



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

# THRIVING INDICATORS

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# Positive Relationships

## What Do Positive Relationships Look and Feel Like? <sup>1</sup>

Regardless of whether a relationship is with a family member, friend, romantic partner or mentor, healthy relationships consist of the following characteristics:

- **Respect and trust.** Both people work hard to treat the other person well. Positive relationships are based on respect and trust, even in challenging times. When disagreements do occur, both individuals stay calm, express their opinions, and genuinely listen to the other person, trying to understand his or her perspective. It's important to work through tough times rather than give up. <sup>2</sup>
- **Good communication.** Positive relationships are based on healthy communication, including sharing feelings and listening to what others share. In healthy relationships, people are comfortable sharing secrets, and are truthful and expressive about how they feel. Communication is done in a self-assured but nonaggressive way, meaning that desires are expressed clearly and respectfully, without threats, intimidation, or physical force. <sup>3</sup>
- **Negotiation and compromise.** In a healthy relationship, negotiation - or talking until you agree with each other - and compromise - each person giving up a bit of what he or she wants until both can agree - are always present. Explain to youth that there might be some issues which are non-negotiable, or rules that will not change, often for safety and health reasons. (e.g. Drinking alcohol, curfew, etc.) <sup>4</sup>
- **Self-esteem.** Feeling safe and good about yourself when you are with another person, and knowing that you both deserve a healthy relationship. <sup>5</sup>

## Gender Differences in Peer Relationships

Recognizing most teenagers love to talk to their friends, researchers have recently examined the question of whether talking is beneficial. Some studies have found that excessive talking about problems, or "co-rumination", can contribute to emotional difficulties, including anxiety and depression. This is especially true for girls, who are more prone to such intense conversation and emotional challenges than boys. <sup>6</sup>

The research distinguishes between sharing, which is associated with positive friendships and positive feelings, and dwelling on concerns and frustrations. Psychologists believe the latter often promotes negative thinking patterns for girls. While it often makes girls feel good to get support and validation from friends by co-ruminating, one person's negative thoughts or anxiety can affect another's mood - called "contagious anxiety". This contagious anxiety can sometimes exist for a very long period. (Interestingly, such intense emotional conversations do not tend to heighten anxiety or depressive moods for boys.) One strategy for helping girls avoid the negative consequences of co-ruminating is to help them focus conversations on problem-solving, rather than on problem-dwelling. <sup>7</sup>

### *Bullying*

Nearly a third of 12 to 18 year old youth report being the victim of some form of bullying at school in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Boys are more likely to participate in physical forms of bullying, such as hitting and inappropriate touching, whereas girls are more likely to participate in relational forms of aggression, such as starting or perpetrating rumors, or ignoring or excluding others. This behavior is most common in early adolescence and tends to decrease in middle to late adolescence. <sup>9</sup>

What can adults do to discourage bullying and help bullied youth?

- Model and support pro-social behaviors, such as sharing, comforting others, cooperation and teamwork. These

behaviors foster empathy, self-esteem, positive attitudes and building community.

- Encourage youth to play positive leadership roles to prevent bullying and victimization.
- Help bullied youth lessen feelings of isolation by connecting with peers who have shared interests.
- Explore bullied youths' feelings of unearned self-blame; help youth see that the bully is responsible for bullying.
- Identify and encourage steps to stop the bullying. Help youth find ways to be safe by using advocates and resources.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Apply a growth Mindset!*

Remind youth that everyone - including bullies - has the potential to grow and change through effort and practice. It's helpful to remember that new skills (e.g. for handling bullies) can be learned with practice, and that bullies can also learn to treat their peers with respect.

