

Piecing Together Behaviors of Healthy Relationships

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Abstract

Unhealthy relationships have a devastating impact on adolescents' academic performance, including poor attendance, difficulty concentrating, and feeling unsafe at school. Schools provide an ideal setting to positively influence adolescents' attitudes, knowledge, and relationship skills by integrating healthy relationship lessons into sexuality and/or violence prevention units. The primary goal of these units is to promote positive health behaviors and reduce unhealthy behaviors in order to decrease adolescents' risk for short- and long-term academic and health consequences. Therefore, the purpose of this teaching technique is to increase adolescents' ability to identify characteristics and corresponding behaviors of healthy and unhealthy relationships including romantic/dating, friendships, and familial relationships.

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Introduction

According to the Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance System (YRBSS), approximately 10% of high school students reported physical or sexual victimization from a dating partner within the last 12 months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). Teen dating violence (TDV) is associated with negative health outcomes, including increased risk of substance use and abuse, early onset of sexual activity, and poor body image (Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Chang, &

Ennett, 2013). Additionally, victims of TDV are more likely to experience violent adult relationships and often find it more challenging to develop trust, security, and intimacy with long-term partners (Foshee et al., 2013).

Teen dating violence severely impacts adolescents' academic performance; nearly 20% of students with underperforming grades (e.g., D's and F's) report experiencing TDV in the last year compared to only 6% of students performing well (e.g., mostly A's) (CDC, 2009). Adolescents in unhealthy relationships report feeling unsafe in the school environment, contributing to poor concentration, low attendance, increased misbehavior, and decreased education outcomes (Baynard & Cross, 2008; Laco, 2013).

A primary goal of school-based health education is to promote positive health behaviors while preventing unhealthy behaviors (Table 1) that place students at higher risk for short- and long-term consequences. Healthy relationship, sexuality, and violence prevention curricula are designed to equip adolescents with the requisite knowledge and skills to identify characteristics of unhealthy relationships, evaluate their current and future relationship goals, and prevent patterns on TDV (Clinton et al., 2016). Additionally, effective curricula influence adolescents' relationship knowledge, beliefs, and skills and by promoting communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills (Clinton et al., 2016).

Effective curricula establishes relevance to participants' developmental stage and provides a quality learning experience (Stabback, 2016). This teaching technique encompasses both components while building on an existing strategy; by utilizing puzzle pieces, participants are encouraged to think critically, analyze information, and discuss characteristics with hopes of decreasing stigma surrounding the topic. Therefore, the purpose of this teaching technique is to increase adolescents' ability to identify characteristics and corresponding behaviors of healthy and unhealthy relationships including romantic/dating, friendships, and familial relationships.

Primary Audience

This teaching technique was designed for high school students in ninth or tenth grade as an introductory lesson within a healthy relationship, sexuality, or violence prevention unit. The foundation of this lesson easily connects to future lessons on effective communication, setting healthy boundaries, and sexual assault prevention. This technique could also be implemented for students in higher education as well as participants in community-based organizations to introduce characteristics and behaviors of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Learning Objectives

Following the lesson, participants will:

- Differentiate between characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships;
- Create jigsaw puzzles displaying relationship characteristics and behaviors;

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- Classify behaviors as representative of either healthy or unhealthy relationship characteristics;
- Discuss strategies for responding to unhealthy and/or abusive relationships.

National Health Education Standards & National Sexuality Education Standards

Health education should align to national standards and is most effective when the content is age- and developmentally-appropriate for participants. Implementing this lesson will

