ROLLER COASTER RELATIONSHIPS, ROMANCE, AND DESTINY

MEDIA MESSAGES IN THE REAL WORLD

A PLUG AND PLAY ACTIVITY FOR YOUTH

FACILITATOR GUIDE

July 2023

CONTENTS

Overview

This module will provide youth with information on identifying healthy and unhealthy messages in the media related to sex, dating, and relationships. Youth learn to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy messages shown in the media and are encouraged to base their own ideas about sex, dating, and relationships on facts, dispelled myths, and their own values.

KEY TOPICS

Media literacy, media influence, sex, dating, and relationships

AUDIENCE

Middle and high school youth

LENGTH

90 minutes

GOALS

- Youth will understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy messages in the media regarding sex, dating, and relationships.
- Youths' perceptions of norms relating to sex, dating, and relationships will become more accurate as they learn to question and debunk messages based on myths or tropes that are prevalent in the media.
- Youth will become aware of the influence the media has on their perceptions of sex, dating, and relationships.
- Youth will be able to examine the motives of advertisers and entertainment producers that spread messages about sex, dating, and relationships.
- Youth will develop strategies and skills to manage future media consumption and the ability to discern which messages are healthy and unhealthy.
- Youth will become less likely to engage in unhealthy relationship behaviors and more likely to engage in healthy relationship behaviors.

KEY MESSAGES FOR YOUTH

- My ideas about sex, dating, and relationships can be influenced by what I see in the media.
- It's important to think about why certain messages are being spread in the media.
- I have the ability to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy messages about sex, dating, and relationships in the media.
- The relationships I see in the media do not always reflect how relationships work in real life.
- I have the ability to manage my media consumption and question what I see and hear in the media to make sure I'm not persuaded to make unhealthy choices about my own behaviors when it comes to sex, dating, and relationships.

Before You Start

To get ready for this classroom activity, review this checklist and gather all the materials and technology you will need. Some activities will require advance preparation. Read this Facilitator Guide to familiarize yourself with each section. In this activity, you will be showing video clips and other samples of media to your students. These will serve as the basis for group discussion. You will either need to use the samples provided or the tips included in this resource to identify your own.

Resource	How to Prepare	Where You Will Use this Resource
Laptop or tablet device		Entire Lesson
Videoconferencing platform such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, or Blackboard	Your organization may already have a platform. If not, these platforms offer free versions with access to features you will need to implement this lesson virtually.	Entire Lesson
Students' school or personal laptops, tablets, or mobile phones (optional)		Entire Lesson
Projector, chalkboard or whiteboard, flip chart, or means to display results of brainstorming activity (e.g., shared Google Doc, Google Slides, Zoom's whiteboard feature)		Entire Lesson
Poll Everywhere free basic account (optional brainstorming method)	Poll Everywhere can be used to engage students in brainstorming activities. Poll Everywhere shows the results in real time, which increases student engagement. Before the class discussion, sign up for a free Poll Everywhere account, which will allow you to create a question and have participants type in responses in real time via the web or SMS text messages. If you choose to use Poll Everywhere for brainstorming, read the instructions to learn how to set up a poll first. Choose the poll type called "open-ended question."	Section 1, Parts 1 and 2

Resource	How to Prepare	Where You Will Use this Resource
Identifying Sample Media Messages (for facilitators)	Download the resource and use it to identify samples of media you can use to illustrate key messages and themes about sex, dating, and relationships present in the media. You can fill in the title and any other notes about the sample in the 3rd column where it says, "alternative sample found by facilitator." You will need to do this before you begin the module.	Section 1, Part 1
Match the Message Tracker (for students)	After filling out the **Identifying Sample Media Messages** worksheet, use it to complete the student **Match the Message Tracker**. Fill in the media/type and summary of the sample under Section 1, Part 1 with media samples you plan to share with students. Send the students an electronic copy of the worksheet via email or through the videoconferencing platform. If you give them a printed copy, fill in the worksheet and then print out one copy of the tracker for each student in your classroom.	Section 1, Part 1

SECTION 1
Messages in the Media

OBJECTIVES

- Youth will identify healthy and unhealthy messages in the media related to sex, dating, and relationships.
- Youth will reflect on why certain messages are included in media.
- Youth will develop a list of common healthy and unhealthy messages spread in the media about sex, dating, and relationships.

