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SAFER DATING FOR YOUTH ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

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1ST EDITION
JANUARY 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Dating relationships are common, normative, and developmentally-appropriate for adolescents. The majority of neurotypical and neurodiverse teenagers and young adults become interested in establishing intimate relationships. Though intimacy isn't always sexual, and can take many forms (physical, emotional, intellectual, recreational, etc.), at some point during adolescence most people will experience a desire to be close to one or more peers romantically.

Flirting, getting to know someone, and becoming sexual can be an unparalleled thrill and pleasure. It's also true that having conflict, experiencing jealousy, breaking up, and having to live with unrequited interest or set boundaries with someone who is not respecting our own lack of interest, are often features of dating.

Emotionally, physically and/or sexually abusive dating relationships are a serious

and worrisome problem for neurotypical and neurodiverse teenagers alike. Autistic youth are far from alone in needing education and information about healthy dating. In fact, the inspiration for this curriculum was the fact that there are several curricula for neurotypical/general populations of youth delivered in schools. Our team wondered: might autistic youth benefit from a curriculum that was designed with them in mind?

This curriculum was authored via a collaborative process with multiple rounds of feedback from autistic youth, autistic adults, parents of autistic youth, and professionals and advocates who work with the families of autistic youth. It is intended to be used with teenagers ages 15-19 years old with a diagnosis of ASD, who are verbal and would like to date in the near future.

This curriculum does not teach youth how to find a dating partner. It is intended

to educate youth about what counts as healthy (vs. unhealthy) behavior in a dating relationship, help youth get to know themselves as prospective dating partners and identify what they are looking for in a relationship, think about what they can do to minimize conflict and forms of abuse in dating relationships (either as the one experiencing it, or the one perpetrating those behaviors), and where they can go for help if they realize that they are in a relationship that may become unhealthy.

The curriculum is meant to be facilitated online via software such as Zoom. It is intended to be facilitated by two adults with prior experience facilitating classes for youth on healthy dating or to develop social skills for autistic teenagers.

Ideally, there should be 8-10 youth in the class. This curriculum assumes six 60-minute class sessions.

Because leading group discussions on Zoom using both the chat feature and speaking aloud simultaneously may be difficult for facilitators unaccustomed to Zoom, facilitators may find it useful to practice with Zoom in advance. Students should also be encouraged to explore Zoom in advance of the first class. In our experience, the use of the Zoom software was not a challenge for any youth.

Autistic youth and their parents who provided feedback on this curriculum suggested that facilitators should take care to use gender-inclusive language and to acknowledge that many autistic people identify as non-binary gender. We have written this curriculum to be used with people of all genders, and while teaching specific lessons about gender identity falls outside its scope, the expectation is that facilitators will be conscious of and address

wherever possible the added challenges of dating and maintaining healthy relationships in a world that caters to cis-gender people.

As facilitators use this manual, we hope that they will take notes on what works well, what works less well, and what suggestions they have for improvement in the future. We consider this manual a living document at this time and will be updating it as we accrue experience.

A few other guidelines:

(1) *What if a student reveals that they are, or that they have a friend who is, a victim of dating abuse or another type of abuse?*

It's important at the outset to let the participants and their parents know what you will do if you learn that someone is a victim or perpetrator of dating abuse, child abuse, or an adult with a disability experiencing abuse. Before teaching this curriculum, check your institutional policy and state laws. If a student reveals something about experiencing or perpetrating abuse during a class session, do not attempt to address it in front of other youth. Invite the student to talk privately with you after class. Establish protocols for safety and response based on institutional policies and state laws before you start using this curriculum.

(2) *What if parents are uncomfortable with the topic and don't want their children involved?*

It's understandable that some parents are not ready to think about their adolescent children as individuals with a sexuality and potential for a romantic/dating life. Allow parents to review the curriculum and to decide what is right for their family.



SESSION 1:

A Starting Point for Healthy Relationships

TIME: 60 minutes

MATERIALS:

- (1) Word cards for healthy, unhealthy, and abusive card sort [mail ahead of time]
- (2) A word document with each student's name, in alphabetical order, to share on one facilitator's screen.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, youth participants will be able to...

- (1) Feel familiar with other people in the class
- (2) Understand ground rules for class
- (3) Understand the rationale for having the class and their goals for themselves from participating in it
- (4) Have an introduction to the idea of healthy vs. unhealthy relationships

ACTIVITY 1: The Opening of Class (15 minutes)

- Begin the class by introducing yourselves as facilitators. Facilitators should say a bit about who they are professionally, but include a bit of personal information as well to become personable. For example: I grew up in Boston, I have a dog named Lola, I like studying psychology. Facilitators should also explain why they decided to spend their time facilitating this class. Example: I like working with autistic teenagers and this is an interesting new topic for me.
- Check in and make sure technology is working OK for everyone. Facilitators should decide in advance which one of them will be the technology troubleshooter if that is needed. Ideally, facilitators should have a list of each participant's cell phone number at the ready in case the facilitator needs to make a private phone call to one individual to troubleshoot technology with them.
- Inform the class that nothing is being recorded using the Zoom software. Explain that facilitators may "mute all" participants in case of background noise and that students should remember to unmute when they want to join the conversation.

