



**Future Ready Pathways for  
School, Work and Life**

# **Building Better Connections**

Healthy Relationships & Empathy

*Lessons for middle school  
students, aged 11-14*

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# Building Better Connections

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*Lessons for middle school students,  
aged 11-14*

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# Teacher/Parent Guide

## Building Better Connections

### Learning Objectives

By the end of these lessons, students will be able to:

- Recognize the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships across friendships, peer groups, and early romantic contexts
- Understand and practice boundaries and consent in physical, emotional, and digital interactions
- Use empathy and perspective-taking to consider how their actions impact others
- Identify social influence and peer pressure, including subtle and indirect forms
- Respond to gossip, exclusion, and conflict in ways that reduce harm
- Practice upstander behaviors to support others and promote inclusive environments
- Apply strategies for resolving conflict, repairing harm, and rebuilding trust
- Develop confidence in making choices that align with their values and personal boundaries



# Teacher/Parent Guide

## Building Better Connections

### Learning Rationale

The middle school years mark a period of rapid social, emotional, and cognitive growth. During this stage, students begin navigating increasingly complex relationships shaped by peer influence, social hierarchies, identity development, digital communication, and early romantic experiences. Friendships evolve, group dynamics become more visible, and students are often expected to manage conflict, boundaries, and social pressure with greater independence.

This workbook was designed to support students during this critical developmental window by making relationship skills explicit, approachable, and actionable. Rather than treating relationships as fixed or intuitive. Students are encouraged to reflect on their choices, recognize their influence on others, and develop strategies for navigating both in-person and digital interactions.

The workbook emphasizes student agency and empowers learners to understand themselves as active participants in shaping healthy relationships.

The workbook is grounded in the understanding that:



Relationships require awareness, communication, and intentional choices



Peer influence is powerful, and students can choose how they respond to it



Boundaries and consent help relationships feel safe and supportive



Empathy includes considering impact, not just intent



Conflicts are a normal part of relationships and can be addressed respectfully



Mistakes do not define students or their relationships; repair and growth are possible



# An Introduction for Teachers & Parents

These lessons are designed for middle school students (ages 11–14) and can be used in classrooms, homeschool settings, counseling groups, or small-group discussions. Each lesson includes a brief guided reading to introduce key concepts, followed by structured activities that allow students to explore real-world social situations and practice relationship skills in meaningful, age-appropriate ways.

The lessons are:

**Flexible** – Each lesson can be completed in approximately 25–30 minutes or expanded with optional discussion questions, reflection prompts, role-play scenarios, or real-life application tasks. Lessons may be taught sequentially to build skills over time or selected individually to address specific social or relational needs.

**Engaging** – Scenarios and examples reflect the lived experiences of middle school students, including shifting friendships, group dynamics, peer influence, gossip, digital communication, boundary-setting, and early romantic contexts. Activities encourage discussion, critical thinking, and self-reflection without being preachy or overly scripted.

**Practical** – Students learn concrete strategies they can apply immediately, such as setting and respecting boundaries, recognizing unhealthy dynamics, responding to peer pressure, practicing empathy, speaking up as an upstander, and resolving conflict in constructive ways. The focus is on skills students can use both in and out of school.

The goal of this pack is to empower students to see themselves as active participants in their relationships rather than passive observers. Healthy relationships are not about avoiding conflict or always getting along; they are built through thoughtful choices, communication, empathy, and accountability. By developing these skills during the middle school years, students gain tools that support belonging, confidence, and positive connections across academic, social, and digital spaces.

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# Universal Design for Learning

## Overview

This workbook is designed using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to ensure that all students—across diverse strengths, needs, learning preferences, and backgrounds—can access, engage with, and benefit from the lessons.

UDL recognizes that students learn in different ways. Some learn best through discussion, others through visuals, movement, or hands-on practice. Rather than relying on a single method, this pack intentionally offers multiple pathways for engagement, understanding, and skill practice, allowing adults to adapt lessons while keeping learning goals consistent.

The activities and structures in this workbook support flexibility without sacrificing rigor. Lessons can be adjusted in pacing, format, and delivery to meet the needs of individual students, small groups, or full classrooms.

## Multiple Means of Engagement

(How students stay interested and motivated)

- Lessons include a variety of activity types such as scenario analysis, sorting, discussion, drawing, role-play, movement-based activities, and reflection.
- Students are offered choices whenever possible, including how to respond, which scenarios to explore, or how to demonstrate understanding.
- Activities are designed to be flexible in length and format, allowing adults to adjust pacing based on attention, energy, or emotional readiness.
- Content is grounded in realistic social situations students commonly experience, helping learning feel meaningful and relevant rather than abstract.