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

Respect/disrespect, honesty/dishonesty, trust/lack of trust, communication, independence/dependence, jealousy, patience, support, manipulation, isolation, control, gaslighting, abusiveness

MATERIALS

- Three to four media samples you previously screened and chose from contemporary media. Use the resource entitled **Identifying Sample Media Messages** to locate the samples you will use.
- **Match the Message Tracker**

TECHNOLOGY/TOOLS

- Laptop or tablet device
- Students' school or personal laptops, tablets, or mobile phones (optional)
- Projector, chalkboard or whiteboard, flip chart, or means to display results of brainstorming activity (e.g., shared Google Doc, Google Slides, Zoom's whiteboard feature)
- Poll Everywhere free account (optional)

PART 1 | Identifying Media Messages (20 minutes)

Pre-assessment Activity

Guide students in identifying common messages about sex, dating, and relationships that appear in various forms of media. Following the instructions provided in the **Identifying Sample Media Messages** resource, locate or select three to four samples (as many as time allows) to share with youth. Enter your chosen samples in the **Match the Message Tracker** ahead of time. Begin the activity by showing the first sample. Be sure to provide youth with any relevant information needed to understand the context surrounding the sample (e.g., a film summary or quick explanation of the characters and setting). Do not comment on the main message implied by the samples. Youth will be responsible for matching the samples you share with messages/themes.

💡 FACILITATOR TIP

Samples in the **Identifying Sample Media Messages** document are for illustrative purposes only. You can use these samples to illustrate each theme if you are comfortable using them and believe they are relevant to the population you serve or you can locate other samples that reflect the themes. The sample materials you select should be age-appropriate and within the norms of what is acceptable to show to youth in your community. Even though you will be using the samples to illustrate and counter harmful media messages, you will need to use your judgment regarding which messages will be appropriate to share. Consider the age of your youth population, the norms and policies of your host organization/implementation site (e.g., school, after-school program, other community organization), and the views of the parents of the youth you serve. Also consider that some depictions could be triggering for youth who have experienced trauma. Consult Creating Safe Spaces: Facilitator's Guide to Trauma-informed Programming for tips on using a trauma-informed approach to conducting this activity.

1. Introduce assessment activity.

SAY: In today's lesson, we will be discussing how the media influences our idea of what real-life relationships look like. Movies, TV shows, music, and other media send specific messages that shape our view of what is normal in relationships. Some messages are more accurate than others. Some messages are healthy and others are unhealthy. You're going to see if you can figure out what messages are being communicated in the samples I show you.

Walk students through the instructions on how to fill out the **Match the Message Tracker**. Pre-fill part 1 of the worksheet with the title and summary of the media samples you plan to share with students before the lesson.

SAY: Now, I'll show you the first sample.

Show/play students the first sample. Instruct students to choose any messages from the message bank that apply to the sample video clip, song, or other media. Students will use the letters A to I to match the message to the sample. Then, discuss which messages they thought were being communicated by the sample. You may choose to use Poll Everywhere or a poll provided by your conferencing platform (if you are implementing the lesson virtually) to have students share which messages they matched to each sample. Spend about 3 minutes discussing each clip.

ASK: (for each media sample you cover):

- What message(s) do you think this video clip (or song or other sample) is communicating when it comes to sex, dating, or relationships? Is it a healthy or unhealthy message?

- Can you give me some other examples of places you've heard this message or theme in the media?

- What negative consequences might result from the behavior shown that are not portrayed in the media message we just viewed?

  - Prompt: unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, abusive/toxic relationships (see the main takeaway messages in column 4 of the **Identifying Sample Media Messages** document for more examples).

SAY: Now that we've seen a number of media samples and talked about the messages in them, let's apply what we learned!

PART 2 | Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships in Media (30 minutes)

Brainstorming and Class Discussion

1. **Guide students in identifying messages conveyed about sex, dating, and relationships in childhood films.**

    SAY: As children, most of us are exposed to ideas about sex, dating, and relationships that skew our view of what's normal. Let's go over a couple of childhood films to see what messages they send about these topics.

