

Overview

There are many different kinds of relationships - acquaintances, friends, best friends, family, companions, romantic, sexual, intimate. Relationships can be between people from different countries, different cultures, the same gender or another gender. They can be long-term and last a lifetime, or they can be short-term. The level of contact and connection also differs. The one thing that remains constant is the need for respect - being respectful and being respected. As teachers, we value respect enormously. We hope that our students will respect us, that they will respect others and that they will respect themselves. We also hope that they will be respectful of their belongings, the environment and the law.

What is a respectful relationship?

Respect is about showing that you value other people through your words and your actions. You treat other people with care and you consider how your words or actions may affect them.

Sometimes people refer to relationships as 'healthy' or 'good'. These terms can be quite values laden and it can cause people to categorise relationships into 'good' vs 'bad' or 'healthy' vs 'unhealthy'. Relationships are complex and rarely as black and white as this. What can be more helpful is talking in terms of what is 'respectful' and 'disrespectful' behaviour. No matter what type of relationship it is - family, friends, work mates, sporting partners, neighbours, fellow students, teachers, acquaintances, boyfriends, girlfriends - respectful relationships are about:

- feeling safe
- trust and honesty
- being valued and cared for
- being free to be yourself
- listening and being heard
- being able to disagree or say no without fear of being criticised or hurt
- being supported to make your own choices
- being encouraged to grow, learn and succeed
- being able to make mistakes
- working out arguments by talking and compromising

Learning how to put these things into action in relationships with family and friends will help lay the foundations for respectful romantic and intimate relationships later in life.

Professional or formal relationships are often guided by codes of conduct but in the personal and social realm there is a wide variety of



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approaches to relationships. Generally, the closer or more intimate the relationship, the more crucial the 'respectful relationship' characteristics become.

Know yourself

The best way for a person to know and understand what close and intimate relationships are 'right' for them is to firstly know themselves and the limits and boundaries for each type of relationship in their life.

Knowing yourself and what you want gives the best start for the development of a respectful relationship because it allows you to communicate your wants and needs. Clarity about values, culture, beliefs, other important relationships, experiences, spirituality, thoughts and feelings are part of a person coming to 'know' themselves. Knowing what is important, what they feel strongly about, what dreams and aspirations they have and what makes them unique all help.

Similarly, knowing their physical, emotional, spiritual or sexual limits and boundaries they wish not to cross, will help a person make the best decisions, as well as help keep them safer.

Everyone is different. What might be important to one person and what their 'limits' might be may be quite different to someone else. Educating about knowledge of self, respect for self, as well as respecting that others may be different from you, is a powerful support for young people in learning about respectful relationships.

Effective communication is possibly the most important element of a relationship and only happens when it is genuinely a two-way process – talking and listening for both. Effective communication can be difficult but is worth persisting with to keep relationships respectful and positive.

Gender stereotypes, roles and expectations

Gender stereotypes can limit people's potential, shape their career prospects, get in the way of good mental health and respectful relationships. Research shows the links between rigid gender stereotypes, gender inequality and violence against women and children.¹

Gender roles (that is, how we expect girls and boys to behave) are taught right from birth and influence all of us - what we wear, how we behave, what interest we have, how we feel about ourselves, and how we relate to one another. The media plays a large role in this - TV shows, news, music videos, adverts, games and apps, magazines, social media. We are constantly bombarded with stereotyped images and messages - firefighters are men, nurses are women, dads don't change nappies, mums like to bake, men have to be tough, women cry a lot. These stereotypes have been part of our everyday culture for such a long time that we may not be aware of how we subtly reinforce them and the impact this can have. Research shows that many parents are still more comfortable with young girls playing with trucks than they are with young boys playing with dolls and we still hear people praise boys for being strong and girls for being pretty.¹

Teachers are important sources of information when it comes to attitudes and values and providing positive role models. We need to model gender equality and respectful relationships whilst challenging stereotypes and discriminating behaviours.

Understanding gender stereotypes and expectations in the impact it can have on relationships, sexuality and safer sex is vital when delivering lessons on these topics.

Consider some of these stereotypes and how they might impact on a young person's knowledge, attitudes and values and ability to have respectful relationships:

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- Boys will be boys.
- Real men don't cry.
- He pushed you/teased you because he likes you.
- Stop crying like a girl.
- It's a girl's responsibility to take care of contraception.
- It's a guy's responsibility to bring the condoms.
- All guys are after just one thing.
- All girls say 'no' to sex at first, they need convincing.
- Girls who have sex with lots of partners are sluts/promiscuous.
- Guys who sleep with lots of partners are cool.
- Men aren't good at communicating their feelings.
- All women want to get married and have babies

Relevant resources

Websites

[Relationships](#), The Line

[Building respectful relationships](#), Kids Helpline

Fact sheets/booklets/videos

[Relationships, families and friends](#), Get the Facts

[Information sheets for young people](#) - relationships, sexual assault, consent, safety, leavers, SARC

1. Challenging gender stereotypes in the early years: the power of parents. Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch; 2018.

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Postscript

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- [Ready vs not ready \(for sexual activity\)](#)
 - [Sexual consent and the law](#)
 - [Power to manage relationships](#)
 - [Sexual activity - what are the risks?](#)
 - [Sexual risk taking](#)
 - [What's OK and what's not OK](#)
 - [Respectful vs disrespectful relationships](#)
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- [When is the right age to be in a sexual relationship?](#)

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