

Healthy Relationships – Ten Top Tips to help parents understand the main influences on young people’s relationships.



Most parents will have heard about the dangers of online content that their teens and pre-teens are accessing on their phones.

Most parents will know about the dangers of ‘porn’.

Most parents will know about influencers like Andrew Tate and his brand of ‘toxic’ masculinity.

Most parents will know about the addictiveness of TikTok and how it’s leading to young people to undertake dangerous ‘prank’ trends and diagnose themselves with mental health problems.

I’m sure many parents will feel out of touch and at a time when teenagers are prone to challenging behaviours, many won’t want to exacerbate already fragile relations within their family.

Many parents won’t want to rock the boat.

Many parents may be so invested in their own lives, social media, emails and their working days - which have somehow bled into plenty of our own leisure time – that they may not notice the subtle shifts in their young people that suddenly it’s like you’re speaking a different language.

Parents thinking back to their own adolescence will recall the challenges they felt communicating with ever-more-distant and stressed parents and wondering why they were getting so upset, you know as a teen ‘everything will be fine’ and that they should just ‘you know, relax a bit’.

Modern youth now has an internet that doesn’t forget anything, that encourages them to take ever-more-risky online behaviours, an adulthood slipping into their childhood and a dozen platforms that need careful curation and attention to keep their friendships and social lives up-to-speed.

So, as parents, what do you need to know? Here are ten different tips and tricks to help you understand and support your teen.

1. **They may well be embarking on unhealthy relationship behaviours** – in November 2023, Women’s Aid and ORB research published some insightful research into the influence of influencers after interviewing young people under 24:

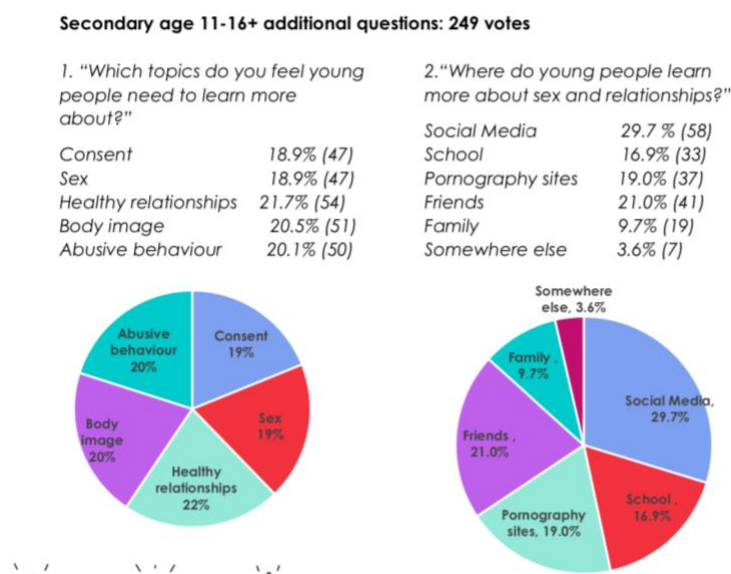
- 23% disagreed with the statement that 'you always need consent to have sex with someone'.
- 4% agreed that it is acceptable to physically hurt someone in a relationship as long as you said 'sorry' afterwards.
- This rose to 19% for those who consumed 'Andrew Tate' style content.

Top Tip: understand and discuss consent with your teenager. Regularly. (Yes it's embarrassing but it could ensure that they are safe from harm in relationships – either behaving in a harmful way or receiving it).

[Here's a blog and a link to this research.](#)

2. **A Votes for School survey** about relationships undertaken in 2022 (with more than 42,000 students responses) found that parents accounted for less than 10% of the sources for their learning about sex and relationships, with young people saying that p0rn made up twice that figure and Social Media was three times higher. Research Report [HERE](#).

Top Tip: you need to have those BIG talks to keep your children safe in their intimate relationships.



3. **As a result of online influencers** and p0rn, young people are finding themselves in relationships with partners who are using coercive control tactics to manipulate them.

