a setting in which social skills are both learned and tested and where adolescents gain important communication, negotiation and conflict management skills. Teens are also navigating how to be intimate and manage a range of emotions. These early relationships play a key role in the lives of youth and are important to developing the capacity for long-term, committed relationships into adulthood.

Given their importance and prevalence, romantic relationships should be a focus for teachers and the school community.

### The Importance of Promoting Healthy Relationships in Schools

As teens adjust to their changing bodies they may seek information from a variety of sources. This can include peers, the media, online and from trusted adults. Yet, the information they find may be incorrect or useless. When young people are given honest and accurate information from their teachers and parents, they can learn to make more responsible decisions.

School is often where adolescents form their identity through interactions with peers and develop expectations for relationships. Helping

students develop knowledge and social skills that improve their chances of experiencing positive relationships can contribute to a teen's overall health and wellbeing.

A romantic relationship can also have an effect on a student's education. Partners in a relationship have the potential to influence (both positively and negatively) students' career plans, aspirations and educational achievement. Adults can help reduce high risk behaviours and increase protective factors by helping young people engage in healthy relationships. For example, a teen that is in a healthy relationship is more likely to adopt healthy birth control and STI prevention measures as well as be assertive about their sexuality compared to a teen in an unhealthy relationship.

Finally, young people WANT more information on relationships. While friends have the most influence on dating choices, teens trust adults to provide the most accurate information. Young people don't automatically know what a healthy relationship looks like. Without a clear understanding of what makes a healthy relationship, youth are more likely to tolerate relationships that put them at risk. For instance, it could be easy for a teen to interpret constant text messaging and possessive behaviour as a sign of love rather than a warning sign for emotional or physical abuse.

**Teens need to be taught what a healthy relationship looks like, how to differentiate between a healthy and unhealthy relationship and how to seek help if needed.**

### What Emotional & Social Changes are Students Experiencing?

During the ages of 13 to 18, teens:

- Complete the physical, emotional and social changes of puberty
- Experience increased sexual feelings
- Desire physical closeness with a partner
- May face peer pressure to be sexually active whether or not s/he feels ready
- May change close friendships in favour of romantic relationships
- May make choices which lead to pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases
- May have to face violence in relationships (sexual harassment, acquaintance/date rape)

**During adolescence, most young people desire increased independence. There is a period of gradual maturation and separation from their families. During this time, friends, peers and teachers play an increasingly important role in the lives of teens.**

### Students Using the Internet for Relationship Advice

Approximately 1/5 of older students use the internet as a resource for information about sexuality and relationships, and to seek out anonymous opportunities to experiment flirtatious behaviour.

## Healthy Vs. Unhealthy Relationships

Every relationship is different. However, most unhealthy and abusive relationships have common issues around power and control. The following chart compares healthy and unhealthy relationships. Consider sharing this information with students or have it posted somewhere in the classroom.

# Healthy vs. Unhealthy Relationships

In a healthy relationship...	In an unhealthy relationship...
Power is shared	Power is unequal
Communication is in both directions	Communication is in one direction
You listen to each other	Listening is in one direction
There is respect	Respect may be absent
There is trust	Trust is absent
Both people are confident and allowed to have his/her own opinion	One person is aggressive and dictates opinion
Both people have positive self-esteem	There is low self-esteem in one or both people
There is communication of feelings and needs openly	There is an inability to communicate feelings and needs without fear
<b>There is negotiation</b>	<b>One person has control over the other</b>

## Unhealthy Relationships

Just like adults, unhealthy behaviours in teen relationships are not just physical, but can also be emotional and sexual.

### Physical Abuse

Physical abuse can be described as any intentional use of physical force with the intent to cause fear or injury, like hitting, shoving, biting, choking, kicking or using a weapon.

While girls are more likely to report incidences of physical abuse, some research suggests that boys experience equal or more acts of physical aggression in relationships. As adult allies, it is important for teachers and parents to realize that anyone can be a victim of relationship abuse.

### Emotional Abuse

Psychological abuse attacks someone emotionally or verbally using threats, insults, constant monitoring, humiliation, intimidation, isolation or stalking.

One Canadian study revealed that almost two thirds of youth respondents had experienced some kind of psychological violence, defined as insults, threats and controlling behaviour:

### Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse can be described as any action that impacts a person's ability to control their sexual activity or the circumstances in which sexual activity occurs, including rape, coercion or restricting access to birth control.

Studies of youth dating relationships reveal disturbingly high rates of emotional, physical and sexual aggression. Dating violence in adolescence may set the stage for continued abuse in adult relationships.

