



A PARENT'S  
**HANDBOOK**

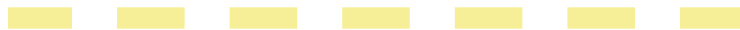
How To Talk To Your Children  
About Developing Healthy  
Relationships

**LIZ CLAIRBORNE**  
W O M E N ' S   W O R K



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# DEAR PARENT OR GUARDIAN

Eleven-year-old Michael giggles when his buddies refer to the girls in their class as “bitches,” but deep down it makes him uncomfortable. Thirteen-year-old Jessica feels conflicted about the kiss she gave to Tyler after he bought her a soda. He bought her something, so, she wonders, does she owe him a kiss? Twelve-year-old Debbie sighs when she boots up her e-mail — it’s filled with 15 mean-spirited messages from a boy at school who claims he likes her.

It’s tricky business raising pre-teens these days. The good news is you have kids that mature earlier, are more independent and have access to the greatest quantity and quality of information ever available. The bad news is you have kids that mature earlier, are more independent and have access to the greatest quantity and quality of information ever available.

It is with this contradiction in mind that we decided to create this booklet, “A Parent’s Handbook: How to Talk to Your Children About Developing Healthy Relationships.” Our goal is to help adults create an environment in which they can give their pre-teen boys and girls the skills with which to have positive, healthy relationships with peers and in dating situations. We expect that implementation of those skills will help to prevent relationship violence and break the cycle of abuse.

We hope that with the help of this handbook and the love and support of parents and other important adults in their lives, pre-teens can grow up to become strong men and women who engage in balanced, rewarding and loving relationships. In addition, by using the techniques and examples found in this handbook, you will have laid a strong and lasting foundation for effective communication between you and your children. As parents, it’s okay not to have all the answers—we’ve provided a list of resources for that—it’s more important that you ask the questions.

Your children learn as much from your words as from your actions.

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New York University  
Child Study Center

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# HOW TO START THE DIALOGUE

The world is a different place now than it was when many of us were young. The majority of families have both parents working outside the home; kids are increasingly involved in extracurricular activities and spend more time out of adult supervision than ever before. Because of this, child-rearing experts state, we must do more to teach our kids early in their lives to make good decisions and take appropriate actions. This teaching and dialogue must cover all issues relevant to their lives, including difficult subjects such as drugs, drinking, sex and ways to relate positively to peers.

While it's not easy to bring up some of these subjects, parents have an obligation to create an open environment in which to start the conversation. Here are six steps to encourage your kids to talk about difficult issues.

**1. Keep an Open Environment** — Be available to listen to your children. This means letting them ask you anything or sound out any idea. Give them plenty of opportunities to start a talk — tell them that you are always there for their questions or concerns. Don't criticize them for having questions, even if they raise ideas that are disturbing to you. Keep in contact with your kids through small talk — often big ideas begin as little thoughts slipped in the middle of a conversation about something else. Finally, ask questions. One tip: Use current events or situations on a favorite TV program as an opener for a chat with your kids and ask them for their opinions. Then listen attentively to your child's answer.\*

**2. Give Your Undivided Attention** — When the opportunity for dialogue presents itself, focus your attention on the conversation and your child. Don't let other things distract you or divide your concentration. Turn off the television, let the answering machine pick up the ringing phone and sit down one-on-one with your child. If it's really a bad time to talk, schedule it for another time, but first make sure that waiting is okay with your child. And be sure to keep that appointment — there is nothing more disappointing to pre-teens than a forgotten meeting to discuss something of importance to them.

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3. For **Important** Topics, Start the Talk — If you think it's difficult for an adult to raise certain topics, imagine how hard it must be for a child. Believe it or not, our kids want us to talk with them, so look for moments during the day that seem ripe for conversation.

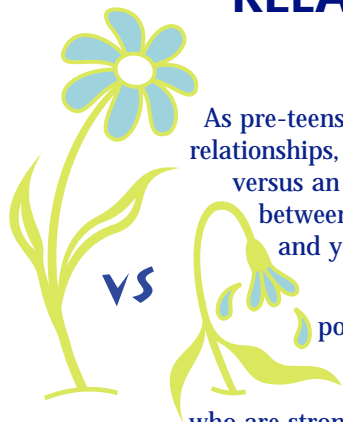
4. Talk with Your Kids **On Their Level** — Pre-teens don't always get it when you speak to them in abstractions. Examples work better: situations in a friend's or older sibling's life, anecdotes from your youth, or even episodes of favorite TV shows ("Do you remember that episode on 'Party of Five' when Claudia..."). Keep your ideas clear and be sure that they relate directly back to your example.