Often dressed up as 'care' or 'keeping you safe' controlling behaviours start small and might look 'romantic' or 'jealous' or 'really keen' but can quickly become overbearing and controlling.

There are a number of stages to coercive control and as parents, it's worth investigating the elements that present themselves in relationships and the way they will potentially affect the behaviour and outlook of your young person.

Top Tip: Cathy Press' book, When Love Bites, is specifically designed to help your teen (and you) understand the unhealthy relationship dynamics that come with Coercive Control. Book Review and [link HERE](#).

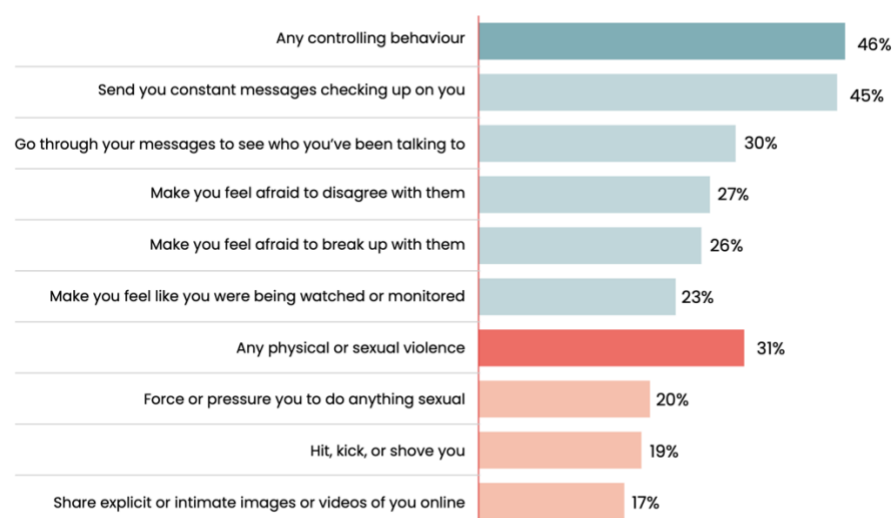
4. **Children, Vulnerability and Violence:** research released by The Youth Endowment Fund in December 2024, found that around 13% of all children in relationships in the UK aged between 13 and 17 are likely to be involved in relationships where some form of control, abuse or violence takes place. The survey undertaken with around 10,400 young people yielded the following headline figures:

- 27% of young people aged 13-17 said they had been in relationships in the past 12 months, of those 49% had experienced violent or controlling behaviours from their partners.
- The above figures translate to *13% of all children*.
- The most common controlling behaviours that were experienced / perpetrated were (see graphic below):
 - o constant messaging (45%);
 - o going through your messages to see who you've been talking to (30%);
 - o making you feel afraid to disagree or break up with them (27% and 26% respectively);
 - o any type of physical or sexual violence (31%)
 - o force or pressure to do anything sexual (20%)

This snapshot of young peoples' relationships – they third part of a series of five - should make it pretty clear that the technology we all rely on and utilise constantly is being abused by controlling people to track and 'investigate' their partners. Not only that, but that there seems to be a growing link between technology / social media / porn which is leading to coercion and violence in intimate relationships.

[Here is the Youth Endowment Fund report.](#)

Figure 2.1: Proportion of children in relationships who have experienced different types of violent or controlling behaviour



5. **Language / Attitudes.** As well as the usual indecipherable phrases and words young people use that seem like a totally different language to a parent, when young people are becoming drawn into unhealthy masculinities or sexist / misogynistic attitudes you may note a change in the language they use to describe women and girls or certain concepts which hint at their viewing content.

Young men who listen to a lot of shouty male podcasters - who often go shirtless and frequently spout stereotypical sexist attitudes - will use a distinct vocabulary, one which may at first be subtle but will become repetitive:

- Calling women “girls”.
- Calling women “females”
- Using phrases like “feminism’s gone too far” or “feminists are man haters”
- They’ll often talk about “false accusations that ruin men’s lives” when sexual harassment / assault allegations emerge
- You may hear “fatherless behaviour” / “raised by a single mother”
- You will hear “parental alienation”
- You may hear “men are oppressed now”
- You’ll hear “traditional man is a provider”
- You may also hear words like “simp” or “cuck” or “Low-T” (where ‘T’ is testosterone) to describe men and boys who show the slightest empathy and kindness to women and women’s issues.
- After the US elections in November 2024, we heard a lot of “Your Body, My Choice” as women’s rights were again under threat as Trump was re-elected.