    ASK: Ask students to share what childhood films they have seen that touch on sex, dating, or relationships. For each film mentioned, ask students to provide (1) a synopsis of the plot, (2) how the film starts and ends, and (3) the message the story teaches them about relationships and whether the message is healthy or unhealthy.

    > **FACILITATOR TIP**
    >
    > Children's films have progressed with the times, so earlier children's films may be more likely to include unhealthy themes, while more recent children's films have corrected some of the earlier unhealthy themes. If students do not come up with their own ideas, use the two examples below.
    >
    > **Beauty and the Beast**
    >
    > **SAY:** Let's talk about the Beauty and the Beast.
    >
    > **ASK:**
    > - Who has seen this film?
    > - Who can summarize the plot? Can you guide me through the beginning, middle, and end?
    > - What was the takeaway message in this film? What messages did it communicate to you about relationships?
    > - Do you view these messages as healthy or unhealthy? Why?

Use this synopsis to summarize the plot and takeaway messages:

After the Beast saves Belle from the woods, he slowly starts opening up to her emotionally and his behavior changes for the better. He even eventually lets Belle go to save her father. The message being sent here is that if you're kind enough or patient enough to suffer through someone's unacceptable or harmful behavior toward you, they can change for the better. **In reality, no matter how much you care about someone, you are not responsible for their behavior and growth. You can't be expected to shape them into becoming a better person.**

The Little Mermaid

SAY: Let's talk about the Little Mermaid.

ASK:
- Who has seen this film?
- Who can summarize the plot? Can you guide me through beginning, middle, and end?
- What was the takeaway message in this film? What messages did it communicate to you about relationships?
- Do you view these messages as healthy or unhealthy? Why?

Use this synopsis to summarize the plot and takeaway messages:

Ariel gives up her whole family and everything she was familiar with to be with Prince Eric. The message is if you really love someone, you should sacrifice everything to be with them. **In reality, you should never give up your support system to be with a partner, and you should never feel pressured to do so.**

2. **Guide students in identifying modern messages conveyed about sex, dating, and relationships in media.**

SAY: Now, let's talk about other media messages.

ASK: What healthy or unhealthy messages about sex, dating, or relationships do you notice in the media content you currently consume? Think about songs you listen to, TV shows or movies you watch, video games, or even commercials or other advertisements you have seen.

Have students brainstorm for **5 minutes** about messages they have observed in the media. Encourage students to say whatever comes to mind to prompt as many ideas as possible. Record students' ideas on a whiteboard, flip chart or virtual whiteboard, or by using Poll Everywhere to gather ideas. If you are using a virtual whiteboard, use the "annotate" feature to allow students to write their ideas directly on the virtual whiteboard.

SAY: Let's examine the messages you came up with.

ASK:
- What do you notice about these messages? Do you see a pattern among the messages, or a common theme that keeps appearing?
- Are most of them healthy? Unhealthy? A balance?
- Do they accurately depict real-life scenarios?

FACILITATOR TIP

Throughout the discussion, guide students to an understanding of these points:

- Healthy media messages are ones that promote healthy relationship characteristics, such as respecting boundaries, some degree of independence, respectful communication, support of one another's goals, freedom from extreme jealousy or threats of harm to oneself or partner, and more.
- Some of the scenarios that you see in media are often dramatized and do not reflect the way relationships work in real life. Often, messages will promote stereotypes of certain groups of people like a specific gender or racial or ethnic group.

SECTION 2
How Do Media Messages About Sex, Dating, and Relationships Impact Me?

OBJECTIVES

- Youth will be able to distinguish between the portrayal of sex, dating, and relationships in some media and in "real life."
- Students will determine their personal stances on these messages.

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

Healthy relationships, unhealthy relationships, healthy decision-making, media manipulation

MATERIALS

N/A

TECHNOLOGY/TOOLS

- Laptop or tablet device
- Videoconferencing platform such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, or Blackboard
- Students' school or personal laptops, tablets, or mobile phones (optional)
- Chalkboard or whiteboard, flip chart, or means to display results of problem-solving activity (e.g., shared Google Doc, Google Slides, Zoom's whiteboard feature)

PART 1 | Let's Get Real (20 minutes)

Reflection and Discussion Activity

1. Introduce the activity.

SAY: Now that we've identified some healthy and unhealthy messages being shown in the media, let's think about our own personal values and which messages we choose to accept.

