

Conversation Strategies for Talking With Young People About Healthy Relationships

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Training Script

Slide 1: Conversation Strategies for Talking With Young People About Healthy Relationships

Hello, and thank you for listening to this recorded training on talking with young people about healthy relationships! The training is offered by Activate – the Center to Bring Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Research to Youth-supporting Professionals. My name is Matthew Rivas-Koehl and I am one of the leads at the Activate Center who supports our research-to-practice translation products. I'm joined by my colleague Mindy Scott.

Slide 2: Activate partners with youth-supporting professionals, young people, and researchers to translate research and create...

Hello everybody. I lead the Activate Center and look forward to sharing guidance from a number of Activate's resources focused on having conversations with young people about different aspects of healthy relationships.

I want to start by saying a bit more about the Activate Center.

Activate is led by Child Trends in partnership with Chapin Hall and an external research alliance made up of practitioners, young people, and researchers. We aim to bridge the gap between research and practice. Specifically, we create research-based resources for use by professionals who support young people who experience the child welfare or justice systems, homelessness, or disconnection from school and work (we often call youth who are disconnected "opportunity youth").

The substantive focus of the center is translating research on the sexual and reproductive health of young people in their early teens through early twenties. As I mentioned, we are particularly interested in research that can be used by professionals who work with young people involved in systems, experiencing homelessness, or disconnected from school and work. And we interpret the concept of sexual and reproductive health broadly to include healthy relationships.

Slide 3: Training Goals

Our goal in this training is to keep this information as practitioner-focused as possible, really emphasizing considerations for youth-supporting professionals whenever we can. So we will introduce information about healthy relationships and share some tips about how to apply this information in practice. Then, we are also going to address how some of our information and tips about healthy relationships can apply in digital settings.

As we move through the presentation, you'll see that we introduce concepts, then move to how to apply them. We'll do that for each major concept that we cover.

Slide 4: Handout Exercise 1

Throughout the training, you will see five slides like this one. At each point, we will ask you to pause the training after our cue and turn your attention to the accompanying handout. The handout can be found [here](#). Our handout is meant to be a training tool that can help you follow along and practice some of the skills that we're talking about in the training.

The first exercise is a reflection. We've heard in our work with youth-supporting professionals that having conversations about relationships can be tricky. We'd like you to reflect on why this might be. Pause the training now and answer the accompanying questions for Exercise 1 in the handout.

Slide 5: Healthy Relationships

This slide gives a bit of a road map for key elements of healthy relationships that we are going to cover. On the left, you'll see that we at the Activate Center have emphasized communication, boundaries, and shared power as central to healthy relationships. We've also expanded upon this to explicitly include consent as another key element of healthy relationships. We are going to talk in more detail about each one of these factors. Of course, these are not the *only* elements of healthy relationships, but they are important ones.

I'm now going to hand it over to Mindy to get us started talking about healthy communication.

Slide 6: Healthy Communication: What to Know

Thanks Matthew! Ok, let's talk first about a few things to keep in mind about healthy communication.

Slide 7: What Does Healthy Communication Look Like?

Healthy communication requires several things. First, an essential component is active listening, which is where someone is really paying attention and reflecting back what they heard rather than just waiting for their turn to talk. Second, healthy communication also requires clarity, which means people say what they mean instead of expecting someone to read their mind. For the other person in

the conversation, this might include trying not to make assumptions and using active listening to clearly understand the other person.

Slide 8: What Does Healthy Communication Look Like?

Effective communication also includes elements of emotional regulation, or someone's ability to pause and come back to a conversation rather than react in the moment.

Healthy communication might also include the ability to repair, particularly when things get tough or may have gone wrong in a previous conversation. People misstep; disagreements happen. What matters is whether someone can recognize those missteps, apologize, compromise, and work to rebuild trust.

And finally, healthy communication means that sensitive topics such as sex, boundaries, and trust are handled with respect and empathy rather than pressure, ridicule, or avoidance.

One important point to emphasize with young people is that communication is a life skill. It is something people can practice and improve over time. Additionally, healthy communication is something that can always be modeled, including in your own interactions with young people.

