

Help Teens KNOW! How To Set Dating Boundaries

One in three teens will experience physical or sexual abuse, or both, and we emphasize efforts and conversations with our children on the importance of healthy relationships.

In this tip, the focus is on helping teens build and maintain healthy relationships by setting boundaries with their dating partner. Even if your child isn't currently in a dating relationship, this is vital information to know and share. It will help set the tone for future dating relationships during their youth and into their adulthood.

In a healthy teen dating relationship, decisions are made together, not just by one person. There is no pressure to “get physical” beyond what both partners are comfortable with, and relationship problems can be discussed openly. In a healthy relationship, both people enjoy spending time together but also know they're free to spend time with others as they please. This type of positive, caring and respectful relationship can be established and maintained by setting boundaries from the beginning.

For the most part, teen relationship boundaries can be broken down into three key categories: emotional, physical, and digital.

Emotional Boundaries

- **The L Word** – Just because a partner says, “I love you,” doesn't mean you have to say it back. You may not be ready, or you simply may not have those feelings, and that's ok. You can let your partner know how it made you feel and share your goals for the relationship. Also, know that hearing those words doesn't obligate you to feel or do anything more than you want to.
- **Time Apart** – You may or may not feel like you want to spend every waking moment with the person you are dating, but it is important for both of you to also spend time with other friends (of any gender), family members, and alone. In a healthy relationship, you should be able to be away from your partner without feeling like you're doing something wrong.

Physical Boundaries

- **Take Your Time** – Being physical in a relationship is nothing to rush. Regardless of how long you have been dating your partner or how old you both are, nothing says you must go to a certain point physically. It should be discussed and agreed upon to go only as far as both of you want, and it should never be pressured. If something changes, it needs to be communicated. It is also important to know and understand that either one of you can change your mind at any time, and you both have the right to do so.
- **Sex Isn't Currency** – Just because your partner pays for your dinner, buys you a gift, or says, “I love you,” doesn't mean you owe them anything in return. In a healthy relationship one person does not pressure the other for sex or say their partner must “go all the way” with them if they truly love or care about them. “No” is to be heard and respected and can be said by either person at any time.

Digital Boundaries

- Social media brings a whole new level of trickiness to dating relationships, especially for teens. Before discussing it with your partner, check in with yourself and think about what you're ok and not ok with putting out there:
 - Is it ok to tag each other or check in?
 - Do we post our relationship status?

- Is it ok for you to friend or follow my friends?
- When it is ok to text me and what is the expectation of when we return it?
- Is it ok to use one another's devices?
- Is it ok to talk about our relationship on social media?

Once you and your partner figure out how you each feel separately, discuss it together and come to a digital agreement, knowing that it can be renegotiated along the way.

- **Passwords are Private** – Sharing passwords for your phone and social media sites are not a good idea, even if you trust your partner. Just as you should be granted time away from your partner without feeling bad, you should be granted the privacy of keeping your passwords to yourself, without being pressed for it, or made to feel untrustworthy.

- **Photos and Sexting** – Once you've hit send on a photo, it's out of your control; it's out there for all to see and cannot be taken back. Even if the person you send it to doesn't share it, anyone who gains access to their phone might. Don't send a picture that you're not ok with your teacher or your grandma seeing. If your partner sexts you and asks for one in return, just say "no." You should be able to say no without them getting angry or threatening you. Regardless, say "no."

While a teen may feel especially awkward having to initiate this type of conversation with a dating partner, they must clearly understand that boundaries are about respect, and that both of them fully deserve respect. It is critical for our children to know that boundaries are also about personal safety and security, and if crossed, could lead to serious, even legal, consequences.

If you or your students have questions about setting boundaries, you are encouraged to visit LoveIsRespect.org for information or to call, chat, or text with the experts.

Sources

- loveisrespect.org: Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month.