- Facilitators should remind students that this class is private: no parents or siblings should be in the same room.
- Facilitators should acknowledge that using Zoom is tricky because it's easy to get distracted. Request the participants' mindful presence during class time. (That said, if people are distracted, be easy-going and roll with it!)
- Ask the class to go around and introduce themselves. Use the whiteboard or sharing feature to make the list of names and these 4 prompts visible: (1) Name you would like us to call you; (2) Your age; (3) Anything important about your identity you want us to know (note that this replaces asking for pronouns); (4) State where you live; (5) What time it is for you right now (due to different time zones); (6) if you have any pets, and if so what kind of pet. At least one facilitator should model the introduction before students start it. Facilitators should call on each student in alphabetical order so the order of who introduces themselves next is clear both from the written list and the auditory cue. Facilitators may need to remind students to unmute themselves to speak.
- Facilitators should explain that the purpose of class is to have discussions and play some games related to dating and learning how to have healthy, instead of unhealthy, dating relationships. Facilitators should affirm that everyone needs education about this, not just youth on the autism spectrum, but we thought it would be fun and a good idea to have a class where all the students have the shared experience of having autism.
- Facilitators should explain that the next activity is to generate some ground rules for the class together. Ask if anyone has been in a group or class previously where they were asked to come up with their own rules. If they have, ask if they can remember one or two rules from that group or class. If nobody has had that experience, announce that you are about to ask them to think of something that would make a good rule for the class to help people feel more comfortable and enjoy it more. Tell students that they can suggest rules by typing them into the chat box or saying them aloud. One facilitator should write the rules down on Zoom while they are coming in and share her screen in order to do this.

EXAMPLE RULES:

- (1) Respect what each other have to say
- (2) Do not "yuck someone else's yum"
- (3) Share air time [is there a polite way to signal 'air time is ending?']
- (4) What's said in class stays in class (within reason)

ACTIVITY 2: Introduction to Healthy Relationships (20 minutes)



A facilitator should explain that most romantic and dating relationships—the vast majority—are fun, uplifting and have lots of benefits. But it’s also true that some of them can be less than healthy. One way to think about this is that relationships may come in three basic types. A relationship can be: healthy, not healthy, or abusive. Facilitator should relay that it is good to think about your relationships and decide how healthy they are from time to time. One facilitator should share their screen and show a word document with HEALTHY, UNHEALTHY and ABUSIVE written in 3 columns. The words will be written underneath one of these columns so that all can view them.

The students should open the envelope for Session 1 with sort cards inside of it. Ask the class to go around in order of first names (alphabetically), and when it is each person’s turn they are invited to add one word to any of the three columns, consulting their cards for ideas of words to add.

After the class has been through one round, the facilitator can say: “I challenge you to look through your cards and find the one behavior that you

think is the most abusive or the worst. What is that one? You can tell me via chat or out loud.” Include these suggestions on the 3-column list. Next the facilitator can say: “I challenge you to look through your cards and find the one behavior that you think is the best, and most healthy for a relationship.” Finally, the facilitator can say: “Now can you look through your stack of cards and pick out one that is confusing to you. Are there any that you don’t understand or cannot figure out how to place in a column?”

When finished, the columns should contain some of the following types of words or ideas. Note that if students raise the legitimate point that some behaviors can be unhealthy in certain contexts but healthy in others (such as, being a little jealous once or twice is OK, but strongly jealous or all the time is unhealthy), the facilitator can write that out as a note below the columns to incorporate it visually. Permit discussion of whether some items can be both healthy and unhealthy (e.g., using a fake avatar name online is not the same as impersonating someone for catfishing purposes on line).

NOTE: There is no correct answer to the question what is the most abusive, and it is possible to debate the correct categorization of every word. Facilitators should steer the class towards discussion and contemplation of the idea that some behaviors are healthy vs. unhealthy vs. abusive, and not get stuck on the task of “correctly” placing each word in only one category. Facilitators can explain that sometimes context can change how these behaviors come across to another person.

HEALTHY	UNHEALTHY	ABUSIVE
One person cares about the feelings of the other person	Sometimes the person insults you or puts you down in a mean way	Hitting
Respectful	Pretends it’s a joke when they are mean to you	Yelling to intimidate
Polite	Likes to “mess with your head” (i.e., confuse you, trick you)	Pushing sexual things the other person doesn’t want to do
Courteous	Isn’t honest about who they are online	Making the person afraid for his or her life
You feel relaxed with them sometimes	Tells you that if you really liked them you would do something particular for them	Stealing or ruining your possessions
You feel like you can be yourself, at least sometimes		Stalking
You can gently state when you are feeling upset, and they care about what you say		Threatening to tell people something about you unless you do what they want
Resolves conflicts peacefully		Sharing things you texted or emailed without your permission
Makes you happy		Tells you to give them money in a threatening way
Inspires you to try new things		Saying insulting things about autistic people
Empowers you		
Makes you feel creative		
Doesn’t get upset if you don’t text back right away		
Is honest about who they are online		

After you have generated the list of qualities that fall under each of the three categories, lead a discussion using the questions below. Note that there is no sole correct answer to any question. The purpose is to generate discussion and contemplation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Is it possible for relationships to be more than one type?
- 2 Are there some behaviors that you want to add to one of these lists that is not represented by one of your cards?
- 3 It is important to think about what type of relationship you are in, if it’s a friendship, dating relationship, co-workers or others. What is the long-term advantage of knowing if your relationship is healthy or not?
- 4 How can you decide whether your relationship is abusive, unhealthy, or healthy? If you can’t decide, what should you do to figure it out?

ACTIVITY 3: An example story (OPTIONAL, 20 minutes)

This activity can be cut if the energy in the class is flagging. Only do this activity if both facilitators agree, in the moment, it's a good idea. Facilitators can also ask the class if they want to stay for another activity or go.

If you do this activity, one of the facilitators should tell the class that she is going to read them

a short story. They should listen to the story and use the chat box to express their opinion to the group. They are asked to type in the word GOOD or "G" if they hear something that sounds like a healthy relationship feature, and the words NOT GOOD or "NG" if they hear something that sounds abusive or unhealthy. The story is below:

Jill's story

Jill met Ken when they were both in 8th grade. They became a couple shortly after they met. People said that they were "dating" or "going out," except technically they did not go out on dates. But they did text each other a lot, and talk to each other at school. They were very happy. They liked to play games over text messaging with each other or send each other links to videos on YouTube that they thought the other person would like.

