

## Tips for Girls: Building Healthy, Equal Relationships

Whether you're hanging out with friends or wondering what it would be like to go out with someone, there's a lot to learn about relationships. Every girl has to decide what she wants to be and what relationships she wants to have. When people are in healthy relationships, they feel valued, respected, and treated like equals. Both girls and boys need to be in relationships that feel good. Below are some tips to help you have healthy relationships:

**You're Worth It!** Feel good about yourself and about being a girl. This is the first step to having healthy relationships.

**Expect Respect.** Everyone deserves to be treated as an equal and with respect.

**girlFRIEND.** The word "friend" is there for a reason. Friends listen to each other. They care about each other. Expect people you go out with to treat you like a real friend. They should like you for who you are.

**Express your thoughts and feelings.** You should be listened to and taken seriously.

**Ups and Downs.** It's normal to feel hurt or angry sometimes, but in a healthy relationship, people don't yell or call each other names. Things can be worked out through talking and listening to each other.

**Do your thing.** Going out with someone is great but that doesn't mean you have to be together all of the time. You need your own space and your own interests.

**Be aware.** Did you know that girls are more likely to be abused by someone they know - like a boyfriend - than by a stranger? If you feel uncomfortable, trust your instincts and do what you can to change the situation. Hang out with friends you trust, leave when you feel unsafe, or call your parents or someone you can rely on.

**Danger Zone!** Some girls think that if a boy ever hits them, they'd be able to leave him. But a boy doesn't usually start hitting his girlfriend out of the blue. He may start by telling you how to dress and do your hair. He may get really jealous and try to separate you from your friends. He may insult you, yell, or break things. Watch out for these warning signs of abuse. If any of these things happen, you can talk to an adult you trust or call a Kids Help Phone.

**The truth is,** even though times have changed, girls aren't always treated equally. Boys might get better sports equipment, get better paying jobs, or have more career options. Some people believe girls can't or shouldn't do certain things, just because they're girls. Speak up if you think someone is treating you unfairly because you're a girl. You have a right to be treated as an equal.

**Get the word out.** Talk to your friends about healthy equal relationships and share these tips with them. Learn more about the issue by doing a project on violence in relationships. Talk to your teacher about arranging a guest speaker to come to your school. Get involved in positive events in your community. Remind your girlfriends that they're smart and can do anything they put their minds to!

To find out more about healthy equal relationships and violence against women and girls, visit:  
[www.equalityrules.ca](http://www.equalityrules.ca) | [www.ontariowomensdirectoriate.gov.on.ca](http://www.ontariowomensdirectoriate.gov.on.ca)

For more help and advice call the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or visit: [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

## Activities for Parents: Building Healthy, Equal Relationships

As a parent/guardian, you can be the biggest influence in your child's life. Communicate values and beliefs that will help your son or daughter build healthy relationships free from violence. You can make a difference that will last a lifetime.

**Learn about the issues.** It will help you talk with your kids. Learn about what healthy and equal relationships are and how to build respect, trust, and friendship. Show them that being in relationships where people are treated like equals feels great.

**Play RePlay with them.** You can ask them to show you how to play and watch what they do. You can ask them to help you make choices in the game. Use RePlay to start a discussion with them. Don't worry if you lose or don't do as well as you'd like - you can play again!

**It's never too early.** Talk to your children about healthy relationships before they start dating or going out. Fight stereotypes about "real men" and "real women" with positive ideas about opportunities for everyone. Show that girls are as valuable as boys by treating your kids fairly. You can give chores by age instead of gender. If your 12-year-old daughter has to do laundry, the same rule would apply to your son when he turns 12.

**Keep communicating.** The more often you bring up the issues, the more comfortable your kids will be talking with you. Find ways and times to discuss the attitudes and behaviours that lead to healthy equal relationships. Discuss what you see on TV, the internet, and in movies - ask them to think about healthy and unhealthy relationships they've come across in the media themselves.