Table 1. *Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships* handout. (Youth.gov, n.d.). This table presents a variety of healthy and unhealthy relationship characteristics for participants to use to help identify which characteristics they believe are the most influential in developing healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Healthy Characteristics	Unhealthy Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mutual respect.</i> Respect means that each person values who the other is and understands the other person’s boundaries. • <i>Trust.</i> Partners should place trust in each other and give each other the benefit of the doubt. • <i>Honesty.</i> Being truthful, even when it might be uncomfortable, which builds trust and strengthens the relationship. • <i>Compromise.</i> Each partner does not always get his or her way. Each should acknowledge different points of view and be willing to give and take. • <i>Individuality.</i> Neither person should have to compromise who he/she is, and his/her identity should not be based on a partner’s. Each should continue seeing his or her friends and doing the things he/she loves. Each should be supportive of his/her partner wanting to pursue new hobbies or make new friends. • <i>Good communication.</i> Each partner should speak honestly and openly to avoid miscommunication. If one person needs to sort out his or her feelings first, the other partner should respect those wishes and wait until he or she is ready to talk. • <i>Anger control.</i> Controlling emotions that may be perceived as hostile. Anger can be handled in healthy ways such as taking a deep breath, counting to ten, or talking it out. • <i>Fighting fair.</i> Those who are fight fair, stick to the subject and avoid insults. • <i>Problem solving.</i> Partners can learn to solve problems and identify new solutions by breaking a problem into small parts or by talking through the situation. • <i>Understanding.</i> Each partner should take time to understand what the other might be feeling. • <i>Self-confidence.</i> Being comfortable enough to allow others to express their opinions without forcing their own opinions on them. • <i>Being a role model.</i> Inspiring others, friends, and family to also behave in a respectful way. • <i>Healthy sexual relationship.</i> Dating partners engage in a sexual relationship that both are comfortable with, and neither partner feels pressured or forced to engage in sexual activity that is outside his or her comfort zone or without consent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Control.</i> One partner makes all the decisions and tells the other what to do, what to wear, or who to spend time with. He or she is unreasonably jealous and/or tries to isolate the other partner from his or her friends and family. • <i>Hostility.</i> One partner picks a fight with or antagonizes the other partner. This may lead to one partner changing his or her behavior in order to avoid upsetting the other. • <i>Dishonesty.</i> One partner steals or lies to or keeps information from the other. • <i>Disrespect.</i> One partner makes fun of the opinions and interests of the other partner or destroys something that belongs to the partner. • <i>Dependence.</i> One partner feels he or she “cannot live without” the other. He or she may threaten to do something drastic if the relationship ends. • <i>Intimidation.</i> One partner tries to control aspects of the other’s life by making the other partner fearful or timid. One partner may attempt to keep his or her partner from friends and family or threaten violence or a break-up. • <i>Physical violence.</i> One partner uses force to get his or her way (e.g., hitting, slapping, grabbing, or shoving). • <i>Sexual violence.</i> One partner pressures or forces the other into sexual activity against his or her will or without consent.

satisfy both the National Health Education Standards (CDC, 2016) and National Sexuality Education Standards (Future of Sex Education, 2011) (Figure 1).

Materials & Resources

- 1 blank puzzle template (laminated) per small group (Figure 2)
- 1 set of dry erase markers per small group
- 1 pair of scissors per small group
- 1 “Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships” handout per small group (Table 1)
- 1 highlighter per group
- Whiteboard
- 1 “Relationship Types” handout per small group (Table 2)
- 1 small baggie per group for puzzle pieces

Procedures

Part I: Before the lesson

- A. Print one “Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships” handout per small group (Table 1).
- B. Print and laminate one blank puzzle template per small group (Figure 2).
- C. Print the “Relationship Types” handout (Table 2), cut into strips, and place one strip into each baggie.

Part II: During the lesson

- A. The facilitator will arrange small groups of two to three participants.
- B. Each small group will be given the “Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships” handout (Table 1) and a highlighter. The facilitator will ask participants to review the handout and highlight five characteristics from each category (i.e., healthy and unhealthy) they believe are most influential in shaping each type of relationship.
- C. The facilitator will draw a line in the middle of the whiteboard and label one side as “Healthy” and the other side as “Unhealthy.”
- D. The facilitator will call on groups to report key words highlighted in each category and record the words on the

appropriate side of the whiteboard. The facilitator may choose to have groups indicate why the characteristics were selected or just record them on the board. This procedure can be adapted to participants in higher education by having participants record answers using electronic “clickers” rather than whiteboards.

- E. Next, the facilitator will distribute the following materials to each small group:
 - One baggie containing a relationship type slip (Table 2)
 - One puzzle template (Appendix 1)
 - Dry erase markers
 - One pair of scissors
- C. After each group has the required materials, the facilitator will introduce the puzzle activity by informing participants the purpose of the lesson: to explore and identify behaviors you would expect to see in healthy and unhealthy relationships. The facilitator will use the directions below to guide participants through the activity:
 1. On the front of the puzzle template, draw a picture that resembles your assigned relationship type.
 2. On the back of each puzzle piece, write behaviors you would expect to see in the relationship type in varying directions and angles.
 3. Use the scissors to cut along the pre-drawn lines to create puzzle pieces. Place pieces in the baggie and exchange puzzles with another group. Remind participants not to include the slip of paper indicating the relationship type.
 4. Instruct groups to read each behavior out loud to determine if they are representative of healthy or unhealthy relationships as they put the puzzle pieces together. For each puzzle piece, the group should use the dry erase marker to label the behavior according to the relationship characteristic being supported or compromised by the behavior.
 5. After creating the completed puzzle, instruct groups to turn the puzzle over and evaluate how the image drawn represents the type of relationship described on the back. Groups should attempt to figure out the type of relationship assigned on the original slip of paper.

