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Love is in the Air: Relationships in Adolescence

Exploring a new relationship (friendship or romantic) as a teen can feel strange, confusing, exhilarating, and heartbreaking. Society and movies display this budding love as romantic, sweet, and awkward, but to teens and their families, it is so much more. This month, we explore the trials and tribulations of relationships for teenagers in 2023.



Identity and Interoception

An important part of adolescent development is exploring and building social relationships. As they do this, they are also often exploring their identity: who they are and who they want to be. They are still learning to navigate their emotions, especially with hormones and bodily changes that are impacting those emotions. Additionally, they will encounter and build interoception; a lesser-known sense that helps you understand and feel what's going on inside your body. This is typically attributed to hunger/thirst, hot/cold, etc., but is also involved when they experience new sensations when meeting someone such as “butterflies in the stomach.” They may not understand these sensations initially, but adolescents begin to figure it out over time.

Parent Panic

It could be tempting to not want your teen on the dating scene at all or to use restrictive measures to keep them away from their partners. Trying to end or prevent your teen's relationships can push them away or lead to them sneaking around. Instead, try these tips to support healthy relationships:

- Be curious about their relationships
- Set limits around electronic use when necessary
- Provide your teen with positive attention
- Talk to your teen about what a healthy relationship looks like
- Embody traits of healthy relationships yourself as a model

Don't You Know That You're Toxic?

In consideration of the famed words of Britney Spears, knowing when a relationship is toxic is just as important as knowing when it is healthy. Though a healthy relationship can have an immensely positive impact on an adolescent's mental health, understanding the necessary boundaries in relationships and the red flags that can be present is crucial. Here is a list of possible toxic traits relationships can exhibit:

- Controlling behaviors
- Following or stalking
- Searching through your phone or belongings
- Verbal, mental, physical, or sexual abuse and assault
- Your teen is constantly checking in with their partner
- Sudden change in habits
- Jealousy
- Guilt tripping
- Gaslighting

Sometimes it takes an outside perspective to notice these behaviors, putting friends and family in a position to raise concerns and intervene.

Happy and Healthy Hearts

Now that we've looked at unhealthy relationship signs, you might ask, "what does a HEALTHY relationship look like?" Here are some signs of a healthy relationship:

- Mutual respect of boundaries and values
- Trust
- Cooperation and understanding of differences
- Individuality and self-confidence
- Healthy communication
- Management of emotions
- Fair fighting/conflict resolution skills
- Honesty and accountability
- Safety

These are all areas that teens are still exploring for themselves as individuals may need help navigating. Trusted adults modeling these healthy relationship features is a useful tool for learning how their future relationships can look.

Boundary Activity

One way to maintain a healthy relationship is to constantly explore and understand boundaries. Below is an activity you and your adolescents can use to explore personal boundaries and responses to them.

Personal boundary	How to communicate these to others	How someone may violate my boundary	My reaction when someone violates my boundary
Consent to touch my body in any way.	"Can you ask me before you hold my hand?"	Grabbing my hand without asking, saying things to convince me it's "not a big deal"	Calmly pull my hand away, repeat my boundary, "can you please ask me before holding my hand?" Wait to be asked.