5. Talk **Often** — Speaking often and honestly with your child helps establish clear channels of communication early in your child's life. No one likes to be lectured, so try having many brief, yet insightful, conversations instead. Plus, frequent chats are a great way of communicating, reinforcing your values and letting your kids know that you are interested in their lives.

6. **Understand** the Questions and Answer Honestly — Did you ever hear the one about the little girl who asks her dad, "Where did I come from?" He launches into a complicated discussion of reproduction and then stops when he notices her perplexed face. She says, "No, Daddy, Debbie came from Cleveland. Where did I come from?" If you're not sure what your child is asking, say so. Once you understand the question, give an answer that you know is correct and honest. If you don't know the answer, say so and assure your child that you can research it and come up with a solution together.

\*Don't be upset if your child is more comfortable talking with an aunt, uncle, family friend or teacher. In fact, encourage them to do so and keep in mind that the important thing is that they have *someone* to turn to for advice.

# DEFINING HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



As pre-teens enter the world of more complex and intimate relationships, it is important to define what determines a healthy, versus an unhealthy, relationship. Why does the difference between these two types of relationships matter to parents and young people?

You can raise sons who are strong, tough and powerful, but who recognize that those qualities are never expressed through violence, abuse or maltreatment of others. You can also raise daughters who are strong, tough and powerful and who are confident that they should be treated in respectful ways that never include violence, abuse or maltreatment. Studies have shown that aspects of domestic violence can appear long before anyone is married or even going steady. So it is critical to help your kids learn early what constitutes healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

A **healthy** relationship has open and honest communication and an even playing field on which partners share power and control over decisions.

An **unhealthy** relationship has an imbalance in which one partner tries to exercise control and power over the other through threats, emotional abuse and physical abuse. At its most extreme, an unhealthy relationship can include name-calling and insults, withholding of money or other resources, threats to isolate a person from friends and family, coercion, violent acts, stalking and significant physical injury.

The outcome of growing and learning through open communication is the development of strong, emotionally complete men and women who are interested in and capable of having healthy relationships. The following guidelines provide insight into the characteristics of people in healthy relationships.

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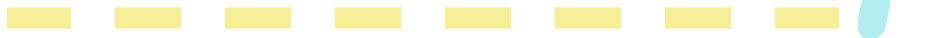


**A strong woman is someone who:**

- is willing and able to make decisions about her activities, her future and her family.
- speaks her mind in a relationship.
- refuses to do things that make her uncomfortable.
- expects people to treat her with respect and affection even when they are angry or disappointed.
- expects equal relationships where partners take turns giving and getting from each other.
- expects that any and all sexual behavior is consensual.
- knows that destructive relationships hurt her self-esteem and mental and physical well-being.
- knows that *any* violence is unacceptable.

**A strong man is someone who:**

- respects others and doesn't try to control them.
- participates in discussions and negotiations and does not feel threatened when his partner voices opinions that are different from his own.
- compromises and realizes that he doesn't lose power or status if his way isn't followed.
- doesn't resort to threats, insults or violence to get his way.
- knows that "no" means no, and doesn't force sexual contact.
- can confront feelings of anger and frustration without taking them out on somebody else.
- recognizes that he may be physically stronger than others, but doesn't use that strength to hurt.
- accepts an equal share of the responsibility for the work needed to keep a relationship healthy.
- knows that *any* violence is unacceptable.



# TEN TIPS

FOR TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT  
**RELATIONSHIPS**



Girls and boys are not born knowing the right and wrong codes of behavior for many of the activities in their lives. It's best to help set some guidelines and realistic expectations for things like dating with your child *before* they actually begin. While a good dating relationship can serve as a model for wonderful future relationships, a bad experience can start a negative pattern of relationships. What follows are ten ways you can help kids prepare for the good and the bad of dating relationships.