National Health Education Standards (9-12)	
1.12.1	Predict how healthy behaviors can affect health status
1.12.2	Describe the interrelationships of emotional, intellectual, physical, and social health
2.12.3	Analyze how peers influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors
4.12.1	Use skills for communicating effectively with family, peers, and others to enhance health
7.12.3	Demonstrate a variety of behaviors to avoid or reduce health risks to self and others

National Sexuality Education Standards (9-12)	
HR. 12.CC.1	Describe characteristics of healthy and unhealthy romantic and/or sexual relationship
HR.12.IC.1	Demonstrate effective strategies to avoid or end an unhealthy relationship
PS.12.CC.1	Compare and contrast situations and behaviors that may constitute bullying, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual assault, incest, rape and dating violence

Figure 1: *National Health Education Standards (9-12) & National Sexuality Education Standards (9-12)*. The figure outlines which specific Health Education and Sexuality Education standards are addressed throughout the teaching technique.

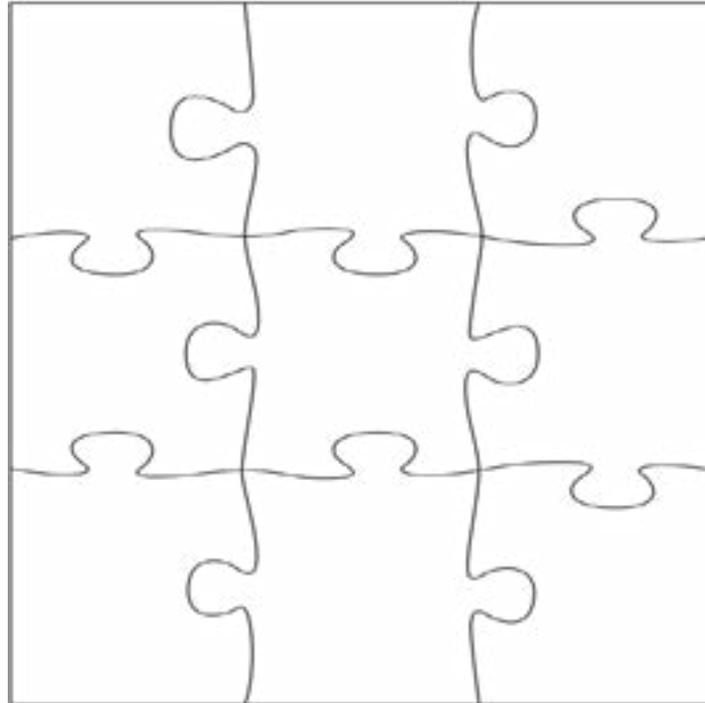


Figure 2: *Puzzle template*. A template will be provided for small groups to write behaviors of the assigned relationship type. On the front of the template, participants will draw an image representative of their relationship (Table 2). Puzzles can be downloaded online and are available in 6-, 9-, or 12-piece templates.

Part III: After the lesson (Debrief)

A. After groups have completed the activity, the facilitator will lead a large discussion calling on groups to respond to the following prompts:

1. What behaviors might we see in a healthy relationship and what characteristics do those behaviors represent?

Potential response:

- A person sends a text telling their partner he is running late but should be there in the next ten minutes. This could represent good communication, understanding, or being a good role model.

2. How do these characteristics contribute to healthy relationships?

Potential response:

- Each characteristic functions to help or support the other person succeed. They build each other up instead of serving as a barrier for the other person.

3. Why are healthy relationships important?

Potential responses:

- They build a strong foundation for each partner to grow individually while increasing their relationship with their partner.
- Healthy relationships are important to individual's health and well-being. Feeling isolated and alone are never good feelings; having someone to share experiences and opportunities are one of the many ways individuals can live happy and fulfilling lives.

Table 2: *Relationship Types handout*. This table provides the relationship types to be cut into strips, placed into baggies, and assigned to small groups.

Relationship Types	
Healthy romantic relationship	Unhealthy romantic relationship
Healthy family relationship	Unhealthy family relationship
Healthy school relationship (e.g., teacher, coach, or other adult)	Unhealthy school relationship (e.g., teacher, coach, or other adult)
Healthy friendship	Unhealthy friendship

4. What behaviors might we see in an unhealthy relationship and which characteristics do those behaviors represent?

Potential response:

- A person sends twenty texts within ten minutes accusing the partner of not being honest about where he/she is. This could represent control, disrespect, hostility, intimidation, or dishonesty.

5. How do these characteristics contribute to unhealthy relationships?

Potential response:

- Each of the characteristics may create conflict by producing a non-supportive situation or environment. These unhealthy characteristics cause problems and interfere with the ability for partners to experience happiness within the relationship.

6. Why is it important to avoid unhealthy relationships?

Potential response:

- The negative situations created by unhealthy characteristics compromise a person's mental and emotional health putting the individual at greater risk for depression and stress, which can contribute to a variety of negative outcomes and/or health complications.

