

Relationships & Boundaries – Young Adults (18+)

Executive Summary

Many autistic young adults struggle in relationships because boundaries are confusing, invisible, and often not taught in concrete ways. Saying yes when you want to say no, oversharing personal information, missing red flags, and not understanding consent can lead to unhealthy friendships, unsafe dating situations, and burnout. This guide gives you clear, repeatable systems for boundaries in every area of life: family, friends, work, school, online spaces, and romantic or sexual relationships. You will learn levels of relationships, five boundary types, and step-by-step scripts you can literally read or memorize. You will practice saying no in many ways, asking for space, leaving early, blocking unsafe people, and repairing mistakes when you go too far or not far enough.

The system uses simple tools: a boundary skills checklist, “relationship levels” map, consent questions, an energy tracker, and a boundary board you update as you grow. Supporters provide full help in Weeks 1–4, shared decisions in Months 2–3, you lead from Months 4–6, and then they move into backup mode. Goal: Use at least three boundary scripts confidently, maintain 3–4 energizing relationships, and exit unsafe or draining situations within 90 days.

SpectrumCareHub Independence Series

Practical, autism-affirming tools for relationships and boundaries independence nationwide.

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SECTION 1: CORE Relationship & Boundary Skills Checklist

Pre-Relationships Assessment

Skill	What It Means	Can You Do It?	Practice If Needed
Say no clearly	Use words that mean a real no without apologizing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Practice 10 “no” sentences in the mirror daily

Skill	What It Means	Can You Do It?	Practice If Needed
Ask for space	Tell someone you need time alone or a break	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use one script after a short interaction 3 times a week
Leave early	End a call, visit, or hangout before you are overloaded	<input type="checkbox"/>	Set a timer and practice leaving at the set time
Reject unwanted touch	Tell someone to stop touching you	<input type="checkbox"/>	Role-play with trusted person using firm voice and clear words
Report uncomfortable behavior	Tell a trusted adult or authority what happened	<input type="checkbox"/>	Write a one-paragraph report about a past situation
Use relationship “levels”	Treat strangers, acquaintances, and close friends differently	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sort 10 people in your life into the 5 levels
Use a 3-step boundary script	State need, optional reason, and what will happen	<input type="checkbox"/>	Write 5 scripts and read them out loud weekly
Notice red flags	Spot behaviors that mean “this is not safe”	<input type="checkbox"/>	Make a red flag list and review before social events
Check consent every time	Ask and listen for yes, no, or “I don’t know”	<input type="checkbox"/>	Practice consent questions with a script on paper
Track energy after interactions	Notice who drains you and who energizes you	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use the energy tracker for 2 weeks after each interaction

Readiness Guide:

- 7–8 YES: Ready to practice boundaries in real-life situations with light support.
- 5–6 YES: Practice for 4–6 weeks with a trusted supporter role-playing weekly.
- 4 or fewer YES: Work with a therapist, counselor, or coach to build boundary skills.

Relationships & Boundaries Readiness Checklist

- You can say “no” in at least three different ways
 - You can ask for a break or alone time without apologizing
 - You can tell someone “please do not touch me” and hold your boundary
 - You can list five people and sort them into levels (stranger, acquaintance, friend, close friend, partner)
 - You can name the five types of boundaries: physical, time, information, energy, sexual
 - You have at least one trusted adult you would tell about a serious problem
 - You have a written plan for what to do if someone scares you, pressures you, or violates your boundaries
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SECTION 2: Understanding Relationships & Boundaries

Why Relationship Systems Matter

Relationships are easier when there are clear maps and rules instead of guessing. A system for boundaries tells you who gets what level of access to your time, body, personal information, and energy. Without a system, people can take too much from you because you care, you are honest, or you are afraid of conflict. Boundaries are not about pushing everyone away; they are about letting the right people in at the right level.

Using levels and types of boundaries gives you a way to protect your energy and still have connection. It is okay and healthy to treat a stranger differently than a best friend, and different from a romantic partner. Clear boundaries can also protect you from manipulation and abuse. Good people respect your boundaries; unsafe people ignore them, push them, or punish you for them.