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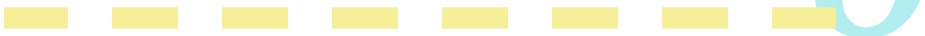


**1. Assess Your Own Values Before You Talk to Your Kids** — Think about the things that you value in your relationships. How do you expect men and women to act? How should people behave when they disagree? How should decisions be made in a relationship? How should the power be divided between two people? Make sure that you can explain your reasoning and can support it with examples. For example, “I appreciate when Dad lets me know why he’s angry instead of picking a fight over something unrelated to what’s bothering him.”

**2. Reveal the Unspoken “Rules of Dating”** — Never assume that your son or daughter will know how to behave properly in a dating relationship. Give your kids clear examples of what are appropriate manners. Talk to them about the standards of conduct that you expect in the way they talk and present themselves to both friends and the opposite sex, rather than letting locker room or slumber party talk be their only source of information.

**3. Tell the Whole Truth...Good and Bad** — Pre-teens generally view dating very romantically. They are excited and hope that their relationships will be filled only with pleasure and happiness from their partners. Support these expectations, but also be realistic with them about the bad things that can happen. Let them know that even though miscommunication can occur when hormones are raging and sex starts to be explored, violence is never acceptable. Agree that it can be challenging to know how to act when strong feelings are aroused, but give them a few suggestions or phrases to help them get out of difficult situations (“I’m not ready to go that far,” or “I’m not comfortable, can we talk about this?”).

**4. Teach Assertiveness, Not Aggressiveness** — One of the best skills parents can teach their pre-teens is learning to state their feelings, opinions, desires and reactions clearly. To do this, they need to make their feelings known. For example, if they don’t want to do



something, say so: “I’d really rather stay home tonight and work on my homework instead of meeting you at the mall.” Parents should compliment behavior that works, so their kids learn to do the same: “I really appreciated being given the turn to pick our movie tonight.” Finally, teach kids to fight fair, if it comes down to it, and that they shouldn’t resort to name-calling, blaming or insulting the other person. If things cannot be settled, encourage them to always take a break and cool down before feelings get hurt.

**5. Teach Anger Control** — It’s not realistic for everyone to get along all the time. Help your kids recognize their personal warning signs for anger. How do they physically feel when they get angry? Do they have clenched fists, gritted teeth, a red face, tensed arms and shoulders? Teach them to gain valuable time to calm down through such techniques as counting backwards from ten to one; deep breathing; visualizing a peaceful scene or happy memory; reassuring themselves that they’re in control; or, if all else fails, walking away and calming down.

**6. Teach Problem Solving** — If your son or daughter has been confronted with a tough issue, have them determine what exactly happened and what may have caused the situation. Then, ask them to think of several different ways in which it could have been resolved and to consider the consequences of each of the alternatives. Follow up by asking which solution they chose and discuss why they chose it. This is a skill best taught through examples, especially if you use ones that are close to your child, such as experiences of siblings or friends.

**7. Teach Negotiation** — A boy may not want to spend all of his time with his girlfriend’s friends; a girl may not be ready for sexual experimentation. Help your children understand that compromising and turn taking are positive steps to a healthy relationship and can help make their partner feel good. Also help them understand that violence, threats and insults have no place in respectful negotiation. Teach your children to negotiate in several steps. First, acknowledge

the situation (“I’m spending a lot of time with your friends these days.”). State each person’s point of view honestly (“My friends and I feel bad because we don’t see each other very much any more.”). Discuss options that allow both people to “win” or, by taking turns, get their way (“How about if we have Monday and Wednesday afternoons as days when we catch up with our friends?”).

**8. Explain the “Danger Zone”** — It’s human nature...no relationship goes smoothly all the time. However, there are signals that a relationship contains more than the usual ups and downs. Help your children know that any act of violence is a bad sign, even if it was “just a slip.” Teach them to recognize that thoughts of aggression are signals of frustration that need to be acknowledged and dealt with. Help your kids understand that any incident of violence in a relationship is a predictor of very serious problems. When violence has happened more than once, it is very likely to continue no matter how many promises are made that “it will never happen again.”

**9. Keep No Secrets** — Tell your kids that while it’s okay to have special shared thoughts or memories in a relationship, girls in particular need to learn that secrecy that isolates them from friends and family is not acceptable. In fact, too much secrecy in a relationship can be the first sign of manipulation and coercion. Teach your kids that being strong means relying on the appropriate authorities, from parents and teachers to counselors and, if necessary, the police.