**Adult Tip:** If a student seems disengaged, try changing the response format (for example, drawing instead of writing, or role-play instead of discussion) rather than repeating the same task. Or give students the opportunity to create their own scenarios from their own lives to make the activity more authentic.



# Universal Design for Learning

## Multiple Means of Representation

(How information is presented and understood)

- Key ideas are introduced using clear, age-appropriate language supported by visuals, icons, examples, and anchor texts.
- Short readings and scenarios are used to introduce concepts before moving into reflection, discussion, or practice.
- Consistent routines, sentence starters, and guided questions support comprehension and build confidence.
- Core concepts—such as boundaries, empathy, influence, and conflict—are intentionally revisited across lessons to reinforce understanding and real-world application.

**Adult Tip:** Read instructions aloud when helpful, reference visuals during explanations, and model one example before asking students to work independently.

## Multiple Means of Action and Expression

(How students demonstrate understanding and apply skills)

- Students are given multiple options for expressing learning, including written responses, discussion, role-play, drawing, checklists, and scenario-based decision-making.
- Activities focus on applying skills to realistic situations rather than memorizing definitions.
- Reflection prompts encourage students to connect learning to their own experiences, values, and future choices.
- Supports such as sentence frames, guided steps, and example responses help reduce barriers while maintaining high expectations.

**Adult Tip:** Accept different forms of evidence for understanding. A thoughtful discussion response or role-play may demonstrate learning just as effectively as a written answer.



# Universal Design for Learning

## Supporting Diverse Learners

This workbook is designed to support a wide range of learners, including:

- Emerging and developing readers and writers
- Multilingual learners
- Neurodivergent learners

Students with varying levels of emotional regulation, social confidence, and prior experience with relationship skills

Lessons are intentionally structured to reduce unnecessary barriers and provide multiple entry points for learning. Students are not expected to engage with content in the same way or at the same pace. Instead, the focus is on meaningful participation and skill development over time.

Differentiation strategies embedded throughout the lessons include:

- Sentence starters and guided prompts to support communication and reflection
- Visual supports, icons, and graphic organizers to clarify key ideas
- Movement-based and hands-on activity options to support engagement and regulation
- Partner and small-group activities to encourage shared thinking and peer learning
- Adult modeling and think-alouds to make social reasoning visible

These strategies allow students to access content, participate meaningfully, and demonstrate understanding in ways that align with their individual strengths, needs, and communication styles.

## Final Note for Adults

You do not need to be a specialist in social or relationship skills to use this pack. Your role is to:

- Allow students to pass or observe during discussions if a topic feels sensitive. Participation can increase over time.
- Normalize different ways of responding, including brief answers, drawing, or role-play.
- Offer choices whenever possible to support autonomy and reduce anxiety.
- Focus feedback on effort, reflection, and decision-making rather than “right” answers.



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# Pre-Assessment



# Lesson Plan: Pre-Assessment

## Learning Objectives

By the end of the pre-assessment activity, students will:

1. Reflect on how they currently navigate friendships, peer groups, and social interactions
2. Identify areas of strength in their relationship skills, such as empathy, communication, boundary-setting, or handling conflict
3. Recognize areas that feel challenging, including peer pressure, gossip, exclusion, speaking up, or resolving disagreements
4. Increase self-awareness about how they respond to social situations in both in-person and digital settings
5. Establish a personal baseline that will guide reflection, discussion, and skill-building throughout the lessons

## Learning Rationale

The pre-assessment provides students with an opportunity to pause and reflect on how they currently experience and navigate relationships during the middle school years. As social expectations increase and peer influence becomes more complex, students are often expected to manage relationships independently—without being given time or language to reflect on how they do so.

This brief check-in serves several important purposes:

- Builds self-awareness – Students begin to notice patterns in how they communicate, set boundaries, respond to influence, and handle conflict.
- Normalizes learning relationship skills – Students understand that skills like empathy, boundary-setting, and conflict resolution are learned over time, not traits people either “have” or “don’t have.”
- Provides insight for adults – Teachers and parents gain a clearer picture of how students currently approach friendships, group dynamics, and social challenges, allowing instruction and discussion to be more responsive.
- Encourages student ownership – Reflecting on current habits helps students feel invested in their growth and more open to trying new strategies.
- Establishes a meaningful baseline – When paired with the post-assessment, students can clearly see how their thinking, confidence, and skills develop across the pack.

# Lesson Plan: Pre-Assessment

## Step 1: Introduce the Activity

- Explain: “This activity helps us understand how you currently navigate relationships—things like friendships, boundaries, communication, peer pressure, and conflict. There are no right or wrong answers. Everyone has different experiences and strategies. Your responses simply show where you are starting.”
- Encourage honesty and self-reflection.