**Create the space.** Make an open and safe place for your son or daughter to talk about relationships. Try to always listen to what they say and answer their questions. Talk with them instead of talking to them. Ask questions like, "What kind of person would make a good girlfriend or boyfriend?" and "How do you show someone you like them?" Try to listen patiently, ask questions, and let them share what their ideas.

**Get interested.** Find out about the music, videos, TV shows, magazines, websites, and video games your kids like. Find out about their favourite activities (e.g. sports, games, clubs) and try to visit their favourite places (e.g. community centres). Your kids will know that you care about their life. Tell them that they can hang out with their friends in your home. You'll learn more about what they're dealing with and what they learn about relationships.

**Set an example.** Show your kids how to have a healthy relationship and show them how conflicts with friends and family can be solved through respectful discussion. Parents can feel stressed out and at their limit. The constant needs children have can overwhelm them. Even the most loving parent can make a mistake and lash out at their child with words or actions. But parents can learn to listen to their children and think about what they say. Treat your child with respect so they'll learn to respect others. Try not to call them names, put them down, or hit or beat them. It won't help them understand and it makes things worse. Any abuse and violence hurts and can teach kids the wrong things.

**Important:** anybody in your home may not respect the best interest of your child and can abuse them emotionally, physically, or sexually. It doesn't matter how well you know them. Talk to your children about inappropriate touching, actions, and secrets. Let them know that you will always listen to their fears and hopes. If you know or even suspect that your child is being abused, please get help immediately. You can make an anonymous call to your local children's aid society and they'll give you information to help you decide how to protect yourself and your child.

**Practice makes perfect.** Your kids can learn how to deal with difficult things before they happen. What will your daughter do if she feels pressure to have sex? What will your son do if he feels pushed to control or disrespect girls? Come up with real examples with your kids and work with them to figure out how they can respond.

**Work with your sons and daughters.** Both boys and girls learn gender stereotypes that make women and men seem unequal. That can lead to abuse and violence when they grow up. Show your sons and daughters that it's great for men to be sensitive and for women to be independent. Teach your children that boys and girls are of equal value.

**Watch out!** Look for the warning signs that your teen is in an abusive relationship. Get to know who they're dating by inviting them home. Pay attention to how your teen and her/his boyfriend or girlfriend act. Watch for controlling or mean behaviour, criticism, and jealousy. Pay attention to your teen's behaviour. Some girls who are in unhealthy relationships get anxious, quiet, depressed, or feel bad about themselves. They can stop doing the things they love. Some boys who are in an unhealthy relationship get angry easily, unpredictable, or moody.

**Know what to do.** If you think your son or daughter might be in an abusive relationship, don't be afraid to talk to them about it. Tell them that you're worried and let them know that you're there to help them. Ask how they feel about their relationship and listen without judgment. Focus on your child's feelings. If they don't want to talk to you, help them to find another trusted adult. Provide them with other places they can go, like confidential counselling services and numbers for crisis lines.

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Check out these books:

- "The Single Mother's Book" (2nd edition), Joan Anderson, 2004, Peachtree Publishers
- "HomeWise: A Guide to Build Better Relationships between Youth and Parents", City of Toronto Public Health Drug Abuse Prevention Program

## Tips for Adult Mentors: Building Healthy, Equal Relationships

Relationships can be complicated, especially for teens and pre-teens. There are many people who influence what youth learn about relationships - parents, friends, teachers, coaches, movie stars, older siblings, and others. And there are many factors that influence them as well, such as movies, the internet, music videos, magazines, TV, school, religious institutions, and more.

As a mentor, you understand that youth need positive role models. Whether you are a coach, youth worker, scout leader, camp counsellor, or teacher, you have a role to play in helping young people build the confidence and critical thinking skills they need to have healthy, equal relationships. You can make a difference that will last a lifetime.

