

KAHF Educational posts

Promoting Healthy relationships in Adolescents

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A 14-year-old sits on the exam table, hoodie up, answering your questions with one-word replies. You ask about school, sleep, nutrition, and they confirm that everything is “fine.” However, with some gentle probing about what their relationships with friends and most recent partner reveals that things may not be as fine as they want you to believe.

1 in 12 teens experience physical dating violence, and 1 in 10 teens experience sexual dating violence. Unhealthy relationships can hide in plain sight, woven into text messages, social media habits, inside jokes, and the everyday patterns of young relationships. Because many teens are still learning what love and healthy relationships are supposed to look like, the line between caring and controlling can be easy to blur. Even when teens recognize behavior as being unhealthy, they are often afraid to tell family and friends. As pediatricians, incorporating routine discussions about healthy relationships into patient visits can be the difference between our patients feeling alone in their experiences and being seen.

Routine inquiry about coercive behavior provides opportunities for universal education regardless of disclosure. The goal of these conversations is not to push for disclosure of intimate partner violence, but rather to inform patients about the importance of healthy relationships. These discussions should start early, middle school is a time when preteens first explore relationships with peers and may begin dating.

There are many ways to begin this conversation. Some questions to consider incorporating into your visits and open discussion about healthy relationships:

- Ask all patients about the relationships they are in and talk about how everyone deserves to be treated with respect and trust.
- Ask them if friend or partner constantly checks up on them or puts them down; gets mad at them if they do not respond to their calls right away; or ever monitor their phone or texts.

If the answer is no, still share educational resources and empower teens to share information with their friends and family. Adolescents often feel more empowered to help a friend than they may be to help themselves.

The Four C’s: quick messaging to support healthier relationships and safer sex

Communication

- Encourage teens to communicate with trusted adults about dating, relationships, and sex.
- Encourage teens to communicate with potential sexual partners about plans to become sexually active or not, and talk about a plan to prevent STIs and pregnancy (if planning to be sexually active).

Consent

- Educate teens that the legal age to consent to sex in Ky is 16 yo (but waiting longer tends to result in healthier, wiser, and safer choices!)
- Encourage teens to pause before engaging in sexual activity to think about whether they truly consent.
- Encourage teens to also ask their partner, out loud, before engaging in sex if the partner is OK with it (make sure partner consent).
- Remind them that if they, or their partner, do not consent, they should not continue to engage in sexual behavior.

Condoms

- If they have communicated and consented, encourage condom use with each sexual encounter

Contraception

- Encourage birth control in addition to condom use (using dual methods) for pregnancy and STI prevention.

If teens haven't sexually active, let them know that over half of teens haven't had sex and that they are with the majority of their peers! (they like to hear this!!)

Remind them that the only 100% way to prevent unintentional pregnancies and STIs is to be abstinent! (they usually smile at this!)

As pediatric providers, we are in a powerful position to normalize conversations about healthy relationships. These conversations don't have to be long or complicated to make an impact. So, the next time a quiet "fine" lands in the exam room, take the extra moment to ask a few more questions, it may be the moment that changes everything.

Helpful resources to share with teens may include

- National domestic violence hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Text BEGIN to 88788
- <https://futureswithoutviolence.org/>

- <https://www.loveisrespect.org/>
- [Tea and Consent video \(clean\)](#)