

Informing Families

Building Trust

A Partnership for Better Communication
on Developmental Disability Issues in Washington State

Healthy Relationships: The Teen Years and Beyond

Research shows that people with a strong social network—which consists of *relationships*—have better lives. The word relationship has been limited in recent years to mean only “intimate” relationships, but this is misleading.

There are many different types of relationship in any adult person’s life: family, friends, co-workers, acquaintances, neighbors, and service providers, just to name a few.

Of course, it also includes the romantic kind. Falling in love is an experience that in many ways defines us as human beings. Just like everyone else, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) also long for this transformative experience.

Preparing your child for successful, healthy relationships, including the romantic kind, begins with education and example.

People with IDD need clear, specific information about what a loving relationship looks like, feels like, and sounds like. It is not enough to have a list of “don’ts” as in *don’t have sex* or *don’t date bad people*.

Information should be presented that is:

- ❖ at a level your child can understand, with examples and pictures to illustrate points;
- ❖ layered so information can be built up; and,
- ❖ consistent and easily accessible.



Understanding the differences between the many types of relationships, and what is acceptable within them, is essential.

It helps to define relationships by their purpose. For example, a doctor provides medical and health care, but does not take their patients out for dinner and a movie. On the other hand, a girlfriend is someone in an exclusive romantic relationship you have known long enough to trust. It is OK to go out to a movie and dinner with a girlfriend.

Information can also help prevent abuse. Knowing that a caregiver is not allowed to kiss or fondle clients is important for anyone who has a caregiver. And, knowing that

being treated respectfully is part of a healthy relationship means that being treated disrespectfully becomes part of a bad or abusive relationship.

So, what can you do if your child is struggling with relationships?

Look at the types of mistakes they might be making. Use this as important information to identify missing knowledge and fill those educational gaps.

Keep past actions in mind when planning opportunities for social interaction and look for activities that are within your child’s abilities.

Don’t beat yourself up if you or your child make relationship mistakes. Learning is fraught with mistakes; they are a natural part of the process for everyone, with or without a disability.

Learn more about healthy relationships at [Partnership 4 Safety](#), a program of The Arc of Spokane.

*Contributed by Theresa Fears, MSW
Partnership 4 Safety
tfears@arc-spokane.org*

Healthy Relationship Skills to Teach (and Model)

- 🗨 **Creating trust, respect, and honesty in a relationship.**
- 🗨 **Taking time to get to know someone.**
- 🗨 **Understanding that close relationships are based on common interests.**
- 🗨 **Learning importance of reciprocity (give and take).**
- 🗨 **Sharing power equally in the relationship.**
- 🗨 **Finding ways to disagree without fighting.**