Over time, Ken became more and more possessive of Jill. He would wait for her after each class and walk her to her locker or her next class. He would wait for her after school to say hi to her before she got on her bus. Jill liked the attention. It was nice to know that Ken wanted to see her and she felt proud to have a boyfriend. At the same time, sometimes it was hard for her to talk to her other friends because Ken was always there. If Jill tried to talk to her friends, Ken would usually stand right in front of her to make sure she turned her attention back to him as quickly as possible. When Jill had to stay after school a few times to make up a test or talk to a teacher about homework, and missed seeing Ken before he got on his bus, Ken seemed upset with her later. She thought this was just his way of showing her how much he liked her. He was so nice to her at other times. He brought her a muffin or donut every morning.

But Ken's jealousy got worse. He started sending her angry emojis every time she did something other than spend time with him. For example, one day they had a field trip to a museum in the city, Jill chose to get on the same bus as her friend Cat, and not the same bus as Ken. Ken sent her 10 lines of angry emojis and 10 lines of sad emojis and 10 lines of broken hearts. Jill wasn't sure if he was kidding or what she was supposed to say back. She felt afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Ken texted Jill over and over again. He kept asking her if she still liked him. He accused her of texting another guy that they both knew. She said she didn't and could show him screenshots to prove it, but Ken said that there was no way to prove that she wasn't lying. Jillina felt confused. Ken was a really fun person. He made her laugh. He was also really cute. But she felt annoyed, disappointed that Ken wasn't the same fun person that he seemed to be when they started hanging out, and afraid of him. She liked it when Ken was happy, but making him mad or upset was so unpleasant. He always took it out on her, and said that she was untrustworthy. He said he would never act like that towards someone and she should try to be more like him. He said maybe there was something wrong with her. What he said made her want to cry. She just wanted him to like her and be nice to her again. She didn't know what to do to fix the relationship. She wanted to talk to her friends, but they just told her to break up with him. She felt so confused and unhappy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 What were some of the things that made you type "G"?
- 2 What were some of the things that made you type "NG"?
- 3 If you were Jill, would you want to break up with Ken? Why or why not? What would you say? Would you go to anyone for advice about the break up?*
- 4 Why do you think Ken felt jealous and acted possessive?*

**This question worked particularly well with our pilot group.*

Main takeaway: Sometimes it can be hard to tell whether a relationship is healthy or unhealthy, but it is worth it to always be asking yourself (or a safe adult) which one it is.

Closing Check Out (5 minutes)

Ask the students if they are comfortable sharing one thing they liked about class. If so, ask them to mention something that they found interesting or fun.

Homework:

Read the graphic novel on dating violence. Inform students that as they read they should circle any parts that they particularly like or do not like, or if they do not want to deface the graphic novel by writing in it they can keep notes on a separate piece of paper. The point is that the facilitators will be asking them to discuss their thoughts about the graphic novel next week, so they should be ready with a few thoughts.

Respectful

Polite

Sometimes the person insults you or puts you down

Not possible to express your emotions and feel safe

Courteous

You feel relaxed

Pretends it's a joke when they are mean to you

Likes to "mess with your head" (confuse you, trick you)

You feel like you can be yourself

You can tell them when you are upset and they don't mind

Pretends to be someone else online

Tells you that if you really loved them you would do something that they want

Resolves conflicts peacefully

Makes you happy

Doesn't offer sympathy when you are sick or hurt or sad

Pushing sexual things you don't want to do

**Yells to
intimidate**

Hits

**Tells you to
give them
money**

**Says insulting
things about
autistic people**

**Makes you
afraid for
your life**

**Makes you afraid
they will hurt
themselves on
purpose**

**Sharing things
you texted
without your
permission**

**Threatens to
start rumors
about you**

**Jealous all
the time**

**Has a short
fuse or quick
temper**

Stalks you

**Tells people
your secrets**

**Steals or
ruins your
possessions**

**Goes through
your phone**

SESSION 2

Seeing relationship health in media

TIME: 50-60 minutes

MATERIALS:

- (1) Grading relationships sheets [mailed ahead of time]
- (2) Graphic novel [mailed ahead of time]
- (3) List of students' names shared on computer screen so they know the order of check-in.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, youth participants will be able to...

- (1) Identify controlling and healthy behaviors in media depictions of breakups
- (2) Feel even more comfortable participating in the class / feel rapport

ACTIVITY 1: Check-In (5 minutes)

Ask students to re-introduce themselves by name and something light, such as favorite video game or movie. One facilitator should share her screen so that students can see the list of names and know who is going to be called upon next.

ACTIVITY 2: Discussion of graphic novel (20 minutes)

Before beginning the discussion of the graphic novel, facilitators should pass some statistics to the group. Before sharing these, it is important to emphasize that most dating relationships are healthy and fun. It's a worst-case scenario that dating relationships become abusive. We should not be scared of dating, we should simply be aware of the possibility it can become abusive. The facts of interest are:

- 10% of high school-attending boys in the U.S. say that they have experienced physical or sexual violence by a dating partner in the past year (YRBS, 2018) [This can be asked in the form of a question: What percent of high school-attending boys in the U.S. say that... , and students can use the chat box to type in responses].
- 20% of high school-attending girls in the U.S. say that they have experienced physical or sexual violence by a dating partner in the past year (YRBS, 2018)

- We aren't sure what percentage of non-binary teens has experienced physical and sexual dating violence in the past year, but that research is underway now.
- About 50% of teenagers age 18 years old experience psychological abuse, which is like name-calling or swearing, by a dating partner over the course of their entire lifetimes.

What we learn from these statistics is that it is rare to be hit or sexually assaulted by a dating partner.

