

Realtalk Conversation Starter Cards

DISCUSSION GUIDE & NEXT STEPS MANUAL

This tool was created for parents and adults that work with young people to start a dialogue about healthy relationships with the youth in their lives. Adults can help young people establish healthy boundaries in their relationships by role modeling positive behavior and by talking with them about abuse and healthy relationships. According to a 2009 study conducted by Liz Claiborne, there is a disconnect between what parents report they are doing and what teens are experiencing.

“Despite the fact that parents say they are talking to their children about abuse, two in three daughters surveyed (66 percent) say they have **not** had a conversation with their parents about dating abuse in the last year. Four in five parents surveyed (82 percent) feel confident that they could recognize the signs if their child was experiencing dating abuse, but more than half (58 percent) could not correctly identify all the warning signs of abuse.”

The questions on these realltalk cards are open ended questions designed to help adults and parents begin one of many conversations with youth in their personal and professional lives. While **there is not one right answer to any of these questions**, it is our hope that the following recommended talking points will assist adults in helping youth shape healthy relationship norms for themselves.

Card #1: Texting

Is it OK for your BF/GF to look at your text messages?

Help youth understand that just because you are in relationship that does not mean that you do not have a right to privacy. Healthy relationships are based on equality, open communication, and respect for one another’s personal boundaries. This means you have a right to keep personal things like your cell phone, journal, or passwords to different social media websites like Facebook to yourself. This does not mean you don’t care about the person you are in a relationship with – it simply means that you also have a right to privacy that you shouldn’t have to give up because you are in a relationship.

How do you feel if they look (at your text messages)?

Often young people may respond by saying “I wouldn’t care because I have nothing to hide.” Not wanting your partner to read your text messages does not mean you have something to hide. Encourage young people to think about what their partner’s need is to see the text messages in the first place. Is it that they feel insecure? Are they attempting to control them? Do they not trust them? Ask youth where trust comes from and if this is a way to build trust or perpetuate suspicion. Ask follow up questions and educate them on the warning signs of dating violence. Ultimately we want youth to understand that looking at your text messages or coercing you to share your text messages is unhealthy behavior that could be an indicator of an abusive partner.

Is it OK for you to look at theirs? How do you feel if they don't let you?

Relationship norms for teen relationships often include excessive jealousy, possessiveness, manipulation, lack of trust, dramatic outbursts, and frequent arguments. These unhealthy norms are often reinforced in the media (ex. reality TV shows, movies, cartoons). As caregivers we can help young people analyze and unlearn these unhealthy norms. Encourage youth to examine their feelings about a partner not wanting to them to see their texts. Is it because they do not trust them? Do they feel insecure? Explore the underlying issue.

Card #2: Love

How does someone show you they love you?

For this one, encourage teens to talk freely about what they want or expect in a loving relationship -- "they're interested in what I have to say", "they take my feelings into consideration when making plans", etc. -- in terms of positive displays of respect and affection. As discussed above, some young people may give answers based on expectations of excessive jealousy, a lack of trust, possessiveness, etc. Work with them to show why displays of love that are respectful and considerate are healthier. For example, if a teen says someone shows you they love you by "getting jealous when you hang out with friends", follow up and ask how it makes them feel if their partner gets mad every time they want to hang out with a friend. Again, this is a great chance to educate them on the warning signs of an abusive relationship. This could also be a good opportunity to explore if their current relationship has these aspects.

Is there ever a good reason to break up with someone you love?

Again, this question is a good chance to get at the warning signs of an abusive relationship -- e.g., what if that person started calling you names or putting you down? What if they wanted you to stop seeing your best friends? What if they started texting you every few minutes to see where you are and what you're doing? What if they threatened to share private pictures? Looking at it from another angle, it's also a good place to discuss what reasonable things to compromise about in a relationship are and what their "dealbreakers" might be. Encourage teens to think critically about their expectations and to draw their own lines. Knowing what their boundaries are ahead of time can help youth see if they begin to comprise too much.

Card #3: Trust

How does someone show you they trust you?

Encourage teens to talk about their expectations of a trusting relationship. Everyone has slightly different definitions of trust but it's important to emphasize that trust is important in every relationship. Honesty and consistency of behavior are good indicators of trust. Ask youth what they think are

appropriate ways to act when one is in a relationship. If their partner is acting inappropriately, can they express their feelings about this and will their partner consider their perspective?