Key Relationship Principles

Principle	Why It Works	Implementation
Levels of access	Not everyone gets the same closeness	Use 5 levels: stranger to romantic partner

Principle	Why It Works	Implementation
Five boundary types	Different situations need different tools	Physical, time, information, energy, sexual
Scripts over guessing	Words ready in your mouth reduce anxiety	Use 3-step script: need, why (optional), what happens
Energy tracking	Your body tells you who is healthy	Rate energy after each interaction and adjust contact

SECTION 3: Relationship Levels & Boundary Types

Five Levels of Relationships

Use this as your relationship “map.” You can move people up or down over time.

Level	Who They Are	What Is Okay	What Is Not Okay
Level 1: Stranger	People you do not know or just see in public	Short small talk, basic politeness	Sharing personal info, going anywhere alone with them
Level 2: Acquaintance	People you see sometimes but do not fully know	Light conversation about safe topics like weather, hobbies, school	Sharing deep feelings, health issues, money or family problems
Level 3: Friend	People you choose to spend time with	Sharing interests, some personal news, small favors	Telling them everything, giving money you cannot afford, daily access to you
Level 4: Close Friend	People you deeply trust and feel safe with	Sharing feelings, asking for help, crisis support sometimes	Allowing them to insult you, ignore your no, or control your choices
Level 5: Romantic Partner	Person you are dating or committed to	Physical affection with consent, deep emotional sharing	Anything you feel pressured into or

Level	Who They Are	What Is Okay	What Is Not Okay
			anything without clear consent

Energy Balance Rule:

- Aim for: up to 10 acquaintances, up to 3 friends, 1–2 close friends, and 0–1 romantic partner at a time.
- Everyone else stays at “stranger” level until they earn more trust.

Five Types of Boundaries

Print or save this list where you can see it often.

- **Physical boundary:** Your body and personal space
 - Example: “Please don’t hug me,” or “I prefer high-fives, not hugs.”
- **Time boundary:** When and how long you are available
 - Example: “I can hang out for one hour. Then I need to go home.”
- **Information boundary:** What you share about your life
 - Example: “I’m not ready to talk about my medical history.”
- **Energy boundary:** How much emotional and social energy you give
 - Example: “I’m tired and need to cancel tonight. Let’s pick another day.”
- **Sexual boundary:** What kind of physical or intimate contact is okay
 - Example: “I am okay with holding hands, but not with anything more right now.”

SECTION 4: Sensory-Friendly Relationship Framework

Social Sensory Trigger Table

Trigger	What It Looks Like	What You Can Do
Loud group events	Parties, crowded classrooms, big family gatherings	Set time limits, stay near exits, bring headphones, take planned breaks
Long conversations	2–3 hour calls or visits without breaks	Use time boundaries, set timers, schedule shorter meetups
Physical affection overload	Too many hugs, touching, sitting too close	Set clear physical boundaries and preferred greetings
Information oversharing	Telling your life story to someone new	Use “information boundary” scripts, keep topics light at first
Emotional dumping	Someone vents to you for a long time	Use energy boundaries and suggest breaks or other supports
Online message storms	Constant texting, DMs, or group chats	Set “do not disturb” times, answer at specific times only

SECTION 5: Boundary Scripts & Templates

Three-Step Script for Any Boundary

Use this simple formula almost anywhere:

1. **State what you need.**
2. **Explain why** (optional).
3. **Say what will happen.**

Example:

"I need quiet time after 8 PM. Noise overloads my nervous system. So after 8 PM, I will not answer calls or texts until the next day."

Everyday Boundary Scripts

Script 1: Saying No to an Invite

"No, I can't do that today. I am tired and need to rest. Let's talk about another time that works for both of us."

Script 2: Asking for Space During a Hangout

"I need a break right now. I am starting to feel overloaded. I am going to step outside for 10 minutes, and then I'll decide if I can come back or need to go home."

Script 3: Rejecting Unwanted Touch

"Please don't hug me. I'm not comfortable with that. A wave or a high-five is okay."

Script 4: Ending a Conversation or Call

"I need to stop talking for now. I have hit my social limit. I'm going to go rest, and we can talk another day."