Slide 9: Healthy Communication: Talking With Young people

Now let's shift from defining healthy communication to discussing how to talk about it with young people.

Slide 10: Model Healthy Communication

When you talk with young people about relationships—or really, any time you interact with young people—it's important for you, as the adult, to model healthy communication as you go. Here are some things you can do:

- Ask direct questions so you can better understand what is happening in the young person's relationship instead of guessing.
- Avoid making assumptions about what the young person meant, what they wanted, or how they felt. This is especially important because the same behavior can mean very different things depending on the context.

Active listening is especially useful here. You might say something like, "What I'm hearing is that you felt ignored when that happened. Did I get that right?" That kind of reflection communicates respect, slows the conversation down, and gives the young person a chance to clarify.

When you model these behaviors, this approach also shows young people that conversations about relationships do not have to feel like "interrogations" or awkward interactions. They can be collaborative, thoughtful, and grounded in trying to understand one another.

Slide 11: Handout Exercise 2

One practical way to help young people think about communication is by discussing scenarios. We'd like you to turn to the handout and draw your attention to Exercise 2, where we've provided an example scenario to work through.

The scenario: Jordan tells Kate that she should wear a certain dress to prom. Kate wears the dress even though she does not want to because she is not sure how to discuss the issue with Jordan.

This scenario is useful because it sort of sits in a gray area that warrants some conversation to figure out. On the surface, it may sound small. At the same time, it raises important questions like: Was Kate afraid to disagree? Did she feel pressured? Was this a one-time conflict or part of a broader pattern in the relationship?

Using scenarios like this helps young people practice how to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy dynamics without immediately putting them on the spot to disclose their own experiences. Pause the training now and work through the Exercise 2 activities in the handout.

Slide 12: Shared Power: What to Know

The example of Jordan and Kate gives us a natural segue into the next element of a healthy relationship: shared power.

Communication problems and power imbalances are not the same thing, but they can overlap. Sometimes what looks like a communication issue is really about control. So, when we talk with young people about healthy relationships, it is important to help them think not only about whether people are communicating well with one another, but also about how decisions get made and whose needs, values, and priorities count.

Slide 13: What Does Shared Power Look Like?

Shared power means that people in relationships make decisions together, rather than one person calling all the shots. It means each person's needs matter. In other words, each person should be able to freely express their needs and wants: No one dominates, controls, or punishes the other person in order to get their way.

This does not mean both people always want the exact same thing or that conflict never happens. It is perfectly normal for disagreements to arise and for people to want different things in a relationship. But shared power does mean there is room for both people's voices and preferences. In a relationship with shared power, disagreement does not automatically turn dark with elements of control like pressure, threats, guilt, or retaliation.

Understanding the concept of shared power can be helpful for young people because it shifts the question from "Did we argue?"—the answer to which might be "yes," even in a healthy relationship—

to “How did that decision happen, and did everyone involved really have a say?” That is often a more revealing question.

Slide 14: Shared Power: Talking With Young People

When talking with young people about shared power, it can help to return to a concrete example rather than keep the conversation abstract. Shared power becomes easier to recognize when young people can picture what decision-making, influence, pressure, and choice actually look like in a specific situation.

Slide 15: Listen, Reflect, Explore

Let's revisit the scene with Jordan and Kate. Young people like Kate may come to you to talk about what happened. You might start by listening. You could ask, “What happened?” “How did that make you feel?” or “Did you feel like you had a choice?” Those questions invite the young person to elaborate on the experience and how they felt without leading them toward a particular answer.

Then reflect back what you are hearing. For example, “What I’m hearing is that you felt pressured. Is that right?” Reflection helps young people feel understood and gives them a chance to confirm or correct your interpretation.

Next, explore by probing the situation a bit more. You might ask, “What would shared power in that decision have looked like?” This question helps move from simply naming a problem to imagining a healthier dynamic. It gives young people language not only for what felt off, but for what they might want instead in a relationship.