- ▶ The vast majority of dating relationships are safe and healthy.
- ▶ We also learn that psychological aggression, name-calling and swearing and yelling, is too common. It doesn't occur in most dating relationships, but it does happen too often.
- ▶ While people are not in danger from verbal abuse in the same way that they are from physical or sexual violence, or stalking, verbal abuse can make people feel so bad about themselves they develop depression or anxiety.
- ▶ Again, the main point is that most dating relationships are safe.
- ▶ Facilitators should next ask students what they thought of the graphic novel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Ask only those that make sense in the moment, OK to skip questions that feel repetitive or if students are losing energy.

- 1** What did you like about the graphic novel?
- 2** What did you think could be improved about this graphic novel?
- 3** Can you imagine this happening to someone in your school or to someone your age that you know?
- 4** Was there any point during reading this that you thought: "I would do something different than what [victim character] is doing"? What were those times?
- 5** Was there any point during reading this that you thought: "I understand why [perpetrator character] is acting that way" – not that you agreed with it, but you could understand why a person would act so controlling? What things did [perpetrator character] do that you thought you could understand?
- 6** What questions do you have after reading this?

ACTIVITY 3: Analyzing the health of relationships in video clips (20 minutes)



Have 2-3 video clips (1-2 minutes, ideally) cued and ready to go. There are 2 example clips below, or you can use brief clips that you find on YouTube. Preface each clip with a brief introduction about the movie or show it is from, who the characters are, whether there will be anything potentially triggering (e.g., yelling or a swear word). Ask students to watch the breakup, or conversation between two dating partners in a conflict, and think about how healthy it is. They will give it a grade from A+ to F. They might see some things that are unhealthy (like yelling) and also some things that are healthy (like someone saying “Ok” to the idea of a breakup even though it makes them sad). They can comment on both of those.

Ask students to type a grade (A, B+, C, D- etc.), or “good” and “not good” in the chatbox when they see things happening on screen that they think are healthy vs. unhealthy.

Here is one clip from the 2010 movie *The Social Network*. A caution that the filmmakers tried to make Mark Zuckerberg seem like he is autistic and that the actual Mark Zuckerberg may not have that diagnosis. If the character does seem autistic, it could be problematic because he engages in unhealthy behavior. It is also possible that the character doesn't seem autistic to students, but seems like “an average nerdy computer science guy” (as one student put it.) This might be worth discussing ahead of time. Students should also be warned there is one swear word at the end of the scene. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VISkPA60ujQ>

Here is a breakup from the TV show *Liv and Maddie*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um2c31gnqC8>

A scene from the TV show *parenthood*, featuring an autistic boy considering asking someone out: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um-WhT1olsQM>

[Note: We have been told that the Twilight movie series may have other good clips of abusive/controlling moments, but thus far we have not been able to identify any clips that we felt were appropriate for analysis as a class].

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Did you think Mark treated Erica badly or well? What did he do that was not OK and what did he do that was OK?
- 2 Do you think Erica could have acted in a more healthy way or did she do a perfect/A+ job of expressing her anger and upset?
- 3 What else did you notice about this clip?
- 4 What did you think of the Maddie and Diggie breakup? How did it start out, healthy or unhealthy? [Answer: started talking calmly, expressing reasons]
- 5 At what point did the break up turn a bit unhealthy? What did they do that you think could have been better? [Answers: yelling, threats]
- 6 When Diggie says he wants to break up, how did Maddie take it? [Answer OK at first, then hits something with a basketball and cries, gets comforted by Mom]. Would you handle a breakup the same or differently?
- 7 Do you normally ask yourself if relationships are healthy or not when watching TV, movies or reading books? Why or why not?

Next ask students to pull out the handout about grading TV and movie relationships. Explain how to use the handout and that it will be for homework

Closing Check Out (5 minutes)

Ask the students if they feel comfortable commenting on how the class is going for them so far. Facilitators should ask the students to send them email to let them know if something happened that they particularly liked or did not like during the class.

Homework# 2 (5 minutes to explain it)

Student should watch movie or TV show and fill out a grade the relationship worksheet. Bonus if student can have a parent fill out a grading sheet as well, watching the same movie or TV show, but not sharing grading answers until the end. Also OK to do with a friend or sibling. Facilitators should email a reminder to class about homework mid-week.

TV SHOW/MOVIE/BOOK: _____

	YES	MAYBE / SORT OF	NO
They rushed into the relationship	1	2	3
They fell in love by magic	1	2	3
One or the other decided it was "love at first sight"	1	2	3
The main reason they are together is looks or sexual attraction	1	2	3
They interrupt each other when talking	1	2	3
They listen to each other's concerns [RC]	3	2	1
They play tricks, gags or jokes on each other	1	2	3
They use deception (lies) for any reason other than a surprise party	1	2	3
They express their anger in safe, healthy ways [RC]	3	2	1
They are supportive [RC]	3	2	1
They give sincere compliments [RC]	3	2	1
They use false flattery to get what they want	1	2	3
They put down the other person's family or friends	1	2	3
They yell	1	2	3
They threaten, blackmail, pressure or force	1	2	3
They "steal" a kiss or make sexual contact without asking	1	2	3
They are using the other person to get popular or for some other reason	1	2	3
They spy on each other	1	2	3
They don't trust each other	1	2	3
They are relaxed together [RC]	3	2	1
They demand time and attention	1	2	3
They threaten to hurt themselves if they are in a fight or breaking up	1	2	3
They cheat on the other person (sexually or emotionally)	1	2	3
They make the other person feel brave, happy, or calm [RC]	3	2	1

RC= reverse coded

22-30 points: Not healthy
 31-54 points: Mostly unhealthy
 55-66 points: Healthy

Total score: _____

SESSION 3

What makes a relationship healthy?