## Step 2: Clarify the Format

- Students read each statement and mark their response in the rating column.
- If working one-on-one or in a small group, you may also read the statements aloud.
- Remind students to respond quickly and honestly, without overthinking.

## Step 3: Optional Discussion

- After a few selected statements, invite short, low-pressure sharing, such as:
  - “What helps you feel comfortable or safe in a friendship?”
  - “Can you think of a time you spoke up for yourself or someone else?”
  - “What do you usually do when there’s a disagreement with a friend?”
- Keep the tone reflective and non-judgmental. Avoid correcting responses or offering solutions at this stage. The goal is to listen, observe, and understand how students currently navigate relationships.

## Step 4: Record Insights

- Teachers/parents jot down notes on patterns you notice:
  - Areas where the student feels confident (empathy, communication, boundaries, problem-solving)
  - Areas where the student expressed uncertainty or challenge (peer pressure, gossip, conflict, speaking up)
  - Examples the student shared about friendships, group dynamics, etc.
  - Strategies the student already uses to handle social situations
- These notes create a baseline snapshot that can be revisited during the post-assessment.

## Step 5: Set the Tone

- Reassure students that this is a starting point: “This is just a starting point. Over the next lessons, you’ll explore new ideas and strategies for building healthy relationships, handling challenges, and making thoughtful choices. If your answers change later, that’s a sign of growth.”
- Keep the atmosphere positive and reflective. Frame this as exploration, not a test.



# Pre-Assessment

For each statement below, rate how well you understand the idea by choosing one of the following:

- I understand this well
- I somewhat understand this
- I'm unsure or confused by this

Statement	I understand this well!	I somewhat understand this.	I'm unsure or confused by this.
I can tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships.			
I understand what makes a friendship feel balanced and respectful.			
I know how to set boundaries with friends or peers when something doesn't feel right.			
I understand what consent means beyond physical touch (for example, sharing information or teasing).			
I know how to say "no" in a way that is clear and respectful.			
I understand how my words or actions can affect others, even if I didn't mean to hurt them.			
I can recognize when peer pressure is influencing my choices.			
I know strategies I can use when I feel pressured to do something I'm uncomfortable with.			



# Pre-Assessment

Statement	I understand this well!	I somewhat understand this.	I'm unsure or confused by this.
I understand the difference between gossip, venting, and trying to help someone.			
I know how digital communication (texts, group chats, social media) can impact relationships.			
I understand what it means to be a bystander or an upstander.			
I know ways to speak up or support others when I notice exclusion or unfair behavior.			
I understand how to handle disagreements without making the situation worse.			
I know how to take responsibility when I've made a mistake in a relationship.			
I understand how relationships can be repaired after conflict or hurt feelings.			

When it comes to friendships or peer relationships, what feels easiest for you right now—and what feels most challenging?

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# Lesson 1

# Understanding Healthy Relationships

## Essential Question

How can I recognize whether a relationship is healthy, and what role do my choices play in shaping it?

## Core Idea

Healthy relationships are built through everyday choices that create trust, balance, and respect. Understanding what feels supportive—and what doesn't—helps us make thoughtful decisions about our connections with others.



# Lesson Plan: Understanding Healthy Relationships

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify key characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships
2. Recognize red flags related to control, pressure, or imbalance
3. Understand how power and influence can affect relationships
4. Notice subtle forms of exclusion and their impact on individuals and groups
5. Reflect on how everyday actions contribute to trust, safety, and belonging

## Learning Rationale

Middle school is a time when relationships become more complex and less clearly defined. Students may experience shifting friendships, group dynamics, social hierarchies, and early romantic interests—often without clear guidance on what healthy relationships look like beyond “getting along.”

This lesson provides students with a shared language for understanding relationships as systems shaped by choices, behaviors, and patterns over time. Rather than focusing only on extreme or obvious examples, students explore everyday interactions—such as inclusion, communication, and influence—that help relationships feel supportive or strained.

By learning to recognize both positive indicators and warning signs early, students are better equipped to make thoughtful decisions, set expectations, and seek support when needed. This foundation supports student agency and prepares learners for deeper work on boundaries, empathy, influence, and conflict in later lessons.



# Lesson Plan: Understanding Healthy Relationships

Read the **Student Lesson** out loud. Ask students to share their ideas after reading the Reflection Question, if they wish.

## Activity 1: Relationship Spectrum

- Read the directions to your students.
- Emphasize that context and patterns matter more than single moments.
- Encourage students to explain why they placed behaviors where they did.
- Validate multiple answers when reasoning is thoughtful.

## Activity 2: Green Flags, Yellow Flags, Red Flags

- Read the directions to your students and help them get into pairs.
- Avoid labeling people—focus on behaviors.
- Ask follow-up questions like “What would make this healthier?”
- Normalize yellow flags as “signals to notice,” not immediate deal-breakers.

