



# Healthy Relationships

Discussion Guides for Adults with Disabilities, Family Members & Guardians

## Relationship Safety for People with Disabilities

### The Importance of Staying Safe in Relationships

**Everyone deserves safe and healthy relationships.** This is especially important for people with disabilities. Learning how to set boundaries and recognize unhealthy behaviors can help keep you safe. It is crucial for people with disabilities to understand healthy and unhealthy relationships so they can protect themselves, maintain their independence, and build relationships based on respect and trust.

### Healthy Relationships: What Do They Feel Like?

**A healthy relationship makes you feel safe, respected, and valued.** Both people listen to each other, respect boundaries, and offer support.

**Boundaries** help you say what you need, what feels good, and what doesn't. They make sure both people feel heard and safe.

In a healthy relationship, your body feels calm and relaxed. You don't feel nervous, scared, or uncomfortable. Instead, you feel supported and confident.

### What is a boundary?



A boundary is a **clear statement** about what you will and won't do.

A boundary is about **your choices and actions**, not about controlling or changing others.

Boundaries help you take care of yourself by **expressing your needs and limits**.

Setting a boundary is a **respectful way to communicate** and protect your well-being.

#### Examples of boundary statements:

*"I won't answer my phone after 9pm because that is when I like to read. Please don't call me unless it is an emergency."*

*"I don't go to parties or concerts with flashing lights, I could have a migraine or a seizure and I want to avoid this."*

*"I would like to answer the doctor myself when he asks questions during my appointment."*

### Discussion Questions:

1. What are some things that make you feel safe and respected in a relationship?
2. What does it mean to set a boundary in a relationship, and why is it important?
3. When you feel comfortable in a relationship, what does your body feel like? What about when you feel uncomfortable?



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## What is Relationship Violence?

**Relationship violence includes any behavior that tries to control, hurt, or manipulate another person.** It can be hard to notice unhealthy behaviors, especially if you don't see them as "*violence*." Even if your relationship feels healthy, it's important to know what to look for. Relationship violence can happen in any type of relationship—friends, family, or romantic partners. Setting clear boundaries is essential to protecting your well-being and safety.

## Case Study

**In this section, we'll practice understanding the ideas about healthy and unhealthy relationship behavior.** The goal is to think about how to use what you've learned in a practical scenario.

### Background

Emma is a 28-year-old woman with cerebral palsy. She uses a wheelchair and needs assistance with daily tasks like dressing and cooking. Emma lives with her mother, Sarah, who has always been her primary caregiver. Sarah is very over-protective of Emma and often takes control of decisions because she worries about her safety and well-being.



### The Scenario

One afternoon, Emma makes plans to go to a local restaurant for dinner with her friends. Her mom, Sarah, feels anxious about Emma going out on her own and she worries that Emma might face challenges, such as navigating unfamiliar places, access barriers, or needing help from others.

## Types of Relationship Violence

Relationship violence happens when someone tries to control or hurt another person in a relationship. This can include:

<b>Physical violence</b>	Hitting, pushing, or hurting someone's body.
<b>Emotional or mental abuse</b>	Saying mean things, calling names, or making someone feel worthless.
<b>Sexual violence</b>	Forcing someone to be part of sexual activity they don't want.
<b>Controlling behavior</b>	Telling someone who they can talk to, where they can go, or what they can do.

### Healthy Response



Sarah insists on accompanying Emma, saying, "I know you can handle it, but I just want to make sure you're safe." Emma feels frustrated and says, "I don't need you to come with me every time, and I am an adult. My friends understand how to help me if I need it, but I can do things." Sarah agrees that Emma is very capable of being independent and apologizes. Emma thanks her mom for her support.

### Unhealthy Response



Sarah tells Emma, "I am your mother and you can't go anywhere without me; I don't care how old you are!" Emma becomes very upset and calls her friends to pick her up anyway.

When her mother finds out that Emma is trying to leave, she locks the brakes on her wheelchair and tells Emma she isn't going anywhere since she has caused so much stress.



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## Case Study Discussion Questions:

1. What differences do you notice between the healthy and unhealthy response?
2. What are the risks of not trusting someone with a disability to make their own decisions?
3. How can Sarah and Emma develop trust in each other's abilities while supporting each other?
4. How would you react in a similar situation?

## Practice! Understanding Boundaries & Safety

**In any relationship, whether family and caregivers, friendships, work, or romantic, boundaries are an important part of making you feel safe!** This helps build trust, keep people safe, healthy, and happy. Consent means making sure everyone feels comfortable and safe before something happens. When someone ignores your “yes” or “no,” pressures you, or forces you to do something, this is wrong or unhealthy. It can be a sign of relationship violence or abuse. It's important to know how to set boundaries, **before** this happens.

### Your Life: Identifying Boundaries and Consent

**1. Think of a person you know and interact with often – this is a relationship in your life.**



**2. Decide if you usually feel good or bad when you spend time with this person.**



**3. Talk about why they make you feel good or bad:**

Do they listen to you?

Do they get upset when you say “yes” or “no” to things?

Does this person make you feel safe?

Can you think of boundaries you have with this person?

*Practice using clear, respectful language. Here are some examples!*

Setting a boundary:	Responding when someone sets a boundary:
“I’ve already said no, and I don’t want to do this.”	“I understand, and I’m sorry for not listening earlier.”
“I’m not comfortable with that, and I need you to respect my decision.”	“Thanks for letting me know, I will listen to you and respect your decision.”



**Practice how to stay firm in your response.** It's okay to repeat saying “no” if needed, use body language, or gestures to reinforce your message, like stepping back or shaking your head.



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## Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it important to say “no” clearly in relationships? How does this help you stay safe?
2. What should you do if someone keeps ignoring your “no” or tries to pressure you after you say it?
3. How can you tell if someone is respecting your “yes” or “no,” or if they are trying to control you?
4. How can you make sure both people in a relationship feel safe and comfortable sharing their boundaries?



## Conclusion

**Understanding relationship safety is important for everyone, especially for people with disabilities.**

By recognizing the signs of unsafe situations, learning how to set and respect boundaries, and knowing how to check in with others, you can protect yourself and others from harm. Trusting your instincts and communicating clearly helps you stay in healthy relationships. It’s important to remember that everyone deserves respect and safety in their relationships. By understanding these concepts and practicing safe communication, you can create an environment where you feel secure, valued, and supported.

Organization	Contact	How They Help
<b>National Adult Protective Services (APS) Association</b>	(202) 370-6292 or visit <a href="http://www.napsa-now.org/help-in-your-area/">www.napsa-now.org/help-in-your-area/</a> and ask for your state APS office	Helps professionals and individuals report and respond to the needs of older adults and adults with disabilities who are the victims of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, and to prevent abuse whenever possible. There is an APS office for each of the 50 states.
<b>National Domestic Violence Hotline</b>	1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or text "START" to 88788	Offers confidential support and guidance for anyone in an unsafe or abusive relationship.
<b>National Sexual Assault Hotline or RAINN mobile app</b>	1-800-656-HOPE (4673) or download the <a href="#">RAINN app</a>	Provides free, confidential support for survivors of sexual assault.
<b>Love is Respect</b>	1-866-331-9474 or text "LOVEIS" to 22522	Specializes in supporting young people experiencing relationship abuse or those unsure if their relationship is healthy.

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