Top Tip: Like many forms of indoctrination and cults, the ‘manosphere’ (the online community that promotes old-style / ‘toxic’ / dominance-based masculinity) has its own levels and rules of engagement and along with that, different languages and terms. It’s worth looking into this world – via Laura Bates’ excellent book [Men Who Hate Women](#) – who explored the manosphere and what it means for men and boys as well as the impact it’s having on women and girls.

6. **Body Image** – THO / Global Equality Collective Research. A survey conducted in 2023 by Tommy Hatto and the GEC found some troubling insights from young people into their body image. They surveyed 1,146 young people between 12 and 30 years and found that only 15% had a positive body-image, with 46% claiming their body-image was neutral and 39% saying it was negative. The main factors at play were the impact of social media and unattainable / fake / edited photos which claim to represent ‘reality’. [Link to Blog and research report.](#)

Top Tip: Discuss body image, look at unrealistic expectations, consider how cosmetic and product marketing asks us to find fault in our bodies in the ever-changing search for perfection. ‘Instagram influencers’ and their unrealistic and manipulated versions of beauty are also complicit in this idea of ‘perfection’. Use the Olympics / Paralympics as a way of exploring what amazing machines our bodies are and the variety of ways our bodies can look and behave.

7. **The Manosphere** – as described above in section 2 - is built on misogyny and simple solutions to complex issues, key amongst them the idea that feminism is at the root of many of the issues in the world and that men are entitled to

whatever they want – both in an entrepreneurial / financial sense and in a sexual sense. This has manifested itself in a number of ways, including controlling and abusive behaviours (section 1) and increases in sexual assaults and harassment in public places (eg: on public transport where a 20% increase in assaults against women and girls have taken place in 2023/4 – [link to British Transport Police survey article](#)) - a report issued by the [BBC in Dec 2024](#) features a scheme in Humberside where girls have undertaken self-defence classes...managing somehow to also mention that [one million crimes were recorded in 2023 as violence against women and girls](#) but failing to mention that schemes to help young men to BE less violent and abusive might be a better solution.

Top Tip: discuss violence against women and girls with our young people.

Explore the statistics on reputable websites like the ONS / Home Office / Charity organisations like Women's Aid, Refuge, ManKind.

Ask whether your Young People think there's enough awareness of harassment and abuse in public places, ask whether they think there's enough focus on perpetrators to change behaviours, ask whether they think they could do anything themselves to become more aware of their behaviours and those of their friends. In Liz Plank's excellent book about masculinity, *For The Love Of Men*, she explores ways men and boys could learn about more mindful, calm and empathetic versions of masculinity instead of so-called 'toxic' masculinities. ([Blog and book link here](#))

8. **It's not always their fault.** In her BBC news report in September 2024, the BBC's misinformation correspondent Marianna Spring interviewed a number of young people about their internet use and its effect on their mental health and attitudes. The algorithms at the heart of Social Media have been directing every targeted content to different groups of people - I mean, we know that's its job – but the way the algorithm works to send harmful / violent / misogynistic and pornographic content to boys and men is in stark contrast to the way algorithms send content about weight loss, music, make-up and exercise to girls and women is sinister and purposeful.

One teenage boy says he doesn't always look for the content he sees and some of it is so disturbing he said "it stains your brain". [Blog and article link here.](#)

Top Tip: As parents consider looking at WiFi filters to manage the content your children can access, consider timed WiFi access so you control when WiFi goes off and also be open to discussing content that they may be viewing without judgement but with learning in mind. Shame will close down your discussions very quickly.

