



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK

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PARENT NETWORK UPDATE

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SPECIAL MIDDLE SCHOOL EDITION OF HEALTHY ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

From early childhood on, most kids are exposed to that most basic of relationship tenets, the Golden Rule – “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

But somehow, by adolescence, the attitude often has shifted to something more like “Do to others before they do to you.” This leads to bullying, gossiping, labeling/name calling, exclusion, and sexual harassment/manipulation. What happened? And why? And perhaps more importantly, what can we as parents do about it?

How do we teach our adolescents about healthy relationships, from burgeoning sexual exploration to the basic dynamics of having and being a good friend?

THE COMPLEXITIES OF ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

While our adolescents may be starting to amass hundreds of friends on social media, face-to-face connections can be a lot more complex. As kids experiment with relationships, friendships can shift very quickly, forming and dissolving for no discernible reason, leaving kids feeling confused and disenfranchised. Even the natural process of friends growing apart as they embrace separate interests can cause teens to feel excluded, even ostracized. And the more time kids spend online, the more isolated and lonely they may start to feel, left out of some of the social activity they perceive going on around them. Parents often feel powerless to help their adolescents during these tricky shifts. How do we best support them during normal social fluctuations? Here are some basic ideas:

- See if you can **draw out your child’s anxieties**/frustrations and **really listen**.
- Before rushing to provide a solution or advice, try just **sympathizing**. Sometimes a friendly supportive ear is all that’s needed for the moment.
- Stay **calm and measured** -- don’t feed into your child’s anxiety.
- Keep things in **perspective** – as quickly as one friend is lost, another may be found. Even one good friend can make a huge difference in an adolescent’s life.
- Know your child’s friends, and try to **maintain connections** with their parents for additional sources of insight and support.
- If your child’s social situation seems to be seriously affecting mood and/or schoolwork, **seek support** from school sources (guidance counselor, trusted teacher, social workers, principal, etc.)

WHAT MAKES A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

Ever met one of your child's friends who you thought maybe wasn't the best influence? Or didn't have the qualities you'd hoped your child would be drawn to? Or knew one of your child's good friends was making bad decisions?

While it can be difficult, and a little risky, to express disapproval of an adolescent's friends, children should know how their parents feel about developing and maintaining healthy relationships. To counteract the mixed and/or unhealthy messages of today's media (TV, movies, internet, offensive music), parents should be clear about their own values and model healthy relationships in their adult lives and with their children. Kids should know how their parents feel about casual vs. committed sex. Boys need to hear the message of responsibility/respect involving intimacy; girls need the message of self-respect reinforced.

So what are the hallmarks of a healthy relationship? Consider the following basics and add your own values as you have these conversations with your child.

Good friends...

- Encourage you to be your best self, your true self.
- Respect differences.
- Know how to listen, to give as well as take.
- Show empathy.
- Are loyal, honest and trustworthy despite the ebbs and flows of social popularity.
- Don't facilitate, enable or encourage risky behavior.
- Stand up for each other and to each other.
- Understand the power of sharing and have the integrity to keep confidences.
- Don't gossip and talk behind your back.
- Are there when you need them.
- Support your dreams.

Ultimately, your child will learn that the best way to have a good friend is to be a good friend.

BULLYING

One of the most troubling aspects of relationship development at the middle school level is bullying, which can take many forms, from verbal meanness (teasing, taunting, rumor spreading, name calling, etc.) to exclusion (cliques, shunning, etc.) to actual physical threats and contact. The rise of technology has also created easy, anonymous opportunities for cyber bullying via the internet and cellphones. (Check out B-PEN's Parent Update on "Social Media & Cyberbullying" -- http://www.b-pen.org/uploads/2/9/2/9/2929884/cyber_ms_update_rev.pdf)

So why do kids bully one another? Some of the basic reasons include:

- It makes them feel more powerful (stronger, smarter, cleverer, etc.) than someone else
- They see others bullying
- It gives them an "in" with a desirable crowd
- Preemptively, it helps keep others from bullying them

Every school deals with a culture of bullying to some degree, and it's very helpful if there are clear

mandates from the top down that make bullying unacceptable in any form. Nonetheless, most kids at one point or another fall victim to some form of bullying. As parents, we need to send a strong message to adolescents about bullying that includes the following points:

- Bullying in any form is unacceptable.
- If you are being bullied, seek advice and help from a trusted adult (parent, teacher, guidance counselor).
- Take a stand if you see someone else being bullied.