Script 5: Reporting Uncomfortable Behavior

"What you just did/said made me uncomfortable. Please stop doing that around me. If it continues, I will leave and may need to report it."

Safety Card (Print/Laminate)

FRONT:

- Clear no. Safe yes.
- My body, my time, my choice.
- It is okay to leave.
- It is okay to block.

BACK:

- If I feel unsafe:
 - Leave the space.
 - Call or text my trusted person.
 - If in danger, call 911 or local emergency number.

SECTION 6: Energy Tracking & Friend Selection

How to Pick Good Friends

Healthy friendships usually:

- Give you energy instead of draining it.

- Respect your “no” without arguing or guilt.
- Enjoy your company without using you for favors, money, or information.
- Apologize and change when they hurt your feelings.
- Match your effort most of the time.

Unhealthy friendships often:

- Ignore or push past your boundaries.
- Make you feel guilty when you say no.
- Borrow money or things and not return them.
- Insult or shame you, even as a “joke.”
- Pressure you to do things you do not want to do.

Energy Tracker (Use After Interactions)

Person Time Together Energy 1–5 (5 = energized) Notes

Energy Rule:

- 4–5: Energizing → keep or increase contact
- 3: Neutral → limited contact
- 1–2: Draining → reduce or end contact

SECTION 7: Dating, Safety, and Consent

Dating Safety Rules (First 3 Dates)

- Meet in public places only: coffee shop, restaurant, park during daytime.
- Tell at least one trusted person where you are going, who you are meeting, and when you will be back.
- Share live location on your phone with that trusted person.
- Limit each date to about 1 hour, especially at first.
- You end the date when you are ready; you do not have to stay longer.
- Do not go to their home or invite them to your home on the first few dates.

Red Flags: End the Relationship Immediately If They

- Push physical touch after you say no, even “just a hug.”
- Ask you to keep secrets like “Don’t tell your family” or “Don’t tell anyone.”
- Ask for money, gifts, or big favors early.
- Get angry, yell, or guilt trip you when you say no.
- Tell you not to see your friends or family.
- Make fun of your diagnosis or say autism is not real.
- Rush the relationship, like saying “I love you” on the first date.

Consent Basics

Consent means a clear, sober, pressure-free **yes** every single time for any physical affection, including kissing and beyond.

Ask yourself:

- Can I stop at any time? If no, there is no consent.
- Am I sober and thinking clearly? If no, there is no consent.
- Is anyone pressuring me, begging, or guiltting me? If yes, there is no consent.
- Do I actually want this, or am I just going along? If you do not want it, there is no consent.

Script if You Do Not Want Physical Affection

- "Not now." (Partner stops immediately.)
- "I'm not feeling physical today."
- "I don't know. I need more time to decide."

If someone continues after you say these things, this is not respect. It is a sign of abuse, and you need to leave and seek support.

SECTION 8: Family, Work, and School Boundaries

Family Boundaries (Especially in Difficult Families)

Time Limits:

- "I can only visit for 2 hours. After that I need to go home and recharge."

Blocked Topics:

- "I'm not discussing my love life."
- "We are not talking about my money or job right now."

Opting Out of Events:

- "I am skipping this event because it is too much for me. I'll connect with you another time."

Responding to Guilt:

- Family: "You never visit, you don't care about us!"
- You: "I care about you and I still need this boundary. That is not going to change."

You do not need to explain your boundaries over and over. Say it once and hold it.

Work and School Boundaries**Processing Time:**

- "I need time to process that information. Can you email it to me so I can review it?"

Communication Style:

- "I understand better through email or text than by phone. Can we use that instead when possible?"

Task Breakdown:

- "I work best when tasks are written down as steps. Can you provide the steps in writing?"

Breaks and Movement:

- "I am taking a 10-minute break to reset and will be back at [time]."
- "I fidget or move to focus. It is not me being distracted."

If reasonable requests are refused and you are struggling, talk to HR, disability services, or a trusted supervisor or counselor.

SECTION 9: Saying No, Violations, and Repairs

How to Say No (Multiple Styles)

Soft No:

- "Maybe another time."
- "I'll think about it."
- "Not right now."