TIME: 60 minutes

MATERIALS:

- (1) Controlling/Respecting rating statements, blank worksheet [email or mail ahead of time]
- (2) Completed TV/movie rating sheets [remind students to bring these]
- (3) Photo of "ball and chain" wedding ready to be shared on screen
- (4) List of names of students ready to be shared on screen for check-in

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, youth participants will be able to...

- (1) Discuss what might feel controlling to a partner
- (2) Apologize to someone
- (3) Recognize that guilt can be a useful feeling, with caveats

ACTIVITY 1: Check in and Reviewing homework from last week (15 minutes)

Going one by one, ask each person to share what TV show or movie they graded, what they saw, and how the activity went for them. If students forgot or had trouble with the sheet, ask them if they can think of a movie, TV show, book or song that they might like to analyze if they had a chance. As each person responds, facilitators ask these questions:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1** Did you end up thinking that the relationship between the characters was healthy or unhealthy? Why did you think that?
- 2** What kinds of things did you notice about the relationship that seemed strange to you?
- 3** What questions do you now have about relationships?

An example of a question that might not work so well is: "Did you notice things about the relationship you might not have otherwise noticed?" (because youth might say that they cannot accurately predict what they would have noticed or not in a different situation)

ACTIVITY 2: Being controlling Discussion and Activity (20 minutes)

Facilitator tip: One problem that some ASD youth face is that they can be taken advantage of. For example, people might tell them: “we can only be friends if you do such-and-such a thing for me.” They might also be treated badly by friends/potential dating partners who disappear on them or cheat on them, and we do not want the youth to learn to be accepting of being treated dishonestly or hurtfully. It may be tricky to teach them that there is a positive value to respecting other people’s right to be free, but that if someone is acting with disregard for your feelings it might also be a sign that it is not a healthy relationship for you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1** How can you tell if you are being controlling in a relationship? (That is, making someone feel controlled?) What signs can you look for from them? [It’s OK to think about friendships or dating relationships to answer this question]
- 2** How can a person figure out if they are being controlling in a relationship? (Ask the other person; stop periodically to ask oneself if they are being respectful)
- 3** What is the difference between being respectful towards someone versus being too trusting (i.e., having “nice guy syndrome”), such that you can be taken advantage of? How can we tell when one is happening versus the other?

Activity: Evaluate each statement below. Is it respectful (R) or controlling (C)?

(Answer key)

Don't go without me	C
I hope that you have fun, call me after if you want to	R
If you really loved me, you would want to come over to my house	C
I don't understand why you said you are busy but you are doing something with someone else.	C
If you are busy today, let's hang out tomorrow. Exactly what time are you free tomorrow? Do you agree to hang out tomorrow, yes or no?	C
Why didn't you text me back?	C
I love you so much I just want to be with you every minute	C
Take your time	R

ACTIVITY 3: Apology formula (15 minutes)

Facilitators explain that we all do things that we shouldn't have done sometimes.

Ask: “How do you know when it’s time to apologize to someone?” [Answers: sometimes it’s because you feel guilty, sometimes it’s because an authority figure tells you that you have to...]

Ask: If you have ever felt guilty before, what does guilt feel like to you?

Answers may include: stomach hurts, something weighing on your chest

Ask [optional]: How can you tell someone is feeling hurt by you?

Answers may include: If they aren't talking to you

Ask: Why is it hard for some people to apologize to other people?

Answers may include: Being stubborn, not wanting to admit that they are wrong, afraid of consequences, afraid of how the other person might react.

Ask: What makes an apology sound fake and not real?

Answers may include: Saying ‘no offense,’ not making eye contact.

Comment: If you find yourself apologizing for every little thing, that’s not good. If you feel like you are the only one who apologizes in the relationship, that’s not good. And, it’s always good to apologize after a fight to move things to a more positive place after a conflict, even if you don't think you’ve done something wrong.

To transition to next part, explain: It’s useful to know how to apologize when you are feeling badly, without going overboard (and getting into denigrating yourself and feeling miserable), and making sure you have been accountable. Every apology is different and there isn’t just one for every situation.

Here is a useful phrase to use to apologize well.

APOLOGY FORMULA

“I am sorry that I _____. If someone did that to me, I would feel _____. I am going to try not to do that again. Next time, I will _____ instead.”

Explain that the elements of this apology formula that work are that people like to hear you be accountable for what you did, and it often feels better to them to hear you name what you did aloud. So saying “I’m sorry I hurt you” isn’t quite as satisfying to them as when you say “I’m sorry that I lied to you.” Next, showing that you can empathize by saying that you would feel an emotion you think that they might feeling can make them feel understood. So you can say “If someone did that to me, I would feel betrayed and sad” to show them you can imagine how they feel. Focusing on the future, and next time, but saying “Next time, I will ___ instead” helps other people focus on the positive with you.

Facilitators can role play with each other, as an example, how to apologize. Facilitators can ask students to use the copy of the formula that they have to write out an apology to someone they feel they need to apologize to for something in the past week or month.

Ask: What do you think of this formula?

Closing check out (5 minutes)

Ask students if they would like to make any closing comments or ask any questions.

Controlling/Respectful statements

Don't go without me	
I hope that you have fun, call me after if you want to	
If you really loved me, you would want to come over to my house	
I don't understand why you said you are too busy to see me but you are doing something with someone else tomorrow.	
If you are busy today, let's hang out tomorrow. Exactly what time are you free tomorrow? Do you agree to hang out tomorrow, yes or no?	
Why didn't you text me back?	
I love you so much I just want to be with you every minute	
Take your time	

Make up your own statement and other people decide if it was a C or a R.

**Note: Context and tone matter, so some of these statements could be controlling or respectful depending on context. That's OK. The purpose is to generate discussion and thought.*

APOLOGY FORMULA

"I am sorry that I _____. If someone did that to me, I would feel _____.
I am going to try not to do that again. Next time, I will _____ instead."