The government initiative **Stop Bullying** (<https://www.stopbullying.gov/>) has a wealth of information on how children, their parents and educators can address bullying. If you think your child is being bullied, they suggest:

1. **Be supportive** and **gather information** about the bullying. Listen carefully, ask for details, and don't blame your child for aggravating the bully and causing the behavior. Being bullied is humiliating, so praise your child's courage in speaking up. Empathize, but don't feed into the emotional intensity. Stay calm and reassure your child that you will help.
2. **Contact** your child's **teacher** or **principal** with as much factual information as possible, again keeping your own emotions in check. Do not contact the parents of the bully(s), but follow up to make sure the school is intervening appropriately.
3. **Help your child become more confident and resilient** to bullying by developing positive attributes, interests, and talents that can expand his/her social group (arts, athletics, religious involvement, etc.) Encourage new friendships in and away from school. (If your child tends to annoy others and perhaps draw bullying behavior because of a learning difficulty or lack of social skills, seek help from a counselor.)
4. Teach your child to **seek help from an adult** when feeling threatened, especially if physical safety is an issue.
5. Maintain a **safe and loving environment at home**, keeping the lines of communication open. When issues big and small arise, you can provide the guidance, reassurance and support that can make a huge difference. And remember, sometimes just listening makes all the difference.

TIPS TO OFFER CHILDREN

- * Tell a trusted adult – this is not “tattling” but standing up for appropriate behavior.
- * Don't fight back or show anger/fear. Calmly tell the student to stop...or say nothing and then walk away.
- * Use humor, if you can, even making fun of yourself.
- * Try to avoid situations and places in which bullying is likely to happen.

Also, check out the **Bullying Awareness Guidebook** -
<https://www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/bullying-awareness-guidebook/>

WARNING SIGNS OF UNSAFE RELATIONSHIPS

According to Planned Parenthood, relationship abuse affects teens and pre-teens regardless of age, location, or financial status. 40 percent of teen girls know someone who has been hit or beaten by someone they are seeing romantically. Yet, less than 25 percent of kids talk with their parents about dating abuse, which can be physical, verbal or mental. Some of the “red flags” that should alert

parents to the possibility that a young person may be a victim of relationship abuse:

- Isolation from family and friends
- Describes girl/boyfriend as possessive or easily jealous
- Wears concealing clothing, suspicious bruises, scratches or other injuries
- Loss of interest in activities and hobbies that were once enjoyable
- Makes excuses for boy/girlfriend's behavior
- Loss of self-confidence

These behaviors may indicate abusive behavior:

- Threatening to hurt others in any way
- Insulting a dating partner in public or private- Put-downs and name calling, blaming and criticism
- Obsessive quality to the relationship, constant phone calls and text messaging
- Attempting to control what a dating partner wears, eats, or who they socialize with

By the time parents notice warning signs of abuse, the unhealthy relationship has usually been forming over a period of time. So what can a parent do?

- Don't be afraid to start the conversation. Express your concerns to your child in a supportive and non-judgmental way.
- Be specific about what you have observed, and your concerns about your child's well-being.
- If your teen is reluctant to talk with you, help her/him find a trusted professional, a school social worker or mental health counselor.
- If your child is planning a break-up, consider any safety risks and seek professional help if necessary.

Talk in general with your teen about some of the important relationships in their lives. If you think your child may be in an abusive relationship of any kind, BHS offers guidance and support through Violence Prevention coordinator Doreen Gallagher (Doreen_gallagher@psbma.org). You can also call the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline at 1-866-331-9474 or visit <http://www.loveisrespect.org/>. In the event of an emergency, if your child has been threatened or is in fear of physical abuse, call the police at 911.

WHAT IS "HOOKING UP?"

With kids beginning to explore their burgeoning sexuality at younger and younger ages, middle school is often a hotbed of covert romantic activity (see *Unhooked* review below). The culture of one-on-one "dating" as most parents think of it is fairly obsolete among most Brookline teens. While some middle school and BHS students may have serious romantic relationships, many connect much more casually, hanging together in groups and at parties. This can often lead to "hooking up," a way of exploring physical connection without further emotional entanglements. But what does "hooking up" mean these days? Not so long ago, the term "hooking up" was a euphemism for having sexual intercourse. But times have changed, and many Brookline teenagers say that you can interchange "making out" with "hooking up." and can imply that you did some sort of sexual activity with another person but not necessarily sexual intercourse. Students continue to differ on the implications and import of oral sex. Some students don't consider the act "sex" per se, viewing it as a more casual connection and saving the term "sex" specifically for intercourse. What does your student think?

What makes a good romantic relationship?

- Trust
- Communication
- Respect
- Sense of security
- Spending time together
- Space Apart
- Moderation
- Not being manipulative
- Honesty
- Mutual attraction and affection

TEENS AND SEX – HAVING “THE TALK”

Today’s adolescents are engaging in sexual behavior earlier than in previous generations, and as parents, it behooves us to talk about basic sexuality in early childhood. But it’s never too late to start the conversation as an ongoing discussion that should grow and adapt as your adolescent’s needs and experiences change. The Brookline School system does a capable job teaching students about the mechanics of human sexuality. However, teens benefit not only from concrete, age-appropriate information but also from hearing their parents’ personal values on developing rewarding relationships, being ready for sexual activity, and making responsible choices.

When considering intimacy, the **CERTS** model is a terrific reference to keep in mind:

- Consent** (needs to be mutual, sober, awake, enthusiastic, verbal – if mixed messages, slow down)
- Equality**
- Respect**
- Trust**
- Safety**

Planned Parenthood (www.plannedparenthood.org) offers a range of info for parents and teens.

HAVE THE CONVERSATION!

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