This tip sheet is intended to support foster or adoptive parents and caregivers in helping foster youth develop healthy relationships as they transition to adulthood. The tips focus on the importance of modeling healthy relationship skills, establishing a safe environment for learning and practicing skills, understanding unique challenges faced by these youth, and honoring their individuality.

INTRODUCTION

Dating and forming romantic attachments is a normal part of the teenage experience for most youth. Recognizing the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviors plays a key role in this process, as these early relationships can set the stage for adult relationship patterns later. According to the University of Washington, a healthy relationship is a mutual connection based on the foundations of respect, trust, honesty, and support. Unfortunately, these foundations are often lacking or nonexistent for teens with experience in the foster care system. As a result, they are less likely to learn healthy and constructive relationship behaviors. Overcoming these deficits is further complicated by experiences of trauma and subsequent mental health issues, which can impede youths’ preparation for independent living and transition into adulthood.

CREATING A SAFE PLACE TO LEARN ABOUT AND PRACTICE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

As dating relationships are often new to foster youth during this developmental period, learning how to be in a relationship is necessary to facilitating positive partnerships during the transition to adulthood. Establishing a home environment where healthy relationship skills are modeled and expected is critical to supporting foster youth as they learn and navigate the rules of this new terrain. Previous life experience will likely make establishing a relationship of trust and honesty with youth difficult. The following strategies will help to promote a safe environment for foster youth to learn about and practice healthy relationship skills:

- **Be honest and transparent:** Teens know when they are being lied to. Honest and age-appropriate conversations will have a greater impact and can support trust in the long term. Being honest and communicating any concerns or major changes will play a significant role in reducing triggers and feelings that their security is being threatened.

- **Ask questions, value responses:** Look for opportunities to engage youth in conversation. Asking open-ended questions will allow you to learn more
about their likes, dislikes, interests, and personality. Driving in a car, cooking, or working on a project together can provide natural opportunities for conversations. Showing interest models positive communication, builds self-esteem, and encourages dialogue.

- Be open-minded and tailor responses: Foster youth often come from unstable environments. Establishing structure, boundaries, and expectations at the onset is an important element that serves as reassurance of stability. It can be helpful to explain reasoning behind house rules so youth don’t see them as just controlling. Foster youth may still be resistant to comply for a variety of reasons. Parental response should be consistent, but tailored to unique considerations specific to the youth’s emotional, social, and mental state.6

Healthy Dating Leads to Healthy Marriage

Young adults are more likely to cohabitate than marry. Those who do marry, marry later. Unmarried, cohabitating couples are more likely to suffer domestic violence and unfavorable economic situations. Recognizing unhealthy relationship behaviors and learning healthy relationship skills while dating can better prepare young adults for healthy marriages.

Source: https://healthymarriageandfamilies.org/special-collections

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF TRAUMA FOR FOSTER YOUTH

Although every child is unique, foster youth have disproportionately experienced trauma, including physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and violence. These youth experience higher rates of multiple psychiatric disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), oppositional defiant disorder, separation anxiety disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and major depressive disorder.6

Brain imaging studies of children with documented cases of maltreatment show that abuse, neglect, and other exposure to trauma can result in long-lasting negative changes to the brain. Victims of child maltreatment frequently suffer from delayed speech, reading ability, and school readiness. Specifically, trauma affects the following areas of the brain:

- The prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functioning and planning:
- The hippocampus region, associated with learning; and
- The amygdala, which serves as the emotional reaction center associated with behavioral functioning and survival instincts.7

5 Signs of a Healthy Teen Relationship You Should Know About and Share with Your Teens

They give each other space to hang out with friends and family. It’s a good sign when teens are balancing all of the relationships in their lives, as well as continuing to pursue hobbies and activities outside of their romantic partnership.

It’s OK to disagree. If one partner isn’t feeling comfortable speaking their mind or seems afraid to disagree with their girlfriend or boyfriend, it could be a red flag.

Physical boundaries are respected. Constant and affirmative consent is key, including not pressuring someone to drink alcohol or do drugs in an effort to engage in sexual activity.

They are in control. Teens should feel able to wear clothing they choose, go where they want to go, and do what they like to do – without fear of a partner being upset or trying to control them.

They exhibit healthy texting behavior. As long as the texts aren’t excessive or interrupting daily life, it’s not necessarily what we call “textual harassment.” If texts become abusive or if someone is pressuring them to send private photos, it might be time to talk.

As a result, foster youth may suffer varying degrees of cognitive impairment and emotional regulation that can lead to a host of problems, including difficulty with attention and focus, learning disabilities, low self-esteem, impaired social skills, and sleep disturbances. They also face significantly increased risk of developing several mental and behavioral health issues.⁸

While not intended to excuse inappropriate behavior, the understanding that trauma causes some of these behaviors should inform behavior modification and corrective efforts. Caregivers should also ensure that youth have access to mental health support services as appropriate.