Firm No:

- "No, I can't do that."
- "That doesn't work for me."
- "I decided not to."

Final No (When They Keep Pushing):

- "My answer is no."
- "This is not happening."
- "I'm done talking about this."

Physical No:

- "Hands off, please."
- "Do not touch me."
- "Back up. This is too close."

Time No:

- "I am not available that day."
- "I can do a different time, but not this one."

You do not owe anyone:

- A long explanation
- An apology for your no
- An alternative solution
- A second chance to push you

No is a complete sentence.

What to Do If Someone Violates Your Boundaries

Step 1: Verbal

- "Please stop. That behavior makes me uncomfortable."

Step 2: Physical

- Step back.
- Leave the room or event.
- "I am leaving now because my boundary was not respected."

Step 3: Block

- Block their phone number.
- Block them on social media.
- Do not respond to messages.

Step 4: Report Serious Problems

- At work: HR or supervisor.
- At school: teacher, counselor, disability office.
- If you are in danger: call 911 or local emergency services.

Step 5: Debrief

- Talk to someone you trust about what happened.
- Get support; do not handle abuse or serious boundary violations alone.

How to Repair Your Own Mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes with boundaries sometimes.

- If you overshared:
"I shared more than I meant to. I'm not ready to talk about that. Please ignore that part for now."
- If you said no when you meant something else:
"I need to clarify what I said. I needed space, not a permanent no. I am not mad at you."

- If you hurt someone’s feelings:
"I am sorry. That was wrong. I understand it hurt you. Here is what I will do differently next time."

You cannot fix everything, but you can take responsibility and learn.

SECTION 10: Milestones, Boundary Board, and Supporter Role

Signs of a Healthy Relationship Checklist

- They respect your no the first time.
- They do not rush you into deeper levels of closeness.
- They listen and share, not just talk about themselves.
- They apologize when they hurt you and change their behavior.
- They do not make fun of your sensory needs or autism.
- You feel safe and like yourself around them.
- They do not pressure you into anything—social, emotional, or physical.
- 8 or more true: Relationship is likely healthy.
- 5 or fewer true: Relationship needs serious work or may need to end.

Milestones to Celebrate

- **Week 4:** You have practiced saying no at least 10 times and feel a little more confident.
- **Month 2:** You held a boundary even when it felt hard, and someone respected it.
- **Month 6:** You ended or reduced contact with at least one draining person.
- **Year 1:** Your closest friend(s) and any partner consistently respect your boundaries.

Boundary Board (Print and Post)

Person	Physical Boundary	Time Boundary	Info Boundary	Energy
Mom	Hug okay, no long cuddling	2-hour visits	No details about dating	Draining/Neutral/Energizing

Person	Physical Boundary	Time Boundary	Info Boundary	Energy
Friend	Hugs okay with warning	1–2 hour hangouts	Some personal sharing	Draining/Neutral/Energizing
Partner	Touch only with consent	Text a few times a week	Deep sharing okay	Draining/Neutral/Energizing
Coworker	No touching	Work hours only	Work topics only	Draining/Neutral/Energizing

Review and adjust weekly.

Supporter Role Timeline

- **Weeks 1–4:** Full support: role-play scripts, review energy tracker, help sort relationship levels.
- **Months 2–3:** Shared decisions: debrief after events, help identify red flags.
- **Months 4–6:** You lead boundaries; supporter is backup and cheerleader.
- **Month 6+:** Supporter is “on call” for emergencies or big changes.

FINAL MESSAGE

Strong boundaries are not about being cold or distant. They are about clear no and safe yes. When you know your levels of relationships, your five types of boundaries, and your scripts, you can show up more fully in the relationships that matter. Good people will adjust to your boundaries because they want you safe and comfortable. Unsafe people will leave or reveal themselves quickly.

You are allowed to protect your time, body, energy, and mind. You are allowed to learn, make mistakes, and try again. Over time, you will waste less energy on draining people and have more for friendships, community, and relationships that truly support who you are.

You deserve relationships where your boundaries are seen, heard, and honored.

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