Everyone should be able to spend time away from one another without feelings of suspicion or jealousy and every person has a right to their own privacy. This could mean spending time alone or with friends, texting a friend without feeling as if someone else will read it later or having a private conversation you don't want others to hear. The best way for a partner to show their trust for you is to allow you to make your own decisions (trusting your judgment) and allow you to spend time apart without criticism. If a partner is domineering, always checking on your whereabouts, constantly calling/texting you or acting upset when you choose to spend time apart, you may find yourself in an unhealthy relationship. If you feel as if he/she does not trust you, it's important to communicate these feelings and explain that this mistrust could damage your relationship. If your partner does not feel the need to recognize your feelings, it may be time to re-evaluate what you value in a relationship.

Can you have a relationship without trust?

Trust is a major cornerstone of a relationship. If someone trusts you, they also respect you and have faith that you can make good decisions. Without trust, any relationship struggles. If a partner is untrusting, suspicions and criticisms can happen more frequently. Both of these negative aspects can potentially damage or destroy a relationship. Stable and healthy relationships are always built on trust.

How does it feel when someone betrays your trust?

Ask youth to think of anecdotes where they felt their trust was betrayed. Use these stories to educate about the warning signs. When someone betrays your trust, it is normal to feel upset, hurt and uneasy about your relationship. It is also important to use these feelings in a positive manner. If you feel this person's action cannot be mended, you must communicate this to him/her. If you feel this was a minor action, explain to him/her why it hurt you and what he/she can do to make amends. Sometimes a person will use their partner's past mistakes against them. This is not healthy either. One partner messing up does not give the other person the right to treat them poorly. If you truly feel it is something you cannot forgive and then let go of, you may need to consider moving on from the relationship.

Card #4: Jealousy

When does jealousy become excessive?

Jealousy can become excessive when the other person in the relationship experiences frequent or intense feelings of fear or worry that the other person is going to end the relationship or be unfaithful. Jealousy can come in the form of control; it can cause a person to experience paranoia and can even lead to violence. Jealousy can cause low self esteem, depression and other social and emotional concerns.

What does jealousy look like?

Some signs of excessive jealousy are:

- Isolation
- Distancing from family and friends to make the other person in the relationship happy
- Needing to know where the other person is at all times
- Not respecting partner's privacy (i.e. checking partner's facebook, phone and e-mail)
- Convincing the other that they are not worthy of anyone else's attention
- Controlling another person's choices such as what they wear, what activities they participate in, what music/movies they like etc.
- Making personal choices out of fear of upsetting your partner
- Withholding positive affirmations or affection as a form of control

How do you handle jealousy?

The first thing to know about handling jealousy is that a small amount of jealousy is normal and can protect a person; it can act as a signal that something is not right. Secondly, it is important that each person takes responsibility for their own feelings of jealousy and does not blame the other person for how they are feeling. In a healthy relationship, a partner can realize if their feelings of jealousy are unfounded and work through them on their own instead of asking their partner to modify their behavior. If you feel that jealousy is excessive there are some things you can do:

- Consider where the information is coming from before acting, making sure a source is reliable. If you believe someone else over your partner, you may want to ask yourself if you trust your partner.
- Evaluate the openness of communication; oftentimes jealousy can be a misinterpretation of information.
- Seek support from family, friends or a trusted adult.
- Tell the other person how you are feeling.

69% of teens think jealousy is a sign of love. What do you think?

There are many ways to show love, but jealousy is not one of them. Jealousy is a sign of insecurity or a lack of trust. Love is genuine care and concern about what is best for your partner, and trusting their ability to decide that for themselves. If they are truly making unhealthy choices for themselves, know that you cannot change another person. If you have brought up your unease with your partner, and they do not agree, it becomes time to evaluate if the relationship is healthy for you.

Love can be shown by trusting a person, respecting a person for who they are including their differences, and accepting the other people who are in a person's life such as friends and family. Love should not decrease a person's self-esteem or leave one with more negative feelings than positive ones. Making someone feel good about themselves and celebrating when things go right for another person is a healthier way to show love.

Card #5: Healthy Relationships

The answers to these questions can differ greatly within the realm of a healthy relationship. The important thing is for teens to think critically about what is important to them and where their ideas about relationships come from. Also, trust your gut and your own experience and education when talking with youth.

What are three things you look for in a relationship?