**NAVIGATING HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT**

Sexual development is one of the natural milestones that youth experience on their path to adulthood. Healthy sexual development often hinges on family stability and access to accurate and age-appropriate information. Foster youth often struggle with social–emotional development in general, so it’s not surprising that they may also face challenges with healthy sexual development. These challenges can stem from a lack of strong family and social networks, resulting in an increased risk of engaging in high-risk behaviors, including unprotected sex, promiscuity, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases.⁹ The level of previous trauma and the impact on brain development can contribute to these challenges by interfering with a youth’s mental ability to correlate behavior with risk and may also result in a lack of impulse control.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI) foster youth in particular may face greater difficulties during sexual development. This subset of foster youth is considered the most vulnerable due to high rates of victimization, resulting in increased mental health issues including the highest rates of suicide or attempted suicide while in care.¹⁰ Even if youth are not sexually active, connecting them to healthy relationship education programs can ensure that they have access to accurate information to support development of healthy sexual attitudes, increased self-efficacy, and improved relationship skills. Accepting foster youth as individuals with lived experiences and providing a safe space for them to explore their sexual development without judgment are essential to reducing high-risk behaviors and encouraging healthy relationship development.

**BE AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE IN HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

Positive relationships with parents, caregivers, and other adults can influence a youth’s ability to build resilience and improve their social and emotional skills. Bandura’s social learning theory emphasizes that individuals learn values, beliefs, and behaviors from those around them.¹¹ Understanding that foster youth may not have been exposed to healthy relationship skills previously, foster parents and caregivers have a responsibility to proactively model healthy relationship skills with other adults and family members. Demonstrating effective communication and healthy conflict management techniques can help

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**Adolescent Health**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides tools and resources related to adolescent development, including sexual health education and services.

Source: [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth)
normalize healthy interactions for youth who may have been exposed to high-conflict environments. To avoid mixed messages, parents and caregivers should also be intentional about socializing with other couples and families that model healthy relationship skills. Individuals exposed to healthy dating models are more likely to approach dating with greater self-confidence, problem-solving capacity, and ability to regulate one's emotions.\textsuperscript{12}

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10 Tips on Talking About Healthy Relationships with Teens\textsuperscript{13} \\
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\textbf{1. Encourage open, honest, and thoughtful reflection.} Talk openly about healthy relationships, allowing youth to articulate their views and expectations related to relationships. \\
\textbf{2. Be sensitive and firm.} Respect differences of opinion and realize that the decisions you make may be unpopular. \\
\textbf{3. Understand teen development.} Adolescence is about experimentation. Understanding brain development and what’s normal is critical in guiding your youth. \\
\textbf{4. Understand the pressures and risks that teens face.} Pre-teens and young teens face new and increasing pressures about sex, substance abuse, and dating. Youth want parents and caregivers to take the time to listen to them and help them think through the situations they face. \\
\textbf{5. Take a clear stand.} Set boundaries about disrespect, use of abusive or inappropriate language, controlling behavior, or any forms of violence. \\
\textbf{6. Make the most of “teachable moments.”} Use media, events, and experiences of friends to discuss healthy and unhealthy relationships. \\
\textbf{7. Discuss how to be an “upstander.”} Teach teens how to stand up for friends when they observe unhealthy treatment of peers. \\
\textbf{8. Accentuate the positive.} Don’t always focus on risky behavior or negative consequences. Conversations should also address factors that promote healthy adolescent development and relationships. \\
\textbf{9. Be an active participant in your teen’s life.} Explore ways to know more about your teen’s friends and interests. Find activities you can do together. \\
\textbf{10. Be prepared to make mistakes.} Accept that you will make mistakes but continue to help teens make responsible choices, while trying to maintain that delicate balance of being sensitive but firm. \\
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CONCLUSION

Many foster youth have experienced disruptions in their primary relationships early in life that have shaped their ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships. It is essential that parents and caregivers understand trauma, its negative impact on behavior, and strategies for supporting foster youth in learning healthy relationship skills that can support positive development. Without intervention, these youth are at risk of repeating patterns of negative behaviors that can have adverse effects in other areas of their lives, including impeding the development
of soft skills related to employment and self-sufficiency. Rebuilding the trust, confidence, and emotional stability of foster youth is not easy, but it is critical to improve resilience and reduce negative, risky behaviors. Foster parents and caregivers play a key role in changing the trajectory of foster youth by modeling healthy relationship skills, recognizing the unique challenges faced by these youth, and creating a safe space for them to learn. Equipped with new skills, foster youth can transition to adulthood with the ability to develop healthy mutually satisfying romantic relationships.

REFERENCES


8 Ibid.


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