## Activity 3: What Would Help?

- Read through the directions with your students.
- Encourage practical, everyday actions (checking in, inviting someone, listening).
- Reinforce that small changes can have a big impact.
- Redirect students away from “fixing others” toward personal agency.

## Activity 4: Silent Signals

- Read the directions with your students.
- Reinforce that silence can communicate just as much as words.
- Keep discussion hypothetical to avoid personal disclosure.
- Highlight how awareness leads to more intentional choices.

## Activity 5: What Kind of Friend Are You?

- Read the directions with your students.
- Emphasize that everyone uses more than one style
- Avoid public sharing of results unless students choose to
- Focus discussion on growth, not labels
- Reinforce that styles can change depending on the situation



# Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Supports

## Lesson 1: Understanding Healthy Relationships

### Multiple Means of Representation

*Provide information in different ways so every learner can access the content.*

#### Visual Supports

- Visual examples of healthy vs. unhealthy relationship behaviors (e.g., balanced vs. controlling, inclusive vs. excluding)
- Anchor charts highlighting green flags, yellow flags, and red flags in relationships
- Relationship continua or spectrums (e.g., supportive ↔ harmful) to show gray areas
- Graphic organizers for comparing relationship traits or reflecting on personal values
- Icons to represent key concepts such as trust, boundaries, influence, inclusion, and choice

#### Auditory Supports

- Read the student lesson aloud or offer an audio version
- Use short scenario read-alouds followed by guided discussion
- Teacher modeling through think-alouds (e.g., “If I noticed this behavior, I might pause and ask myself...”)
- Optional partner or small-group discussions to process ideas verbally

#### Text Supports

- Offer a simplified or summarized version of the lesson text when needed
- Highlight or bold key terms (healthy, unhealthy, influence, inclusion, red flags)
- Use chunked text with clear headers and short paragraphs for readability
- Provide example-based explanations rather than abstract definitions

#### Language/Literacy Supports

- Provide brief, student-friendly definitions for new vocabulary in margins or callout boxes
- Offer sentence starters for reflection and discussion (e.g., “A healthy relationship feels like...”)
- Use visuals or examples alongside key terms to reinforce meaning
- Provide bilingual glossaries or translated supports when appropriate



# Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Supports

## Multiple Means of Engagement

*Offer options that increase interest, motivation, and emotional investment.*

### Choice & Autonomy

- Students choose which type of relationship to reflect on (friendship, peer group, team, or general relationships)
- Students select which scenarios to analyze or discuss
- Students choose how to respond (writing, drawing, discussion, or role-play)
- Students identify one relationship trait they want to be more aware of moving forward

### Relevance & Connection

- Activities are grounded in realistic middle school situations, including group dynamics, subtle exclusion, and social influence
- Prompts encourage students to connect learning to everyday interactions without requiring personal disclosure
- Emphasis is placed on student choice and agency rather than “right” answers

### Emotional Safety

- Students may pass or observe during discussions
- Scenarios are framed hypothetically to reduce pressure
- Adults model respectful listening and neutral responses

## Multiple Means of Action & Expression

*Provide options for how students demonstrate understanding and apply skills.*

### Response Options

- Students demonstrate understanding by:
  - Sorting behaviors into healthy, unhealthy, or “it depends” categories
  - Completing graphic organizers comparing relationship traits
  - Writing short reflections or completing sentence starters
  - Drawing symbols or diagrams that represent healthy relationship qualities
  - Participating in role-play or scenario walkthroughs



# Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Supports

## Guided Practice

- Structured prompts guide students to:
  - Identify specific behaviors rather than labeling people
  - Explain why a behavior supports or harms a relationship
  - Practice noticing patterns instead of isolated moments
- Teacher-led modeling shows how to analyze situations thoughtfully without jumping to conclusions

## Scaffolds & Supports

- Sentence frames such as:
  - “A relationship feels healthy when...”
  - “This behavior could be a concern because...”
  - “One choice that could improve this situation is...”
- Checklists or visual cues to help students organize their thinking
- Option to work individually, with a partner, or in a small group

## Application to Real Life

- Students identify one relationship quality they want to be more aware of in daily interactions
- Optional reflection prompts encourage students to:
  - Notice examples of healthy relationship behaviors during the week
  - Reflect on how small choices affect trust and belonging
- Emphasis is placed on awareness and intention, not immediate change

## Assessment Flexibility

- Understanding can be demonstrated through:
  - Discussion participation
  - Written or visual responses
  - Scenario analysis
  - Exit reflections
- Adults assess growth through reasoning and reflection rather than “correct” answers