**10. Be the Ultimate Role Model** — Talk the talk and walk the walk. Let your kids see you as the ultimate example of healthy behavior. If you want your children to learn to respect themselves and others, it is critical that you respect yourself, your partner and other people. Pre-teens learn by observing those around them, especially their parents.



# QUICK QUIZ

## FOR PARENTS AND KIDS



Take this quick quiz with your son or daughter to help you both determine your ideas about relationships. Decide if you agree or disagree, and then use this opportunity to figure out the best answers together.

1. Choose one couple we know that you think has a healthy relationship. Choose one that you think has an unhealthy relationship. Why did you pick who you picked?
2. What's a healthy way to fight? What's an unhealthy way to fight? Can you think of a situation in your life where you fought unfairly? What could you have done to make it a fair fight?
3. You want to go to the movies; he wants to go to the mall. What's a good way to work it out so everyone comes out happy?
4. You notice your buddy pushing his girlfriend around after he does poorly on a test. Should you say something to him? To her?
5. What does it mean to stand up for yourself? If you're a girl, are you being strong or pushy?
6. What should you do if someone you're dating threatens you? Or tells you to keep quiet and not tell a soul, even though you know it is wrong?
7. True or False: In a healthy relationship, one person makes all the decisions for the couple.
8. True or False: Girls shouldn't have too many opinions or make their feelings known too often or they'll scare away the boys.
9. True or False: It's okay for a guy to call a girl by a nasty name because he saw it on television or heard it in a song.
10. Whose relationship would you most like yours to be like?

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# REAL LIFE

STORIES FOR

## DISCUSSION

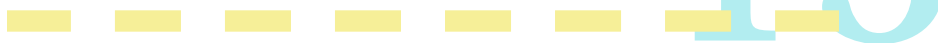
Use these real life examples as a starting point to help stimulate conversation with your children. These stories will allow you to understand your child's ideas and give you a chance to discuss values together. See if your kids can figure out what the problem is in each situation and then encourage them to practice some of the talking and negotiation skills outlined in this handbook. Or act out the situation — you be one character and have your child act as the other and see how he or she responds. For a reality check, reverse roles and have your son act the girl's part or your daughter act as the boy. If you are concerned about the discussion or your child, please check the resource guide that follows. Remember, the right answers to your questions should reflect your values.

**Tyler and Jessica** are hanging out at the pizza place with friends. Jessica likes Tyler and thinks he's funny and nice. Tyler buys her a soda and they talk and laugh together. He walks her home and when they get to her house, Tyler tries to kiss her. Jessica moves away and doesn't kiss him because it feels like it's too soon. Tyler gets angry and tells her he deserves a kiss because he bought her the soda.

Who is right here? Tyler? Jessica?  
What is the problem in this situation?  
What should Jessica say to Tyler to make her feelings known?  
How should Tyler deal with his anger toward Jessica?

**Nick and Keith** are best friends. Practically every day they go to the skate park together. Lately, however, Keith has noticed that when Nick can't do a trick, he throws his board or curses himself or others, including Keith...and these outbursts are getting worse. When Keith tries to talk to Nick about it, he only gets more angry. The other kids don't like to hang out with him anymore, and Keith doesn't know what to do.

What should Keith do when Nick loses control? What should he do once Nick calms down?



Should Keith talk to Nick about his behavior or say something to Nick's parents?

Nick knows that he loses his temper and gets violent easily, but he doesn't want to talk about it with Keith. Who should he talk to?

**Brad** and his buddies have been friends since kindergarten. They play sports together, sleep over at each other's houses and know everything there is to know about one another. Some of his buddies have started dating. One friend, Will, has a girlfriend that's pretty steady. Brad notices that Will pushes his girlfriend around sometimes and speaks to her meanly in front of their other friends. Brad is confused because, even though she is treated this way by Will, she keeps hanging out with him.

Do you think Brad should do something?

Is this any of his business?

Who should Brad talk to about this situation?

If Brad feels okay about talking with Will about this, what's the best way to tell Will?

Is Brad betraying Will if he speaks up?

**Debbie** just got her own e-mail address at school. While it's really fun to send cute messages to all of her buddies, it's starting to bother her that the creepy kid in her math class has started sending her five or more e-mails a day, many of which have mean-spirited messages. She also notices that he's been hanging around many of the places that she does—like her dance class, volleyball practice and the pizza place.