9. **Global Research on the impact of technology on children** is undertaken by the brilliant [Children and Screens](#) organisation in the USA, which looks at the ways the internet and social media are affecting children and young people on an ongoing and developing basis. There is a plethora of information on the findings of many research reports into the effects of various new and emerging technologies as well as more established ones.

10. **Screen Addiction – some tips** for managing screen time is need for all of us, young people may need some more guidance than older people – although the constant drift in work/life balance impacts on us all!

Top Tips: This is a big one. WE as adults need to lead by example. We need to put some guidelines and boundaries into our internet and device use.

A superb book for reflecting on how and on what we spend our time can be found in [Four Thousand Weeks by Oliver Burkeman](#). Although we all have 24 hours in a day, we often find ourselves working towards and on things which aren't central to us or our needs, rather we are split between our needs and the constant driver of needing to be present at work to earn the money we need to survive.

Burkeman argues that with some focus and boundaries, we can gain a better work/life balance as well as putting the average 4,000 weeks we have on earth into perspective.

For Children and Family screen time management there are a couple of simple things you can do as the adults in the home:

- Certain Home internet providers now have an app or online tool to control who can log onto the home WiFi and when (as well as restricting certain types of content to certain age-groups / family members). Have a look into it and make a plan. Discuss the plan with your whole family – and phase it in. This may also involve yourselves in taking some action about your own screen time use which, in many of our cases, could do with some management couldn't it? Sometimes we have to lead by example.
- For the children themselves, it's likely that school / colleges will be helping them with screen time management but in our children's experiences, FOREST is an excellent App for helping children focus – for exam revision for example - and allows the child to wean themselves off constant phone / internet to start to grab back some ability to focus on something for more than a few minutes. It's a free app and allows kids to grow a tree in time-bound sessions which they can set and control. They build a forest and can compete against friends to build their forests together.

BONUS!

11. **Remember what you were like as a teenager.** We were all moody at times, confused, stressed and pressured over various things. It's never an easy time for any of us, and in the 2020s – the digital age – there is extra pressure on your children from social media and the **rules** that have emerged around friendships, relationships and expectations. There's a whole new range of needs for young people to be present in the 'always on' world we exist within – like with work bleeding into our own private time, our children are always *expected* to be online because they *can* be online. A 'could' has become a 'should'.

Routines sound boring, but our lives are built on routines and decisions we take on creating routines and boundaries around what we want / need / have to do are crucial as parents, employees and students. So, how can routines help us all?

- Eat together. Sit at the table to eat and have a 'no phones' policy at the table. No-one. Not even you. Converse over a meal, ask what the best bits of the day were, ask about what could be better, ask what's going on for everyone. 30 minutes sharing food and table service duties keeps the heart in a family.
- Charge your phones downstairs – EVERYONE. (You will get arguments about 'needing the phone for an alarm' – buy some cheap alarm clocks), Charging downstairs is safer, reduces screen time, allows the brain to calm before sleep and encourages more sleep.
- Combine the above with switching off / restricting the WiFi in the house from, say, 2300 each night as discussed above. You all need time off.
- Manage X-Box / PlayStation etc time – set limits. (If this fails, take the nuclear option and remove the devices from bedrooms / games rooms until you can set some boundaries – with multi player / global friendships the time zones can play havoc with sleep).
- Read more books.
- Watch TV together – maybe remove TVs from rooms / restrict laptops in rooms too.

Finally, no one likes to have boundaries set – especially if we have enjoyed privileges around devices etc beforehand – but it is worth it as parents to agree to a set of guidelines and remain strong in maintaining them.

Weathering the storm of setting boundaries for your young people will pay off for everyone in the longer-term. Boundaries and Care are a couple of non-negotiables for children and families and they are intertwined.

Boundaries are *part* of the caring responsibilities we have as parents for our kids – as protection, guidance and balance. We don't let our kids cross the road until they are confident and able to read the roads, we don't allow children to drink alcohol, there are age restrictions on lots of things in life...when you're a parent, you set the guidance in your home and that starts with you and your boundaries.

Weather the storm, it will be worth it in the long term for you and for the safety and health of your children as they mature.

Please get in touch if I can help you.

Bernie.

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