Notice that, here, we are talking with young people about shared power by using the elements of healthy communication that we just discussed—you can see how there is overlap.

Now I am going to pass it over to Matthew to talk about two more key elements of young people’s healthy relationships.

Slide 16: Boundaries: What to Know

Thanks Mindy. I am going to cover the concepts of boundaries and consent. I think shared power transitions nicely to thinking about boundaries. Shared power is partly about whether both people’s needs, preferences, and limits matter in a relationship, while boundaries help us make that determination more concrete. They give us language for what feels okay, what does not, and what respect looks like in practice. Discussing boundaries also reminds us that healthy relationships are not just about liking or caring about someone but also about respecting them as their own independent person.

Slide 17: Four Types of Boundaries

Boundaries are personal limits that communicate what someone is and is not comfortable with, including what they choose to share, consent to, or participate in. Boundaries vary by person, but it can be helpful to organize them into four broad categories.

Physical boundaries involve touch, affection, sex, and personal space.

Emotional boundaries involve sharing feelings and privacy around past experiences.

Material boundaries can include those around money, possessions, or access to things like a phone.

And **mental or intellectual boundaries** involve beliefs, opinions, and values.

One useful thing to emphasize with young people is that not everyone will have the same boundaries, and that is okay. A boundary that feels very important to one person may not feel as important to another. What matters is whether those boundaries can be communicated and respected. And notice how this distinction ties back to both communication and shared power!

Slide 18: Boundaries: Talking With Young people

When talking with young people about boundaries, it can help to start in a broad way. Some young people may be more comfortable thinking about boundaries in friendships, family relationships, or daily life before applying those ideas to dating or romantic relationships.

This framing can reduce pressure and help young people engage in some reflection first. Then, once there is more comfort and clarity, you can move toward relationship-specific examples.

This also helps keep the conversation from feeling like a test. The goal is to help young people identify what matters to them and practice putting that into words.

Slide 19: Strategies for Talking With Young People About Boundaries

A practical strategy is to talk about boundaries in general before jumping straight into dating. You might ask about boundaries with friends, roommates, family members, or classmates. That can help young people identify the concept before attaching it to a more personal or emotionally charged context.

It can also be helpful to give young people structured opportunities to reflect. Writing prompts can work well because they allow time to think and do not require personal disclosure. For example, you might ask the young people to reflect and write about, “What are three deal-breakers for you in a relationship?” or “What is one thing you do not share, such as your clothes, your phone, or your location?”

The goal here is not to force disclosure. It is to help young people identify their own limits and begin practicing language for expressing them.

Slide 20: Handout Exercise 3

Let's pause again for a quick exercise. Consider what other questions you could ask to help young people reflect on and talk about their personal boundaries. You might think about questions that help them define what matters to them, imagine what respect looks like, or identify how someone could communicate a boundary clearly. Consider the different types of boundaries as you do this.

Questions can also stay general rather than personal if that feels more appropriate for the young people you work with.

Pause the training now and complete Exercise 3 in your handout.

Slide 21: Consent: What to Know

Now that we have talked about boundaries, let's cover consent. Consent is a clear intersection of communication, power, and boundaries. If boundaries help a person identify their limits, consent is about whether there is clear, voluntary, and informed agreement around what is happening. That's why consent is not just a one-time checkbox: It's an ongoing process grounded in choice, information, communication, and respect.

Slide 22: What Is Consent?

At its core, consent is voluntary, informed, and enthusiastic agreement. Consent is ongoing, which means it can change at any time. A person can agree to something and then decide they do not want to continue. Pressure or fear (or impairment due to substances, for example) can never lead to consent because they undermine a person's ability to choose freely.

Critically, consent can be communicated both verbally and nonverbally, although a combination of both is always best because it reduces ambiguity. And one myth we want to challenge clearly is the idea that the absence of a "no" means "yes." It does not.

Now, even though we often think about consent in the context of romantic relationships and sex, consent is important across contexts and relationships. For example, people can discuss consent in the context of sharing food, looking at someone's phone, or posting pictures of another person.