What should Debbie do? Should she speak directly to the creepy kid?

Who else would be a good person to talk to?

Should she involve her parents? The police?

**Zack** is having one of those days...first, he finds out he flunked the math test. Then he finds out he didn't make the cut for the basketball team. Finally, when he tries to confirm a date with Brittany, she tells him she forgot about it and is going to a slumber party at her girlfriend's house instead. Zack gets angry and grabs a hunk of her hair and twists it while telling her that she is "deserting him too." He orders her to change her plans and says he will not let go until she says she will.



What should Brittany do right now? What should she do later?  
Who should she tell about this incident?  
Zack knows that he loses his temper and gets violent easily. What should he do about it?  
Should he be punished for what he did or should it just pass?

If your conversations raise real concerns, speak to your child's school counselor or doctor, clergy, or your local mental health center. If you have questions about these stories or any other information in this booklet, please send your inquiries in writing to:  
Dr. Richard Gallagher, The Parenting Institute, NYU Child Study Center, New York University Medical School, 550 First Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

# RESOURCE

GUIDE

While the information in this handbook was developed to provide guidelines for talking with your children about healthy relationships, there will most likely be occasions when you may not have the answer to your child's question or the solution to a problem. Since it is impossible to anticipate every situation that may arise, the following are resources where you can get more information:

## **Emergency Help**

911

## **National Domestic Violence Hotline**

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

1-800-787-3224 (TDD)

## **Websites**

Family Violence Prevention Fund ([www.fvpf.org/fund](http://www.fvpf.org/fund))

Facts and statistics, local and regional hotline numbers, domestic violence education and prevention, and public policy information.

Family Violence Awareness Page ([www.famvi.com](http://www.famvi.com))

Facts and statistics, local and regional hotline numbers for battered women, and domestic violence programs by state.

Sexual Assault Information Page

([www.cs.utk.edu/~bartley/saInfoPage.html](http://www.cs.utk.edu/~bartley/saInfoPage.html))

Information on awareness, men's issues, domestic violence, crisis centers, self defense, literature, counseling, poetry and Usenet newsgroups.

Peace Begins At Home ([www.besafe.org](http://www.besafe.org))

Hotlines and referral numbers across the country and a listing of national information centers.

The Whole Family Center ([www.wholefamily.com](http://www.wholefamily.com))

Pages for parents and teens; myths, facts and statistics about relationships.

## **Books**

*All That She Can Be: Helping Your Daughter Maintain Her Self-Esteem*, by Carol J. Eagle, Carol Colman (1994, Fireside).

*Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul: 101 Stories of Life, Love and Learning*, by Jack Canfield, et. al. (1997, Health Communications, Inc.).

*How to Talk to Your Kids About Really Important Things: For Children Four to Twelve*, by Charles E. Schaefer, Theresa Foy Digeronimo (1994, Jossey-Bass Publishers).

*In Love and in Danger: A Teen's Guide to Breaking Free of Abusive Relationships*, by Barrie Levy (1998, Seal Press Feminist Pub.).

*Keep Talking: A Mother-Daughter Guide to the Pre-Teen Years*, by Lynda Madison (1997, Andrews & McMeel).

*Raising a Thinking Child: Help Your Young Child to Resolve Everyday Conflicts and Get Along with Others*, by Myrna B. Shure, Theresa Foy Digeronimo (1996, Pocket Books).

*Strong Mothers, Strong Sons: Raising Adolescent Boys in the '90s*, by Ann F. Caron (1995, HarperCollins).

*Teen Tips: A Practical Survival Guide for Parents With Kids 11-19*, by Tom McMahon (1996, Pocket Books).

## **Organizations**

The Parenting Institute  
NYU Child Study Center, New York University Medical School  
550 First Avenue, New York, NY 10016  
212-263-6622

Children Now  
1212 Broadway, Suite 530, Oakland, CA 94612  
510-763-2444  
[www.childrennow.org](http://www.childrennow.org)

Call 1-800-CHILD-44 for a booklet on talking to kids (8-12 years old) about tough issues.

To order additional copies of this handbook or other educational materials, call 1-800-449-STOP or order online at [www.lizclaiborne.com](http://www.lizclaiborne.com).

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