SESSION 4

Identifying qualities of healthy dating relationships

TIME: 60 minutes

MATERIALS:

- (1) Names on screen for check in
- (2) Ideal partner qualities card sort cards [mailed ahead of time]
- (3) LBR Apps & Safety or “It’s OK to have boundaries” handout [mailed]
- (4) Planning a date multiple choice questions [mailed ahead of time]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, youth participants will be able to...

- (1) Identify qualities about an ideal partner for a healthy relationship
- (2) Discuss how to make a date and have a healthy date
- (3) Talk about different styles of flirting

ACTIVITY 1: Check in (5 minutes)

Each student checks in with their name and, optionally, can relay something going on with them that others might find interesting.

ACTIVITY 2: My ideal dating partner: a values card sort (20 minutes)

Each student should have a stack of the cards cut out (mailed or emailed ahead of time). Have the students sort the cards into three piles: (a) Important qualities in a dating partner (to me), (b) Not important qualities to me, and (c) Don’t know or maybe.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1** How would you summarize the theme that you see in the cards you put in the “important qualities” pile?
- 2** How would you summarize the theme that you see in the cards that you put in the “not important” pile?
- 3** Why is it important to reflect on the qualities that you are looking for in a partner?
- 4** What should you do if someone does not have one of the qualities you are looking for?

ACTIVITY 3: Planning a date (20 minutes)

Facilitators should explain that just like socializing with friends, socializing with dates can require some advanced planning. What we choose to do on a date, in what location, for how long, can influence how nervous or comfortable we feel and how nervous or comfortable the other person feels. After getting used to each other, two people often have an easy time planning what to do. In the beginning, it can be more difficult.

Explain we are going to talk about planning an in-person date. These questions should be mailed in handout form ahead of time, or facilitators can show them on the shared screen so people can both read them and hear the facilitator ask them. There may be more than one correct answer, the point is to get some discussion and consideration of options started.

(Q1) Pretend you meet someone you really like, you’ve been texting for a while, and you’d like to get together in person. What can you say to them to let them know that you want to see them in person?

EXAMPLES: (a) Do you want to get together this weekend?; (b) Would you like to see [name of movie] with me?; (c) Wait for them to ask you to get together because it’s too hard to suggest it in case they say no. (Note: This is not a “bad” response; facilitator can normalize waiting until you feel ready to weather a rejection, if it happens, to ask someone out. Courage is part of dating!)

Bonus question: What is a way to ask someone out without it seeming “creepy” to them? [Answer: Keep it low pressure and casual, which you can communicate with (a) what you ask, (b) via the medium you ask, (c) how you react]

(Q2) Pretend the other person says yes. What happens next?

POSSIBILITIES: (a) Ask what day and time the other person is free; (b) Talk about how you will get to the place where you are going (i.e., take the bus together, walk, someone drives); (c) Talk about who will pay for the date (Note: This is not considered polite or conventional)

(Q3) Sometimes people know for certain that they are on a date, and sometimes they don’t clarify that ahead of time. How do you figure out which one it is?

CARD SORT ACTIVITY CLASS 4

EXAMPLES: (a) Ask the other person over text if it counts as a date or not; (Note: This might not be advisable, as it puts pressure on them to decide and they may not know. On the other hand, sometimes clarity is useful to some people. It might depend); (b) text them: "it's a date!" so they know you think it is a date; or (c) send a lot of heart emojis

(Q4) If you are on a date, how can you tell if it's OK to hold hands or kiss the other person?

EXAMPLE: (a) Ask the other person: "I'd like to kiss you, is that OK?", (Note: Some college campuses will require that you ask for consent before any contact. Facilitators should stress that); (b) Notice if they stand very close to you, lean their head on you, or touch you non-accidentally during the date; or (c) Don't ever be the first person to touch someone else, wait for them to grab your hand or ask you if you want to kiss or hug.

(Q5) If you are on a date, and the other person says that they just want to be friends, what should you do next?

EXAMPLES: (a) End the date abruptly because it's pointless?; (b) Tell them that it's fine with you even though it is disappointing, embarrassing, or hurt your feelings (Note: In this case, ask if they would take time to process their disappointment later); (c) Pretend you were not interested in dating them and that you only want to be friends, too?

(Q6) This one definitely depends on context. What if someone you know from school and are friendly with (not best friends) asks you out, and you want to say no?

[**Bonus question:** Do you need to worry about hurting the other person's feelings?]

POSSIBILITIES: (a) Just say "no thank you"; (b) Tell them "I don't really like you, sorry."; (c) Tell them "I'm not into dating people."; (d) Something else [tell us what]

Closing Check Out (10 minutes)

Ask students to check out with one new question that they have about dating that hasn't been answered in this class so far. (Facilitators write down questions and answer them next time).

**Totally honest
at all times**

**Can be trusted
with secrets**

**Goofy,
funny, silly**

**Beautiful,
handsome
or physically
attractive**

**Loud, talks a lot,
bubbly, outgoing**

**Smart, thinks a
lot, likes to learn
new things**

**Enjoys spending
time in groups or
with family**

Shy, quiet

Has strong opinions

Doesn't mind when the other person isn't perfect

Wants to have sex or sexual contact

Gives great compliments

Likes sports

Artistic or creative

Heterosexual

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or pansexual

Appears perfect

Appears imperfect

Has extra cash to spend on fun things

Loves music

Jealous

Sometimes seems sad

Gets into arguing for fun, debating, or playful teasing

Hates crowds

Independent

**Likes to cuddle,
hug, snuggle
or touch**

**Does not want
to kiss, hug,
touch or have
sexual contact**

**Yells during
arguments**

Communication and safety

TIME: 60 minutes

MATERIALS:

None

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, youth participants will be able to...