Encourage teens to talk openly and honestly about what they want from dating relationships. As they talk, keep the warning signs of dating violence in mind and caution them about controlling behaviors. Some healthy examples of things to look for are:

- Trust: for both people in the relationship to have trust for each other
- Open communication where each person does not feel threatened in any way to speak to other, and knows that no judgment will be passed. When they disagree, to be able speak respectfully and openly to one another. Finally, find a middle ground where both are willing to sacrifice to make the relationship work.
- Empathy for one another: treat your partner the way you would like to be treated

What does a healthy relationship look like?

Again, answers to this will vary, but here are some standards. A healthy relationship looks and feels like an equal partnership. Decisions are made by respectfully communicating with each other, even about simple things. People cannot read each other's minds, so it is necessary to communicate feelings, wants and needs (and not expect your partner to read your mind, or get angry when they do not). Each partner should be able to be themselves, and should support and encourage the other in their goals. A healthy relationship can be two people that support each other to the fullest and bring the best out in each other. They are each other's cheerleaders and are committed to each other. No human being is perfect and everyone makes mistakes. A willingness to stand by your partner and work through struggles with respect is necessary. This does not mean you stay with someone who is being abusive.

Is it easier to see if someone else's relationship is unhealthy? Why or why not?

Even adults find it easier to notice unhealthiness in someone else's relationship, because we are not embedded in it. Things are clearer when we are viewing them from outside. A bystander can often recognize the warning signs more easily, including: a person who is constantly stressed about their partner; not wanting to go home to the partner because they are afraid; having secrets about money, people they spoke to or where they have been; or telling others to lie about their whereabouts. Perhaps the friend has become distanced from friends and family, or only connects with them in secret; or perhaps a person doesn't seem to be as active as they used to be and has lost interest in things they used to enjoy.

It is vital that teens know the signs of abuse, so that if a friend reaches out they can take them seriously and offer assistance.

Card #6: Breaking Up

What would make you break up with someone? Is there anything your partner could do that would cause you to “be done”?

Suggest that young people brainstorm their own ideas and standards. Every person has different reasons but this is another opportunity to educate youth on teen dating violence. Some reasons that should make any person evaluate their relationships are:

- If a partner is too controlling. He/she is always asking where you are going, who you are with, what you will be doing. He/she wants to read all your text messages or see who you have talked with on the phone. He/she makes you feel guilty for wanting to spend time with your friends and family. He/she does not want you talking to or hanging out with certain people. He/she thinks you should be together all the time. While these actions may seem romantic, they show that he/she does not trust or respect your feelings. If you feel your partner is negatively interfering with your other relationships, you should communicate this with him/her.
- If a partner betrays your trust. Depending on the situation, this could quickly destroy a relationship. If someone betrays your trust, he/she is not thinking about your feelings or respecting your trust. Partners should consider each other’s feelings, as well as their own, in making decisions.
- If a partner is pressuring you. Of course, pressure is present in all different types and forms. A partner could pressure you to see a movie you didn’t want to see or go shopping if you want to go to the beach. It’s necessary for both partners to compromise, but sometimes boyfriends/girlfriends can go too far. If someone is pressuring you do something you are not comfortable with (i.e. drinking, smoking, doing drugs, engaging in sexual activity, lying to your parents or friends, sending sexy pictures and videos) this could damage a relationship. These types of actions are disrespectful towards your feelings and are unhealthy.
- If a partner is violent towards you. If someone really loves you, they will never be violent towards you. Hitting, punching, shoving, kicking, biting, calling names, and throwing objects are all forms of violence and cannot be tolerated in healthy relationships.

What are some respectful ways to break up with someone?

The most respectful way to break up with someone is to be honest and direct. The best way to do it is in person, face to face, rather than over the phone, through a friend, Facebook message or text message. By speaking with someone in person, he/she will see that although you may want to end the relationship with him/her, you still respect him/her as a person and care about his/her feelings. The next step is to be honest. Try to explain to your partner how you feel and why you do not think the relationship can continue. Honesty is always the best policy and it can help both of you grow in the future. Break-ups are never easy or fun to do but sometimes they are necessary. If handled with respect and honesty, you may be able to preserve a friendship instead of just ending a relationship.

Card #7: Friends and Family

How do you balance time with your friends and time with your partner?