7. How might you respond if you or someone you know is involved in an unhealthy relationship?

Potential responses:

- Discuss my concerns with them directly; believe them and tell them I'm sorry; encourage them to talk to a trusted adult (e.g., friend, parent, teacher, guidance counselor, or other administrator/professional); direct them to school or community resources; call the local police department; maintain a supportive presence throughout the process; serve as an advocate for those who are involved or have been involved in an unhealthy relationship.

8. What are some ways you (or someone you know) can escape from an unhealthy relationship?

Potential responses:

- Tell a trusted adult (e.g., friend, parent, teacher, guidance counselor, or other administrator/professional) and seek help/guidance; seek counseling support; locate proper resources involved (e.g., if safety is jeopardized, law enforcement should be contacted); contact your local law enforcement agency; end the relationship. If the relationship was violent, seek a safe place and follow the necessary steps to ensure security (i.e., restraining order); seek therapy and continued support; identify warning signs when entering into future relationships as an adolescent and/or adult.

Assessment Techniques

Knowledge and skills gained from this activity may be informally assessed through participation in the lesson debrief. To encourage all participants to engage in the discussion, think-pair-share may be utilized to provide a safer environment for discussing such a personal and/or sensitive topic. Typically, adolescents are more likely to participate in large group discussions when they know their ideas have been accepted and then agreed upon by their peers.

If the facilitator prefers a formal assessment, the classification of behaviors by characteristic could evaluate the participants' ability to recognize examples of representative behaviors. Additionally, an exit slip may be completed to determine if the learning objectives were met by having participants write down what they believe are the most influential characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationship discussed in the lesson. On the same piece of paper, the facilitator could also ask participants to identify how they would personally help a friend if they were in an unhealthy relationship.

Assessment of participants' knowledge and skills can also be adapted to fit within the higher education setting. Formative assessment may include teach backs, carousels, or reviewing answers recorded using classroom clickers. The classroom clickers may give participants the feeling of anonymity, thus making them more willing to share their thoughts regarding personal topics. Summative assessment may take place through creating infographics or advocacy pieces for social media sites or campus newspapers. These pieces could highlight antecedents to unhealthy relationships, warning signs of potentially unhealthy relationships, and campus/community resources.

The learning objectives were met in the following ways:

- *Differentiate between characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships:* this objective was addressed when participants wrote down characteristics of their assigned relationship type on puzzle pieces.
- *Create jigsaw puzzles displaying relationship types and characteristics:* this objective was met when small groups created a puzzle based on their assigned relationship type. Participants were encouraged to collaborate and brainstorm ideas representing their assigned relationship type.
- *Classify behaviors as representative of either healthy or unhealthy relationship characteristics:* this objective was addressed when participants were required to justify why each behavior was either healthy or unhealthy and which characteristic the behavior represented.
- *Discuss strategies for responding to unhealthy and/or abusive relationships:* this objective was met during the large group discussion. Participants are asked a series of questions, requiring them to think beyond the foundational characteristics and discuss how they would step in to help someone in an unhealthy relationship.

Activity Adaptations

This technique can be modified to a variety of health topics and grade levels. Facilitators can replace healthy versus unhealthy relationships with nutrition, body systems, sexual health, chronic diseases, or categories of physical activity. For participants in higher education, more advanced topics could include methods of contraception, sexually transmitted infections, sexual harassment and “sexting,” or alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Lessons Learned

- This teaching technique was first pilot tested in a health education methodology course and again at an international conference on the health risks of youth. Based on these two experiences, the following recommendations are made:
- To prepare for the lesson, the facilitator should review current teen dating violence literature and be prepared to act as a resource person for participants who may seek additional information or support. The facilitator may wish to invite the school counselor to observe or participate in the lesson to promote the availability of school counseling services.
- Laminating the puzzle pieces allows for the activity to be repeated among various class periods. If laminating is not possible, cardstock paper will easily suffice.
- Drawing the picture on the back of the puzzle template prior to cutting the puzzle pieces apart makes it easier to draw the initial picture. To save time, puzzle pieces can be pre-cut and placed in a small baggie with the relationship types for groups to assemble prior to drawing the image.
- The facilitator should ensure the participants are able to justify what makes a characteristic healthy or unhealthy. For example, some jealousy might be expected within an adolescent relationship, but participants should be able to explain when jealousy becomes unhealthy and/or unsafe.
- The facilitator should encourage diversity and inclusivity within the relationship types depicted on puzzle pieces. It is the facilitator’s responsibility to ensure LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships are represented in the lesson plan.
- The facilitator should guarantee resources are made available to participants involved in unhealthy and unsafe relationships; resources may include school guidance counselors, social workers, local police, community organizations, hotlines, and internet resources (<http://www.loveisrespect.org>).

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