When talking with young people, it can be helpful to keep bringing consent back to real questions like, "Was there a choice?" "Was the person informed?" "Was there pressure?" "Could they change their mind?" To connect back to other elements of healthy relationships, we can use a question like, "Were that person's boundaries understood and respected?"

Slide 23: Consent: Talking With Young People

When we move into talking with young people about consent, examples matter. Consent can feel abstract until young people hear what it actually sounds like in practice. Because we've already

talked about boundaries, you can frame consent as a way for people to actively communicate and honor those boundaries in real time.

Slide 24: Ways Young People Communicate Consent

This slide provides concrete examples of how young people might communicate consent. As you can see, there isn't just one perfect phrase or way to ask, and both verbal and nonverbal cues matter. No matter what, consent should involve a clear ask, clear check-ins, and/or clear responses.

Examples of asking for consent might include questions like, "Can I kiss you?" or "Is this okay?" Examples of checking in might sound like, "Do you want to keep going?" or "Want to stop or keep going?" And examples of declining or slowing down might sound like, "I'm not ready," "Let's slow down," or "No, I don't want that."

For youth-supporting professionals, these examples can be useful because they make the conversation specific. They give young people language they can recognize, practice, and use. You can find this visual and more tips in our consent TA tool linked here too!

Slide 25: Handout Exercise 4

Even if young people have a solid understanding of what consent is and why it is important, they may still feel uncomfortable communicating consent, or struggle with how to bring it up. Exercise 4 in your handout is meant to help you as a youth-supporting professional become more comfortable with helping young people practice consent. Pause the training now and complete Exercise 4 in your handout.

Slide 26: Healthy Relationships and Technology: What to Know

We've now covered several key concepts of healthy relationships. In this final section, we want to briefly address how these concepts can play out (or not) online.

Slide 27: Technology and Relationships - Risks and Opportunities

Using technology to communicate, such as texting, DMs, social media, and video calls, are important ways that young people communicate and connect with one another. This can be particularly true for young people who have more trouble doing so in-person. (This goes back to that communication piece of healthy relationships we discussed.) For example, technology can help young people stay in touch, explore their identities, and maintain relationships across distances. But, in some cases, it can also expose them to harm.

The point here is not to debate whether technology is good or bad, but to be aware that healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics—including those related to communication, power, boundaries, and consent—can occur online as well.

It is useful for youth-supporting professionals to stay aware of the digital contexts young people navigate—including current platforms, norms, and trends—because these contexts shape how relationship dynamics are experienced and interpreted. On the next slide, we will dive more into cyberbullying and what to watch for with that. I also want to highlight that experts are increasingly concerned about mis- and disinformation online: This goes for both young people *and* the rest of us too. We all might receive information that influences our ideas about how technology influences relationships, and it's important to question the motives behind that information and its source. In other words, I am reminding us all of something we might have heard many times: You can't trust everything you see online!

Slide 28: Sexual Cyberbullying: What Is It?

Sexual cyberbullying, which refers to a wide range of behaviors, is defined as any sexually aggressive or coercive behavior facilitated by electronic media. These actions are intended to harm, embarrass, threaten, or intimidate another person. The terms used for specific behaviors may overlap and are not always used consistently.

Sexual cyberbullying may have a detrimental effect on young people who have prior experiences with trauma, unstable living arrangements, and/or a lack of supportive adults in their lives. Furthermore, some of these young people may rely on digital platforms to stay connected with family and friends from whom they have been separated, increasing their risk for being a victim of sexual cyberbullying. However, sexual cyberbullying can happen to any youth, not just those who have experienced trauma or instability. It is important to be prepared to help all youth navigate relationships in a digital context.

For youth-supporting professionals, part of the work is helping young people recognize that harmful behaviors online represent harmful behaviors in their relationships. Connecting these behaviors back to other concepts we've discussed, consider how some of these experiences are clear indications of boundaries being violated or an imbalance of power in a relationship. In a minute, we'll talk through these types of harm in more detail. Pause here and take time to read through each definition. You can do this out loud if you are viewing in a group setting.

