



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
A SAMHSA Funded Drug-Free Community Coalition
Supported By Centre County Drug and Alcohol



February 24, 2010 – Talking to Teens About Healthy Relationships

Tina Cunningham is a Community Educator for the Tapestry of Health, providing a variety of topics around sexual health to groups in Centre and Huntingdon counties. She will be a presenter at the Focus on Strong Families Conference on February 27th. This is the first of two articles on healthy relationships.

Let's face it . . . relationships are, well, complicated. So discussing this topic with a teen can seem monumentally difficult. How and where do you start?

This is a big topic because there is a lot of ground to cover. We have so many relationships in our lives – with a partner, friends, parents, family, teachers, siblings, the list is a long one. And each one has a different dynamic. But healthy relationships share some common ideals. Trust, respect, honesty, communication are the “big ones.” The most important relationships in a teen's life are those with their family and friends and also if they have a boyfriend/girlfriend.

Consider for a moment the number and variety of relationships you have had throughout your life. Some good and some bad. How did you know they were good or bad? Maybe you didn't. Maybe some of your relationships aren't as healthy as you would like now. This is a great place to start; examining your own relationships and your feelings on them. Now you've got something to share and a good place to start. An easy way to start this talk is by looking for an opening to bring up the issue. Maybe your teen is talking about how someone is spreading a rumor. This is the perfect chance to discuss healthy friendships. Something on TV may provide an opportunity to point out the differences between fantasy and reality or how the media distorts relationships. Music often portrays unhealthy concepts in its lyrics. These are all great places to start a conversation about your family's values and relationships.

It is also perfectly okay to simply ask your child to talk. Begin your talk by asking your teen about their personal values regarding relationships. Some questions to consider together are things such as: Do the same healthy relationship rules apply to friends and romantic partners? Why or why not? What about between parents and children? Ask your child to share examples and share some of yours.

When speaking about relationships, boundaries are an important topic to cover as well. We all have personal boundaries and we want them to be respected. Teens can have a difficult time with this because of bullying, peer pressure and the pressures they feel to be sexually active. Discuss boundaries and what to do if a personal boundary is crossed as well as how boundaries are important in knowing if a relationship is healthy. If, for example, your teen isn't ready to be sexual, but their partner is pressing them despite knowing their boundary, then the relationship may not be healthy, if it is making the child feel uncomfortable.

There are so many ways to break the ice on this issue, the main point is to get started and listen. And the bottom line is that relationships are meant to be a fulfilling and supportive part of our lives, rather than a point of discomfort and worry.

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