People depend on all kinds of relationships – strong friendships and relationships with siblings and parents, as well as romantic relationships. Being in a romantic relationship can be exciting and huge fun. But it can also easily slip into a place where two people get so wrapped up in the relationship that they forget that all of their relationships are important. Healthy dating relationships should support your other relationships. It is perfectly okay to say no to a date with a partner in order to spend time with your friends and family. A strong and healthy relationship will survive periods of separation. In fact, it may actually make your relationship stronger and healthier when you and your partner enjoy the company of others.

Have you ever lost a friend because of their relationship?

Friendship is all about supporting and helping one another to have the kind of life that each envisions for themselves. Friends support each other's decisions, including who they become romantically involved with. When friends lose connection because of a dating relationship, it's important to really think about why that friendship is losing ground. It may be because you are jealous of your friend's partner. In that case, you need to think about what is best for your friend and support them. On the other hand, it may be the opposite. It may be that your friend's partner is jealous and controlling. In that case, your friend probably needs, more than ever, you to reach out and help.

Would you break up with someone if your friends and family didn't approve of your relationship? Why or why not?

In the same way, family members need to support who you become romantically involved with. If they have objections, consider what they are. If your family comes from a close knit culture, are they weary of people from different cultures? If this is the case, ask them to give your partner a chance. On the other hand, if they are questioning his character, this may be about your partner and not your family. A general consensus among family and friends should be taken seriously. What if everyone else is seeing something you are not? The expression "love is blind" may be coming into play here. What if you are so star-struck by your new partner that you are not noticing some unhealthy behaviors in them? In that case, maybe the people who love you most are also the best indicators of your relationship.

Card #8: Bystander

Have you ever thought a friend was in an unhealthy relationship? What made you think that?

This is an opportunity to discuss warning signs and give positive encouragement if the teen has already identified some warning signs in a friend's relationship. It may also lead to a discussion about what a healthy relationship looks like, and how the lines between healthy and unhealthy can get blurred.

If the young person seems really hesitant to discuss this, it may be because he/she has a specific friend in an abusive relationship. It would be helpful to outline ahead of time what you would do with the information if the answer is “yes”. It may feel safer for the teen if there is no pressure to use names and identify the friend. If the answer is “yes” and you know who the friend is, resist the urge to step in and “solve” the problem by calling the friend’s parents or the school. Instead, you can brainstorm the following questions with the teen to figure out the next course of action.

What could you do if you thought a friend was being abused? What if you thought a friend was being abusive? When would you intervene?

This is an opportunity to discuss options for bystander action, such as telling a trusted adult, providing support and information to the friend, or calling the police if they witness a situation becoming violent. It is also important to talk about not being judgmental of the friend who is being abused. There are many reasons someone may stay in an abusive relationship, but no one ever deserves to be treated that way, and continuing to be in the relationship does not mean the victim is to blame for the abuse. It is also important to stress that “intervening” does not mean getting into the middle of a physical altercation. Personal safety needs to be part of the discussion. A common response (especially among boys) is that they would beat up the abusive partner. That can lead to a conversation about the possible consequences of that choice and what some good non-violent options could be instead.

Card #9: Sexual Activity

Is sexual activity expected when you’re in a relationship? Does sexual activity complicate a relationship?

Help youth understand that sex is just one part of a whole relationship. Therefore, sexual activity is not necessarily expected when two people are in a relationship and should not be confused with intimacy. Choosing to be in a sexual relationship is a big decision. Two people can love each other very much without having sex. There are many ways to express care for another person without engaging in sexual activities. Encourage youth to think of other ways to show affection for another person -- i.e., listening to each other, sharing stories with one another, doing activities together like going to the movies or the park, and acts of physical affection such as holding hands, hugging or giving massages.

In terms of sexual activity complicating a relationship, talk with teens about how hormones are released during sex which may increase feelings for a partner. These feelings may affect their ability to think clearly about the healthiness of the relationship.

Let young people know that if they do choose to engage in sexual activity, one way to show love and respect for their partner is to practice safe sex. You can show respect and love by protecting your partner from unplanned pregnancies and STIs, and they should show respect and love for you in the same way!

Finally, let youth know that they can agree to participate in some sexual activity without having intercourse. There are degrees of sexual activity, and just because a person is comfortable with some of

them, does not mean they need to engage in all sexual activities. In the same way, just because someone consented to a sexual activity once does not mean that they have to consent to it every time, or ever again. Consent to sexual activity should be voluntary, sober, enthusiastic, wanted, informed, mutual, and honest.