Slide 29: Sexual Cyberbullying Behaviors

All of these relationship concepts are at play when we think about sexual cyberbullying. Examples of sexual cyberbullying include sextortion, where someone is coerced into providing sexual images or favors under threat—this type of behavior connects directly to the idea of boundaries and what it looks like to violate boundaries, maybe resulting from power one has over another

Online sexual harassment involves sending unwelcome sexual messages or engaging in inappropriate behavior in digital spaces. This also relates to boundaries.

Nonconsensual sexting occurs when private, explicit images or messages are shared without consent, tying directly to consent and to healthy communication and boundaries.

Slide 30: Sexual Cyberbullying Behaviors

Revenge porn involves sharing intimate images or videos of someone to humiliate or harm them, often after a breakup: In this scenario, boundaries are violated, trust is broken, and no consent is present.

Cyberstalking refers to persistent and unwanted online monitoring, harassment, or threats.

Cyberdating abuse includes manipulative or abusive behaviors in online relationships, such as controlling someone's actions or spreading harmful content—definitely connecting back to shared power.

We provide these as examples of some behaviors or experiences that you might want to watch out for in terms of harm that can occur online, and how they connect back to healthy relationships.

Slide 31: Healthy Relationships and Technology: Talking With Young People

So how do we actually talk with young people about healthy relationships in digital spaces?

A useful starting point is to remember that many young people already understand the platforms they are using very well. What they may need help with is thinking through what healthy communication, consent, privacy, and boundaries mean within those platforms: That's where you can come in.

Slide 32: Helping Young People Think About Healthy Relationships in a Digital World

We can help young people think about what healthy relationships and boundaries mean in the digital world.

This slide offers a few concrete ways to start those conversations. You might ask, "How do you and your partner use social media in your relationship?" "How fast is fast enough to reply to a message or text?" or "What would you do if someone pressured you to send a photo you did not want to send?" These questions invite young people to think about expectations, pressure, and digital norms without assuming a problem.

It is also helpful to give examples of digital boundaries. A young person might say, "I'm not sharing my password," "I'm busy. I'll reply when I can," or "Don't post me without asking." These and other examples make it easier to connect healthy relationships to online behavior.

Finally, encourage young people to look for accurate, evidence-informed information. Inaccurate or misleading messages about relationships are easy to find online, so source-checking matters.

Slide 33: Handout Exercise 5

You're almost to the end of the training and this is our last exercise in the handout. Now that we've introduced the digital context, reviewed several forms of sexual cyberbullying, and discussed strategies for talking with young people, pause the training and complete Exercise 5 in the handout.

After that, I am going to pass it over to Mindy to wrap us up.

Slide 34: Final Considerations

As we begin to wrap up, we want to leave you with just a few final considerations that can guide your practice across all of these topics.

Slide 35: Final Considerations

These reminders are meant to bring us back to the role of youth-supporting professionals like you all. You do not have to solve every relationship issue in one conversation. What matters is creating space for reflection, respect, and safer decision-making.

Guide young people toward making healthy relationship decisions but respect their autonomy by not telling them how to feel or what to do.

Meet young people where they are. Young people may vary with respect to their understanding of healthy relationships, their relationship experiences, and their capacity to consider new information.

You do not need to have all the answers; your role is to create space, ask good questions, model respect, and help young people reflect on what healthy relationships look and feel like in their lives.

Slide 36: Stay Informed!

Thank you for taking time to participate in this training. If you would like to learn more about Activate or any of the resources mentioned in this presentation, please visit our [website](#) or [LinkedIn page](#).

Related Research and Resources

Citation	Informed Content on Slides:
Rosenberg, R., Naylor, K., Rust, K., Beckwith, S., & Woods, N. (2024). Healthy romantic relationships and youth well-being . Child Trends.	5-19, 32
Rosenberg, R., Naylor, K., Simone-Woods, N., Rust, K., & Beckwith, S. (2024). Crucial conversations about healthy romantic relationships: A toolkit for youth-supporting professionals . Child Trends.	
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