

Unhealthy Relationships and Internet Safety

In an effort to reduce the risk of adolescents being sexually exploited online and offline, it is important to discuss with them the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Discussions should start with what they think are important qualities of a healthy relationship: What it looks like, sounds like and feels like. Then discussion should shift towards what they think qualities of an unhealthy relationship are: what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like. Opportunities to practice identifying caring vs. controlling relationships will help. (A great way to do this is while watching movies, shows and advertisements in the media, ask your adolescent questions about how relationships are depicted — whether they are healthy or unhealthy. Challenge media messages about relationships, and help them start to think critically about negative messages and stereotyping.)

What do relationships have to do with Internet safety?

In an effort to reduce the risk of adolescents being sexually exploited online, they need to learn the difference between healthy relationships and unhealthy relationships. It is suggested that in order to teach adolescents about healthy relationships and to empower them to avoid exploitative relationships, they need to understand the difference between love and control.

Signs of an unhealthy relationship:

- Extreme jealousy or possessiveness
- Short temper (explosive)
- Low tolerance for frustration
- History of fighting
- Disregarding others feelings
- Minimizing inappropriate behaviour
- Constant put downs, humiliation or insults
- Refusal to take responsibility for behaviour
- Using threats to get someone to do something
- Persistence — not taking “no” for an answer
- Isolating partner from friends and family



Unhealthy Relationships and Internet Safety (cont'd)

Signs your child may be in a controlling relationship:

- Everyone who cares about your adolescent (i.e. family, friends, teachers, coaches, etc.) has expressed concern for her/him, or feel as though your child is pushing them away.
- Your adolescent won't participate in activities that don't involve her/his partner or that her/his partner would not enjoy.
- Goals and activities that used to be very important to your adolescent have suddenly been pushed to the back burner.
- Your adolescent is being cut off from her/his friends and family because her or his partner seems to have a "problem" with each of them.
- Your adolescent's partner uses backhanded compliments (for example "You're lucky I love you so much, because who else would put up with you?") or directly puts her/him down.

What to do if you think your adolescent is in a controlling relationship:

- Let your adolescent know that you are concerned with some behaviours you have witnessed in the relationship. Provide concrete examples of the changes you have noticed.
- Listen without judgment and encourage your adolescent to talk and ask questions. Focus on behaviours that are a problem that contribute to the unhealthy relationship as opposed to "bad mouthing" her/his partner (which would likely make your adolescent defensive). Don't blame your child for staying in an unhealthy relationship. People who are controlling and manipulative can appear to be quite intelligent, charismatic, charming, and confident people, so it can be quite easy to feel attracted to them and care for them even if they are being disrespectful. Ask your child if s/he would be okay with someone else being treated the same way in a relationship as s/he is to help her/him see it more objectively.
- Breaking up is hard to do. Make sure you are there for your adolescent, and provide your adolescent with support and also advice. Advise your adolescent to cut off all contact when s/he ends the relationship, meaning not responding to texts, emails, phone calls, etc. Support your adolescent in this effort as it is can be very difficult.
- Make sure your adolescent has the proper support system in place — safe adults s/he can speak with openly, whether it be a parent, friend, teacher or even mental health professional. To help your adolescent learn to enter into healthy relationships and avoid another one, it is important that s/he has someone s/he can talk to and explore these possible patterns.
- If your adolescent's ex-partner is continuing to contact your adolescent whether by text, email, letters, phone, through friends or in-person, and you are concerned about you're her/his safety, enlist the help of police (restraining order) and mental health specialists. It is a good idea that your adolescent save all text messages, emails, phone messages etc. for evidence for police.