How do you communicate about sexual activity with your partner?

For this question, help youth to understand that sexual activity is a big responsibility. While it is a way to express love and gain closeness, it is also a big step that can cause complications and possibly end a relationship if there is not enough communication. In a healthy relationship, both partners feel comfortable expressing what they want and their sexual boundaries are respected. Neither partner is afraid or pressured into doing things sexually that they are not ready for, are uncomfortable doing or do not actively desire.

Sexual activity can have many negative consequences that need to be considered beforehand. Engage youth by asking them what they think these consequences could be, such as unwanted pregnancy and STIs. It is very important that both people in the relationship are aware of these consequences before participating in sexual activity. Suggest that youth ask their partner if they have been tested for STIs before engaging in sex, or get tested together. If they do not feel comfortable asking this of their partner, ask if they are truly ready for sex with that person. Also talk about everything pregnancy entails: while children are obviously not inherently negative, having one before you are mentally and physically ready to care for one can affect a number of lives.

Finally, the reality in many schools is that having sex will also affect what others say about you and how they perceive you. Discuss the double standard that it is ok for guys to have sex with a number of partners but girls are looked down upon for doing so, or get a reputation for being “easy”.

How would you tell your partner if you don't want to engage in sexual activity?

Ensure that youth know communication is an integral part of any relationship. If one expresses that he/she cannot communicate with his/her partner or he/she is afraid to voice his/her opinion, this is a great opportunity to discuss the warning signs of an abusive relationship. Otherwise, encourage teens to be honest with their partners about sexual activity. They may be inclined to only discuss the positive aspects of sexual activity, but it is just as important (or more important) to discuss the negative consequences. The most stable relationship is an honest and open one. If a teen wants to tell his/her partner he/she is not comfortable engaging in sexual activity, encourage this communication. Explain that this is a perfectly normal feeling and it is important to discuss these feelings with your partner. Phrases like “I don't feel comfortable” or “I'm not ready” are perfectly acceptable and a good partner will respect this decision. There are many other ways to show love and have fun together. If a student is feeling pressured to do something they do not want to do, this is another red flag of an unhealthy relationship. One should always feel completely comfortable in a relationship and never pressured to do something before they are ready.

Card #10: Conflict

What are some ways people deal with conflict in a relationship? Are some of these ways healthier than others? How can you remain respectful when emotions are running high?

All relationships experience conflict. It is not whether we experience conflict, but how we deal with it that matters. In fact, when each person listens to the other's perspective with openness and a lack of judgment, the feelings of closeness a couple shares can increase. Beneficial ways of dealing with conflict include communication using "I" statements where each person takes responsibility for their feelings and reactions without blaming the other person. Detrimental ways of dealing with conflict include put-downs, yelling and other types of abuse that come from a place of anger, rather than a desire to resolve the situation. It is often difficult to be respectful and listen when you are feeling emotional. Taking a break from the argument and talking about it at a later time when things have "cooled off" usually makes it easier to discuss the issue in a considerate way. However, giving someone the silent treatment or ignoring them is not healthy behavior. The critical difference is letting someone know that you need time to calm down, and when you will return home or call them to finish the conversation. When a break is taken in this way, it is a mature decision that respects both partners' needs. Sometimes, when they come back together, they may find they are no longer upset and that what they were arguing about is no longer important.

Have you ever kept your opinion to yourself to avoid a conflict? Why or why not? How did it make you feel?

There is a delicate balance of learning what is important to share in a relationship and what is not. It is not necessary, and we should not be expected to, share our every thought, feeling, hope and desire with our partner. A good indicator can be asking ourselves why we want to share the information. For example, do we want to say that we find another person attractive to make our partner jealous? This is something that is probably better kept to ourselves. On the other hand, if we want to share our hopes for our future or how we felt in a particular situation, we should feel we can communicate this without fear of judgment or condemnation.

Also, timing may be important here as well. If you have something difficult to discuss, ask your partner when they will be able to give you their full attention. For example, don't catch them off guard by bringing it up over text while they are taking a test.

This question may be a good way to introduce the concept of double standards. Does one person make all the decisions in the relationship? Is one partner "prohibited" from activities the other can take part in? Are there equal expectations for each partner? In an equitable relationship, both partners get to express preferences and opinions, and both are considered in the decision making process.