- (1) Talk about how to approach someone that you are interested in dating
- (2) Choose a way to talk to someone neurotypical that you are dating about ASD
- (3) Identify possible safety risks of meeting people online

ACTIVITY 1: Check In (5 minutes)

Ask students to say their name and any news about themselves that they would like to share, if they would like to

ACTIVITY 2: Fun facts about dating (10 minutes)

One facilitator answers questions that the group generated at the end of the last class. Some fast facts are provided below as examples:

- How can you tell if someone is flirting? (Smiling, making jokes, teasing you but not to be mean, gives backhanded compliments, making eye contact longer than usual or frequently, touching their hair, does not wrinkle nose when smiling)
- How long should you wait before asking someone out?
- What are some good ways to meet people?
- How do you approach someone you like without being perceived as desperate? (You could ask to take a photo of them and ask for their number to text it to them, and follow up later by texting a bit more)
- What is the average age when teens start dating?
- How can you ask for someone's number in a funny way (not weird)?

- Where does the word dating come from? (This word was invented in the U.S. in 1896 and has to do with the fact that women kept calendars and would use them to keep track of various appointments to go out with someone, using a specific “date.” Source: Book by Moira Wegel, pg. 12)

ACTIVITY 3: Letting someone neurotypical that you are dating know that you are autistic (20 minutes)

Facilitators should explain that sometimes people on the spectrum go to a school where everyone is autistic so everybody already knows that’s the case. In other situations, in college, or elsewhere, other people may not already know that you are on the spectrum. They might not even know when you start dating. In those situations, how can people reveal that they are autistic?

Are there benefits to sharing a diagnosis with someone?

(Q1) What are possible benefits or drawbacks of sharing an ASD diagnosis with someone? Imagine that you met someone and became friends. They don’t know you are autistic. What would be the pros and cons of telling them that you are? Now imagine that the person is a dating partner, and not just a friend. Are there different pros and cons? What are they? [Note: Being open with someone can enhance closeness; being open can help them know exactly what you need and be OK with it; some people are judgmental or rude about it though]

(Q2) Pretend you have decided to tell a friend or dating partner that you are autistic. When in the relationship do you tell them—right away or later on? Why?

(Q3) Pretend you have decided to tell a friend that you are autistic. What words do you use to explain it?

(Optional Q4) Pretend you are teaching a class to kids who are younger than you (about 12-14 years old) who have an ASD diagnosis, and they look up to you. They want to know what they should say to someone that they meet who is neurotypical about their autism. What words would you advise them to use?

DISCUSSION POINTS:

Sometimes putting a name to your needs (i.e, ASD) helps a partner get oriented to it.

ACTIVITY 4: Dating online: Safety considerations (15 minutes)

Facilitators explain that they are going to present different scenarios. They will then ask people to identify the possible safety concern. Note that many youth have already had online safety lectures at school or may have already internalized basic internet safety rules. If the first three scenarios seem “too easy” to discuss, try moving to Scenario 4 or 5.

(Scenario 1): You are playing a video game online and someone starts chatting with you. Their avatar makes them look like a teenager of a gender to which you are attracted. They send you a request to be added to your friends list. What are the possible problems? Has anyone in the group ever made a friend online and how did it turn out?

(Scenario 2): You have been friends with someone online for six months even though you have never met in person. They tell you a really sad story which you believe is true. Their mom is sick, their cat just died, and they are really depressed. They want you to send them money for a bus ticket so that they can visit you. What are the possible problems? What can you do to protect yourself from this problem?

(Scenario 3): You have been texting with someone that you met online for a year. They have become a really good friend to you. They understand you like nobody else you know. Sometimes you have sexual thoughts about this person, even though you have never seen their photo. You can imagine what they look like. They ask you to send a nude selfie. You kind of want to do it, because you want to see what they look like, too. What are the possible problems? Are there better solutions for getting to know them better?

(Scenario 4): Your best friend, who is on the spectrum, is feeling frustrated that they haven’t met anyone that they want to date in a while. They want to start dating. They’ve tried meeting people at school and at camp but haven’t met anyone. They are thinking of dating online. They know that there are some hook-up apps like Tinder that they are going to avoid. They are planning to use a website like Match.com or OKCupid that tries to match people based on their responses to questions. What are the pros and cons of trying online dating? What should they be thinking about to prepare?

(Scenario 5): You’ve been dating someone for one month and you really like them. In the beginning of the relationship they texted a lot. Now they don’t text very often and sometimes seem standoff-ish. That is, they don’t seem excited to hear from you. It’s making you feel lonely and a bit sad. Should you say something to them? If so, should you text it or say it on the phone or in person? What should you say?

Closing Check Out (5 minutes)

Ask the group if anyone has any questions about dating for next week

APPS & SAFETY

Whether you're in a relationship, hooking up, or single, dating can look different online and in apps. No matter if you've known the person you're into for an hour or years, your personal safety is key.

IT'S OKAY TO HAVE BOUNDARIES.



Don't feel obligated to engage in conversations that make you feel uncomfortable. You have the right to protect your personal space.

THINK BEFORE YOU SEND.



Everything sent online or through text can be screenshot, saved and shared. Even if you think you can trust the person, once you hit send you no longer control where the image or content is going.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO BLOCK.



Sometimes people aren't always kind or respectful, but don't engage in back and forth arguments online. It's possible for them to disappear and stop bugging you if you block them.

REPORT IF YOU FEEL THREATENED.



Threats and harmful messages should not be tolerated. All apps have a way to report if someone is being harmful to others. Don't worry about what the person might think. Your feelings matter.

SPILL THE DETAILS.



Should you choose to meet anyone from an app or the internet offline, make sure to tell a friend or family member. Helpful information includes: the person's full name & phone number, location of meeting spot, how long you plan to be gone, and a way to reach you.