**Influence the youth you work with.** Lead by example. Demonstrate your ability to resolve conflict in a calm, rational way without yelling or name-calling. Show youth what it means to treat women and girls with respect. Value what women and girls have to say by listening to them and taking them seriously. Treat all boys and girls as equals who are just as promising and smart. Expect the best from all of them and help them achieve it.

**Make it safe.** Create an environment where girls and boys are treated like equals. Treat children in an equitable, respectful manner and help them to treat each other in the same way. Provide both girls and boys with equal and diverse opportunities and responsibilities, such as leaning about cars, playing sports, doing art or music, nurturing younger children, cooking, and cleaning up.

**It's never too early.** Youth are exposed to complicated social issues and problems at an early age, whether or not we want them to be. They need your guidance to develop attitudes and behaviours that will help them to have healthy, equal relationships before they start dating. You can talk to younger children about the importance of treating their friends as equals.

**Both boys and girls need guidance.** Talk to both boys and girls about healthy, equal relationships. Teach girls that they have the right to be treated fairly and as equals. Teach boys that girls are equal and deserve to be treated that way. Replace the harmful messages about what it means to be a "real man" and "real woman" with positive messages about the many opportunities available to all boys and girls.

**Keep communicating about it.** Look for opportunities to engage boys and girls in conversations about equal relationships. Turn every-day activities into learning opportunities. Talk about the lyrics of song they like and figure out together what they are saying about diverse women, men, and relationships. Help them articulate what's positive and ask them to critique what's negative. Have them draw pictures or cut them out from magazines and discuss whether or not they show women and men of all backgrounds as equals. You'll find that they have a lot to say about relationships and stereotypes.

**Active Learning.** Engage youth in exercises that will build skills they need to have healthy, equal relationships, like how to deal with angry or hurt feelings. Remember, it's not just about "anger management"; it's about challenging how society has taught them how to react to things. Encourage both girls and boys to participate in activities that provide them with outlets for their emotions such as music, art, writing, and sports. Create opportunities for them to practice resolving conflicts in a respectful, non-violent manner. Help the youth work together to create a code of conduct for your classroom or organization. Work with a group of youth to develop skits that deal with issues of abuse or comedic sketches that illustrate stereotyping ideas about men and women. These activities allow young people to explore these issues through creative learning.

**Spread the word.** Tell everyone you know that they can prevent violence against women and girls by promoting equality and mutual respect. Share these tips with your colleagues and friends. Talk about why you think it is so important to help youth break free from harmful ideas about men and women and develop the skills to have healthy relationships - it could save their lives. Organize an awareness event during Sexual Assault Prevention Month in May and Wife Assault Prevention Month in November.

**Keep your eyes and ears open.** Look for warning signs that may indicate a young person is in an abusive situation. Ask them about their relationship and listen for indicators of controlling behaviour, criticism, and jealousy. Pay attention to changes in the young person's behaviour. Girls who are in an unhealthy relationship often become anxious, depressed, and withdrawn from their friends and normal activities. Boys who are abusive tend to blame others for their problems, become angry or frustrated easily, and often seem to have two sides to their personality.

**Supportive environment.** In homes where there is domestic violence, youth often witness the violence. Even if they don't actually see it, they usually have a good idea that it's happening. Witnessing domestic violence has a devastating effect on children, particularly when they see women being abused by their partners. Boys have an increased risk of becoming abusers and girls can start to believe that they don't deserve a healthy relationship. A supportive environment that promotes equality, helps youth identify what they witness as abuse, and teaches youth the importance of healthy, equal relationships can make all the difference.

**Be ready.** If you suspect that a young person is in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, don't be afraid to talk to them about it. Ask how they feel about their relationship and listen without judgment. Focus on the young person's feelings. Offer to help them find resources such as confidential counselling services and crisis line information, and have that information ready. Be aware that you are in a position of trust and have a legal obligation to report the suspected abuse of a child under the age of sixteen, regardless of the age of the abuser. Contact your local children's aid society for more information.

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