ASK:
- Do situations involving sexual activity accurately display consequences that can happen as a result of the actions of those involved?
- Why do you think unhealthy messages are being spread in media? Think about:

  ○ Who created the messages and why?

  ○ What do they want you to feel, do, or buy?

  ○ Who might benefit from the messages? Who might be harmed?

  ○ Are they using emotions like jealousy or fear to make you feel a certain way?

  ○ How have those stories impacted your view of what a relationship should look and feel like in the real world?

  ○ Do you think these messages influence your real-life decisions? If so, how?

  ○ When it comes to the childhood movies and television shows you watched,

    ■ What do you think about this type of messaging being directed at young children?

    ■ How do you think the messaging might affect real-life relationships when children grow older?

FACILITATOR TIP

During your discussion, guide youth to an understanding of these key points.

- Shock factor is used a lot in media to keep audiences coming back to consume that media. We're attracted to things that seem out of the ordinary or that we can't see every day. It's important to understand that while TV shows, movies, and music describe some pretty shocking scenarios, we should remember that it is part of a strategy used in the entertainment and marketing industries to keep consumers coming back. In reality, we should not try to replicate these unhealthy scenarios in real life, thinking that it's normal.

- Businesses sometimes use unhealthy messages to sell their products. For example, some commercials try to make you think that you need to use their product to be attractive. Those messages can harm your self-esteem, contribute to health issues, and also create unrealistic expectations about what characteristics are important to look for in a partner.

- Emotions can be used to make audiences feel something or buy something. For example, commercials might use fear or the feeling of insecurity to sell you a product (e.g., "Our product will help you become popular overnight").

- Films and television shows often only show the emotional lows and highs of a relationship because they have to fit the story of a relationship into 1–2 hours. Because of time limitations, they do not often show the day-to-day, sometimes boring moments that make up a normal, healthy, and loving relationship.

PART 2 | Alternate Behaviors (20 minutes)

Brainstorming and Class Discussion

1. **Test students' understanding of the key concepts of this lesson in this final activity. Choose one or both of the scenarios below.**

   Option 1

   SAY: Now that we've discussed examples of unhealthy messages in media, we're going to come up with some alternate behaviors or endings to the movies, TV series, or other media examples you identified earlier in the lesson. Please take a moment to choose an example we discussed in class and come up with an alternate ending or another way that characters could have behaved in a scenario. Ask yourself: "What would be a healthier way for this situation to play out?" Be prepared to share your idea with the group.

   > **FACILITATOR TIP**
   >
   > If you can, break students into partners or small groups for this activity. If you are implementing the lesson virtually and are unable to use breakout rooms, give students 10 minutes to write up their own alternative endings individually prior to sharing them with the larger group.

   SAY: Okay, now please share with the class. Tell us what the real ending is, how you changed it, and why. What healthy messages did you try to promote?

   Allow each individual or group to share.

   Option 2

   SAY: Think about an advertisement we discussed earlier in the lesson that portrayed unhealthy relationship messages. Come up with a way to advertise that product in a healthier way. When creating your advertisement, ask yourself these questions:

   - What is the message sent by the original advertisement, and what is the message you want to send with your revised advertisement?
   - How might your revision improve the way people think and behave?

> 💡 **FACILITATOR TIP**
>
> If you can, break students into partners or small groups for this activity. If you are implementing the lesson virtually and are unable to use breakout rooms, give students 10 minutes to create their own alternative advertisements individually prior to sharing them with the larger group.

SAY: Okay, now please share with the class. Show us your advertisement, how you changed it, and why. What is the healthier message you want audiences to take away with your new advertisement? How might your revision improve the way people think and behave?

Allow each individual or group to share.

2. Wrap up the lesson and remind students of the main takeaway points.

SAY: Great job! You've learned how to identify healthy and unhealthy messages about sex, dating, and relationships in the media. You've also learned to examine and question the messages you see in the media and how they influence your own perceptions of what a normal and healthy relationship looks like. Use what you learned to be critical of what you see in the media and ask yourself whether it's realistic and whether it's promoting healthy or unhealthy behaviors. Think about how you can share what you've learned with others.