

EMPOWERED RELATIONSHIPS

- Year groups 7-11
- We recommend using this after the Healthy Relationships activity.

"I'm really happy if school can teach my children what is the healthy relationship" – Parent of Faith, Sheffield

"We should learn about relationships earlier, so we have knowledge prior to going into them" – Student, school in Sheffield

"We should find a balance to promote family values, and happy values about being in a positive relationship." Parent of Faith, Sheffield

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We often talk about what healthy, and unhealthy relationships look like, but what if we went further in considering what it means to be in an Empowered Relationship?

Empowerment means 'Having the control to make the decisions about my own life and the skills to change my world for the better'. It doesn't only include economic and material power, but also emotional strength, safety and wellbeing. Empowerment can take different forms in different cultures.

Self-Empowerment can be understood as making a conscious decision to take charge of our own physical and emotional wellbeing. Having self-awareness, knowing our wants and desires, our values, needs, and our strengths is vital to this. Self-Empowerment is also about knowing our rights, our limitations and our boundaries, and having the confidence to stick up for yourself and express your needs and desires. When we are able to harness the feelings of self-empowerment, we are able to enter any relationship, be they familial, platonic or intimate as our full selves, knowing exactly who we are, what we want and what we can offer within a relationship.

Empowerment Activity #1

Writing a letter to yourself – known as journaling – is a useful tool to explore your thoughts and feelings. This personal letter – which you do not have to show anyone else – is a way to reflect on experiences, challenge our thinking and imagine a fulfilling, safe and healthy life. This activity encourages students to do just that.

Introduce the class to examples of letter writing, and journaling and explore the ways that this medium of creative writing can be a useful tool to express our feelings, wants and needs.

Then, invite each student to write a letter to their future self, imagining the relationships they hope to have found in life, five or ten years from now. Will they have a life partner, such as a husband or wife? Will they marry? If not, how might they live? If they have a partner, how will they treat each other?

Split the group into pairs, and ask them to feedback to each other.

- What feelings came up during the exercise? Did they discover anything new about themselves?
- Do people share similar views on what can be considered a healthy relationship? What were the differences? Why might this be?
- Did anyone mention their religion or culture, when thinking about the sorts of relationships they would like to have.

Some prompts may include:

- What are my wants, needs, aspirations and goals? How are they different from, and similar to, my parents?
- What are the things I like about myself and why?
- What qualities do I value in others?
- What are my likes and dislikes?
- What values and beliefs are important to me? And what influences these beliefs?
- How do I want to feel within a relationship?
- What do I deserve?
- What might an 'empowered relationship' mean for me?

Example of letter to self (Activity #1)

Dear myself,

I am a kind person, and I want to have relationships with people who are also thoughtful and kind.

I like reading, playing Xbox and skateboarding, so it would be great to have a relationship with someone who also enjoys these things. But it would be ok if they don't, as long as we both support and encourage each other to do the things that we enjoy.

I am close with my mum and brother, so it is important to me that I have a relationship with someone who will also want to spend time with them.

As I have anxiety, I would like to be with someone who is understanding of this and is patient.

I value having time to myself and I sometimes find social situations tiring, so I would like to be with someone in the future who respects this and doesn't overstep my boundaries.

I deserve to feel loved and safe within all of my relationships, and so good communication is essential.

Lots of love,

Me x

Empowerment Activity #2

Writing a letter to an imaginary person – a letter you will never send, and need not show anyone else – can be a way of exploring your thoughts and feelings about relationships.

Writing to a person you care about – about your hopes and dreams for them and the relationships they might have – is another way of imagining empowered relationships.

For people of faith, and others too, empowered relationships are informed by beliefs and values. So, when you are writing this letter about relationships, you may want to refer to your religious and other beliefs and values.

Here is an example of a letter that describes relationships, from a religious perspective. This is a Muslim mother's viewpoint; other Muslim mothers would write very different letters, as would mothers of other faiths and none. Read the following extracts from *Love Letter* by Shelina Janmohamed (this can be read in full in *A Match Made in Heaven*, a collection of short stories by Muslim women – see *Additional Resources* below).

A small creature that I wanted to hold forever. You're eight already, and here I am still trying to work out how to be a good mother. I thought I had womanhood figured out until I became a mum. Now I am trying to work out how to be me, at the same time as helping you to be you. I was told that motherhood is always about putting your children first, that it's all about you. But I'm learning that's not true. You also need that I am me, so you can watch, and learn, and experiment, and work out how to be you...

... I have all the worries that mums usually have. Schools, and universities, employment and security, good friends, and health, protection from bad choices and bad people. And love. I hope and I worry if you'll find love. Love, because love is everything for Muslims. Love and justice and compassion.

My beloved, when you bring love to this world, you will find love in it. The love you inspire in me for you is proof of that. But it's important to remember that love is not transactional, you don't find love in return for bringing it. When you bring love, that is when you become capable of experiencing it.

My daughter, there is so much to tell you about love, but remember justice and compassion too. It's easy to fall in love with someone who has these qualities. Love is only love with fairness and kindness. As Anne says, the world is only what you bring to it. Bring love, my beloved daughter, bring love.

Things to notice from this letter are:

- This mother understands love through her religion.
- This love takes many forms, including sexual love.
- The mother hopes her daughter will marry but adds, 'you can decide'.
- The child is being brought up within a religious household, but she still has the freedom to 'work out how to be' herself.

People with other religions, and those who are not religious, can learn from this letter:

- That people can use their religion to find positive relationships.
 - We all bring values and beliefs – religious and otherwise – to our relationship hopes and dreams.
 - We don't have to speak personally – about ourselves – in order to think about good and bad relationships. Writing a letter like this can be a way to explore our values without revealing anything too personal or private
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