BOUNDARIES

Scenario 1: PERSONAL SPACE

Noelle and Keith are on their third date and things are going well. They are affectionate and hold hands while they walk around the movie theater. While in the movie Keith put his hand on Noelle's leg. She's okay with it, but starts to feel weird when he keeps moving his hand up. She moves away in her seat and nudges down his hand a little. Keith seems like he got the hint, but soon his hand is moving up again. Noelle likes him, but she's not sure how to tell him that she is not comfortable.

What would you do in this situation?



FREEDOM AND SPACE

I want to do my own thing today. Let's plan something for tomorrow.

I like you, and I like spending time with you, but I also like my alone time.

WHAT CAN I SAY TO SOMEONE IF I NEED MORE SPACE?

I haven't [insert activity here] in a while. I'd like to do that this weekend.

I need space.

SESSION 6:

Getting help from other people & giving help to friends

TIME: 60 minutes

MATERIALS: [emailed or mailed ahead of time]

- (1) List of helping resources and websites

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, youth participants will be able to...

- (1) List people and resources that could be used to get feedback on dating relationships

ACTIVITY 1: Check in & answers (5 minutes)

Each student checks in with their name and anything they might like to add as a hello. Facilitators reply to any questions asked last time.

ACTIVITY 2: What are warning signs a relationship might be turning abusive, or someone is becoming controlling? (15 minutes)

The facilitator should explain that any of these could be fine. They are not an automatic that someone is controlling or abusive. The idea of a “red flag” is that it gets our attention so we know to think more carefully about someone and how they are treating us. Facilitator can read or otherwise share these warning signs and ask the group what questions they have about them.

Warning signs behaviors:

- Doesn't ask you what you want to do; makes all the decisions
- Says things that make you feel insecure
- Doesn't seem to notice when you are feeling sad, shy or nervous
- Is sarcastic about things you say
- Makes fun of you in a way that hurts your feelings and isn't funny
- Shoves you in a way that is supposed to be playful, but is not OK
- Makes you pay for everything, never pays for you

- Assumes you are free all the time or whenever they want
- Calls you names as a joke, but it's borderline hurtful or hurtful
- Is very negative about other people (that is, is always complaining about or saying negative things about other people)
- Has a history of being in violent, abusive or otherwise unhealthy dating relationships (i.e., hit someone in their past relationship)
- Engages in delinquent/criminal activity; has criminal record
- Often in trouble at school; suspension, expulsion, detention, etc.
- Has witnessed or experienced abuse or violence at home
- Is obsessed with the military, guns, martial arts, or fighting [some people do martial arts as a hobby, but this is more than a hobby]
- Tries to assault or attack you inside an online game in a way that is not usual or seems aggressive to you
- Has a history of hitting people; siblings, friends, peers, dating partners
- Talks about hurting themselves or wanting to die
- Has an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, marijuana or other drugs
- Drives a car in a way that scares you
- Yells at other drivers on the road; has road rage
- Is cruel to animals or pets
- Doesn't take medication that they are supposed to take as prescribed
- Brags about being able to make other people do what they want
- Is fond of saying “I'm not like everyone else” or “I'm not normal” [once or twice may be fine, but it is a concern if someone makes it clear that part of their identity is that have disregard for social conventions entirely because it signals they also may not regard laws as applying to them; could also be narcissistic]
- Is fixated on how other people view them
- Says that they can't stand other people except for you
- Has friends who are violent, aggressive, uncaring
- Has very traditional gender-normative attitudes; inflexible about them
- Interrupts you in conversation repeatedly, without apologizing or seems not to notice
- Always chooses what you will eat, what movie you watch, what game you will play

ACTIVITY 3: Who can you go to for advice during a dating relationship? (20 minutes)

Facilitator explains that everybody needs advice before, during and after romantic relationships. There isn't a person alive, not from the most famous movie star to your Mom/Dad/guardian who hasn't needed a friend or other person to talk to about their relationships as they unfold. You should not begin dating until you have a sounding board of at least 2 people you trust that you could ask for advice when you have questions about what to do in a relationship or how someone is treating you. Note that not everyone can go to their parents, and not everyone has friends—both are OK.

Question: For each one of these, (a) WOULD you talk to someone for help? And (b) Who would you talk to?

- (1) If someone you have a crush on starts ignoring you.
- (2) If someone you are dating hits or shoves you.
- (3) If someone touched you sexually and you didn't like it.
- (4) If someone asked you for money and you were not sure it was legit.

Many teens are likely to turn to a friend or someone their own age when they have questions about something going on in a dating relationship or with someone that they like. But there are certain times when going to an adult is probably a better idea, because peers may not have the requisite experience to advise you well. Note: Not everyone can go to a parent safely.

Discussion: How do you know if your parents and/or therapist are a safe person to go to for relationship advice? What makes you feel like they are not or may not be, if you feel that way?

ACTIVITY 4: How can you help a friend? (10 minutes)

Help A Friend



Facilitators review the suggestions from Break the Cycle on the handout to the left.

ACTIVITY 5: Share these resources (5 minutes)

- (1) Scarleteen: <http://www.scarleteen.com/>
- (2) Love Is Not Abuse: <https://www.breakthecycle.org/loveisnotabuse>
- (3) One Love: <https://www.joinonelove.org/>
- (4) Planned Parenthood: <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/>
- (5) Taco about it Tuesday episodes from Break the Cycle: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwlyLuYvX77CSNMhntplw_JcCJwt81Wga

Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673

Trevor Lifeline (for LGBTQ* youth): 1-866-488-7386

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

National Runaway Safeline: 1-800-786-2929

National Domestic Violence Hotline - 1-800-799-7233

National Hotline for Crime Victims: 1-855-484-2846

National Street Harassment Hotline: 1-855-897-5910

Closing Check Out (5 minutes)

Ask students if they have any suggestions about the class to make improvements for next time.

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ORGANIZATION FOR
AUTISM RESEARCH



EXCEPTIONAL CARE. WITHOUT EXCEPTION.