**The first step in countering relationship abuse is acknowledging its existence, and openly challenging the acceptance of abuse in intimate relationships.**

## Warning Signs of Relationship Abuse

Victims of relationship abuse may show the following signs; however it is important to recognize that these can indicate other issues as well:

- Physical signs of injury
- Missing school or a decline in attainment
- Changes in behaviour, mood and personality; becoming withdrawn and passive
- Bullying/being bullied
- Isolation from family and friends
- Inappropriate sexual behaviour, language or attitudes
- Self-harm, eating disorders, problems with sleeping

Other warning signs may not be observable to others and only identifiable by those in the relationship. If a student comes to you for relationship advice keep in mind that the following behaviours

<sup>1</sup> Wood, E., Senn, C. Y., Desmarais, S., Park, L., & Verberg, N. (2002). Sources of information about dating and their perceived influence on adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 17*(4), 401-417.

may indicate an unhealthy and potentially abusive (emotional, sexual and/or physical) relationship and/or partner :

- Checking cell phones, emails or social networks without permission
- Constant belittling or put-downs
- Making false accusations
- Physically inflicting pain or hurt in any way
- Telling someone what to do
- Extreme jealousy or insecurity
- Explosive temper
- Erratic mood swings
- Possessiveness
- Repeatedly pressuring someone to have sex

<sup>2</sup> Sears, H. & Byers, S. (2010). Adolescent girls' and boys' experiences of psychologically, physically, and sexually aggressive behaviors in their dating relationships: Co-occurrence and emotional reaction. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 19*, 517-539.

## How Can You Help?

All members of the school community - staff, peers and parents have important roles in preventing dating violence and promoting healthy relationship behaviours. Involving students can help make the issues relevant for them. There are a variety of different ways that your school can support students in developing healthy relationships and avoiding abuse.

### Healthy School Policy

Ensure that all school staff are aware of the reporting policies and procedures in regards to relationship abuse. It is unlikely that a teen experiencing dating violence will disclose this information, and if they do it will likely be to a friend. For that reason, efforts should be made to promote a clear way for students to support their friend(s) if they suspect they are being abused in any way.

### Teaching and Learning

Healthy relationships and dating violence can be covered in parts of the curriculum. Lessons could include information about the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships and challenge the idea that relationship abuse (physical, emotional and sexual) is "normal". Many successful programs that currently exist focus on positive relationship skills, such as communication and conflict resolution techniques.

### Social and Physical Environments

It is important to make sure that you have established a safe space so students feel comfortable. One way to accomplish this is by allowing students to take part in setting some agreement and norms, or ground rules, before starting a sensitive discussion or lesson on relationships.

Physical changes could include posting information about where students can seek help or providing a safe space where students can discuss concerns with a trusted staff member.

### Partnerships & Services

Discussing healthy relationships and potentially abusive situations can sometimes be a challenging topic. Be aware of what community services are available to schools and students.

## Who Can Help Locally?

- S.T.A.R. (Stop Abuse in Relationships) Counsellors are available for all students in every secondary school in Haldimand & Norfolk who:
  - o Have witnessed abuse
  - o Have experienced abuse in a dating relationship, either as the victim or as the abuser
  - o Have been a victim of sexual assault / abuse
  - o Have experienced other forms of abuse in dating or peer relationships, e.g. bullying, harassment
  - o Want information and help to support a friend in an abusive situation

Information about your school's S.T.A.R. Counsellor should be available in your Guidance Office

- Your School's Public Health Nurse. See below to find out who is part of your school health team. You can also visit our website at: <http://hnhu.org/health-topics/healthy-schools/>

- Haldimand Norfolk REACH

## Looking for More?

The Fourth R is a group of researchers and professionals, in Ontario, dedicated to promoting healthy adolescent relationships and reducing risk behaviours. They work with schools, parents, and community organizations to promote the neglected "R" (for Relationships) and help build this Fourth R in school climates. Visit their website for resources, training opportunities and to purchase the Fourth R curriculum: <https://youthrelationships.org/>



<sup>3</sup> <http://www.breakthecycle.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Fourth R: Skills for Youth Relationships, Safe Dates Project and Youth Relationships Project



## Your School Health Team

Public Health Nurse	Health Promoter	School
Melanie Holjak Ruth Ann Shoemaker	Josh Daley	Simcoe Composite School Waterford District Secondary School
Frances DeBoer	Josh Daley Nicole Stone	Hagersville Secondary School McKinnon Park Secondary School
Terri Hartwick	Nicole Stone	Cayuga Secondary School Dunnville Secondary School
Sabine Murphy	Jennifer Dahl Josh Daley	Delhi District Secondary School Holy Trinity Catholic School
Gillian Raffay	Jennifer Dahl	Valley Heights Secondary

Community Sexual Health Services are available in various locations throughout Haldimand and Norfolk counties including Caledonia, Dunnville, Langton and Simcoe.

We provide:

- Birth control counselling and low cost birth control
- Pregnancy testing and referral
- Emergency contraceptive pills (Plan B)
- Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI)/HIV testing
- Cervical screening
- Sexuality/sexual orientation information
- Needle Syringe Program

Appointments preferred. Contact 519-426-6170 or 905-318-6623 Ext. 3225 to book an appointment



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