#### *Addressing Aggressive Behaviors*

Substantial evidence has shown that aggressive boys tend to attribute peers' behaviors to hostile intentions, often resulting in inappropriate retaliatory aggression. Research has also shown that these youth can learn to re-interpret the intention behind peer behaviors, resulting in significantly decreased aggression. One effective curriculum, *BrainPower*<sup>11</sup>, trains boys to accurately perceive and categorize social cues from peers, attribute negative outcomes of behaviors with ambiguous intentions to accidental or uncontrollable causes, and generate behaviors appropriate to these retrained attributions.<sup>12</sup>

What can *you* do to help youth who exhibit aggressive behavior? First, recognize that a basic task of social interaction is learning when to attribute a person's actions to benign versus malicious intentions. Accurate attribution can mitigate the tendency to retaliate with angry or aggressive behavior.<sup>13</sup> In your youth interaction:

- Help foster benign attribution tendencies by modeling such thinking and acting.
- Promote a culture of cooperation and community over self-defense, personal honor and retaliation.
- Help youth distinguish between accidental, prosocial and deliberately harmful intentions by observing nonverbal cues.
- Teach youth to start from a presumption of accidental causes.<sup>14</sup>

Specific activities, taken from the *BrainPower*<sup>15</sup> curriculum, include:

- Reflect on the importance of understanding one's own feelings. Bad feelings interfere with the accuracy of detecting someone else's true intentions. Ignorance of situational facts and missing social cues can lead to misattributions.
- Role play situations that lead to misattribution of hostile intent (e.g. ambiguous situations, inattention to social cues); reflect on the causes and consequences of mistakes.
- Discuss how nonverbal cues can be helpful in detecting someone's intentions.<sup>16</sup> (See *Social Skills paper on nonverbal communication*.)

## Conflict Resolution

Knowing how to resolve interpersonal conflicts is clearly an important aspect of positive relationships for both genders. Conflict resolution involves knowing how to develop creative solutions that are *mutually* beneficial.<sup>17</sup> Extensive research on interpersonal negotiation skills, by several psychologists at Harvard University, demonstrates that there are stages of negotiation growth.

The first stage is the ability to be persuasive through the use of clear and effective communication skills to get what one wants or needs, without considering the wants and needs of others. A more evolved stage includes attempts to understand where another person is coming from, what they want or need, and then balance the other person's need with one's own interests.<sup>18</sup> Research shows that conflict resolution is a learnable skill through effort and practice.

### Practicing Conflict Resolution Strategies

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a leading not-for-profit that works to advance the science of social and emotional learning (SEL), synthesizing implications for practice. The organization suggests several strategies to help adolescents develop interpersonal problem-solving skills. These include:

- Talking through specific steps for solving a potential or real conflict. (See PATHS strategy.)
- Using active learning activities, such as role-plays or behavioral rehearsing.
- Helping a youth accurately identify and predict the feelings of both self and others in various situations.
- Encouraging verbal expression of feelings - in appropriate ways - and helping youth respond to the emotional expression of others.

- In pairs, having youth practice reflective listening by rephrasing or summarizing the words of the partner.<sup>19</sup>

Mentors can use Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS), a research-based, proven-effective program, as an example of steps to practice when thinking through or acting out conflict resolution scenarios.

### Applying a Growth Mindset

Beliefs about the potential for change significantly impact how we deal with conflict, the end result, and our relationships with others. Research by Dr. Carol Dweck, a prominent social scientist at Stanford University, shows that people who believe personality can change and improve through effort, or have what Dr. Dweck calls a "Growth Mindset", are more likely to voice displeasure openly and constructively with others during conflict. This is particularly true in high intensity conflicts. Those who believe that personality strengths and flaws are fixed and can never change, or have a "Fixed Mindset", are less likely to express their dissatisfaction in face of conflict. They tend to react to conflict with indirect anger, acceptance of the problem, or actions to threaten or end the relationship, since they don't believe that any good will come from honest conversation about conflicting preferences, habits or traits. Conversely, individuals with a "Growth Mindset" actively work to problem-solve conflicts with others by expressing feelings and seeking creative, mutually beneficial solutions. Accordingly, they are more likely to have longer and more satisfying relationships.

## Endnotes

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