The opening sequence of *Exploring Healthy Relationships* presents a montage of young people interacting with one another. Viewers hear the voice of Dr. Deborah Gatins, a clinical psychologist who works frequently with adolescents. She says, “Human beings really are social creatures. It is difficult to lead a happy life without relationships.” The very first important relationship, she explains, is the one that each individual has with himself. “You have to know yourself first, and sometimes that’s a bit of a challenge. Then you have to share with others.” In order for any relationship to be healthy, Dr. Gatins says, it must include four important keys: trust, open communication, mutual respect, and knowing how to set appropriate boundaries. She continues, “Families are where we first learn to interact with other people. So if we want to understand how we are dealing with any relationship, we have to look at what we’re learning from our family members.”

At this point, viewers hear from a young woman named Danielle—or Danny—who says, “Sometimes I think relationships are difficult. There is way too much work involved with them.” John offers his view on why people get into relationships in the first place. “A lot of being a person stems from relationships you have with other people, and with yourself.”

Dr. Gatins explains, “Healthy families come in all shapes and sizes. Today we have healthy nuclear families, blended families, and single-parent families.” The common denominator of all these types of families is that they all display the four keys of healthy relationships. Once these keys are learned within families, they can be applied outside the home—at school, with friends and in romantic relationships.

The video next introduces viewers to Danny and her family. They discuss trust, the first key to healthy relationships. Danny says, “To me, trust means that I can depend on someone, that I can trust them with anything.” Her father continues talking about the first key. “Trust is very much important in any relationship. If it’s a strong relationship, it’s a mutual thing.” Danny adds, “I trust [my family] with a lot of stuff, but not everything.” Dr. Gatins returns to remark, “Trust is the cornerstone upon which everything else is built in a healthy relationship. I can talk to you, and I can know you are listening to me and taking me seriously. I can count on you.”

We are then introduced to John and his family. “I think my parents can trust me about as far as they can throw me because I’m a teenager, and teenagers forget things.” John’s mother expands on John’s remark. “I trust him to take care of himself,” she says. John’s father adds, “I trust John’s love, which is a huge thing. For all our difficulties, I have faith in his willingness to come back and stay connected to us.” When it comes to trusting his parents, John says simply, “They’re my parents. They’ve earned it.” Skimming through his photo album, John points out pictures of his sister and himself as toddlers. His sister appears on-camera, offering her opinion on trust. “With my brother, I trust him to do what’s right. If I ever got in some kind of trouble, he’d be there.”
Danny returns to describe moments when her trust has been broken. “My trust has been betrayed by friends talking behind my back. It has hurt me a lot, especially because this person was my best friend.” She describes the strong bond she had with one girl, and how she wished things could go back to the way they were before, but once her trust was shaken, the relationship just didn’t work out.

The next key to healthy relationships is mutual respect. Dr. Gatins poses an interesting question: What is respect? Is it saying “please” and “thank you?” Is it about respecting your elders? What about mutual respect in a healthy relationship? Danny’s father shares his thoughts. “It’s a give and take. It’s a recognition of people’s feelings and sensitivities. You have to be able to embrace their sensitivities.” John’s sister adds that respect is about “caring for each other.”

John recounts a story. Once, after his parents took him somewhere he had wanted to go for a very long time, he felt so thankful that he decided to “repay” them with a gesture. To show his gratitude and respect, he woke up very early one morning and brought his parents fresh muffins and hot coffee. Danny’s mother says, “With my children, I expect them to have healthy respect for me—not to fear me, but to respect what I am saying.” When it comes to trusting her children and respecting their decisions, John’s mother says, “If it’s a serious matter, I respect his judgment. I respect his strength. I respect his determination, his sincerity, his courage.”

Danny remembers a teacher who earned her respect. This teacher tended to push her students, but she also guided them. When Danny or any other child had a problem, the teacher would work it out with them—“but only if they gave her the respect and time of day,” Danny recalls. John defines respect this way: “If they respect your opinion, and they listen when you have something to offer, and if they treat you like someone they care about, I think that’s respect.”

Dr. Gatins introduces the third key to healthy relationships. “Open communication is the great payoff of having a healthy relationship,” she says. John’s mother stresses the importance of communicating. “It’s very important that people talk to each other, and say what’s going on. Otherwise so many mistakes can be made. If you really know what’s going on, it’s so much easier to respect and be sensitive to the person.” What is open communication? For John, this means “you’re not constrained to talk about your feelings or talk about what’s important to you.” John’s father agrees. “I can say anything to John. The problem is, I’m not always in contact with how I say things. When he was young, three or four years old, one day he said to me, ‘You don’t have to use that dark voice.’ And I wish I had the capacity then to know how deep an issue that was, but I was still learning about it.”

Dr. Gatins returns to explain the distinction between completely open honesty and open communication. “It’s okay to think about what I want to share with the different people in
my life, since different people serve different roles. Even if I have trust and respect for my teacher, I’m not going to tell my teacher about my girlfriend or boyfriend. Having open communication doesn’t mean I say everything to everyone at all times because I’m such an open person.”

Danny and her older brother Jason talk about their relationship, and how it has grown and changed over the years. Danny says, “My communication with Jason is at times difficult, because it’s the older brother thing. Plus I don’t think he likes the fact that I’m growing up. But there are other times when he talks to me like a human being, and he sees me as a friend, somebody he can tell stuff to.” Jason recalls a time after his freshman year in college, when he stayed up late one night talking to Danny, and they talked about what he had learned about friendships, relationships, about perceptions, and she learned that his arrogance was just something to cover other aspects of his personality.

Dr. Gatins introduces the final key to a healthy relationship: setting appropriate boundaries. “Boundaries are absolutely critical and essential for a healthy relationship. Boundaries are both emotional and physical. Everybody is different. When I’m in a relationship, I need to know that the other person knows what those boundaries are.”

Danny’s relationship with her younger sister offers a perfect example of boundaries. As she walks through Danny’s bedroom, her little sister tells viewers, “Danielle has some rules in her room. I can’t go into her dresser, or some of her drawers, unless she tells me to. I can’t touch her tapes or VCR unless she tells me to.” Danny and her sister have a good relationship, yet they talk about the frustrations of having a little sister hanging around when Danny is spending time with friends. It’s uncomfortable, Danny admits, “but she knows I’ll hang out with her tomorrow.”

“Teens are entitled to privacy,” Dr. Gatins says. “They should have some space they feel is their own. But parents also need to remain in charge, they need to be the ones to say, ‘Here’s what the boundaries are.’ Also, parents need to shut their doors.” Danny’s father explains his family’s “closed door” policy. He knows that his children understand and respect that when their door is closed, they are talking about parenting issues. “They know not to intrude,” he says. John shares how he feels about his private space, his bedroom. “I don’t like people going into my room when I’m not there. The only person who is really allowed is my sister because she knows everything in my room, and I have nothing to hide from her.” His sister adds, “I go into his room, but I don’t go around looking through his stuff, and he doesn’t look through my stuff. We basically respect each other’s personal space.” Danny ends this segment reflecting on the difficulties she has faced in past relationships. “I’ve always had a boundary with friends. If I got close to someone, I’d find a way to make the friendship deteriorate. I didn’t want to be left. For a lot of years, it was about me leaving them. I had to work on that a lot.”
As the video draws to a close, Dr. Gatins reminds viewers that healthy relationships can require hard work. “But there’s nothing in the world like feeling like you can trust somebody, and that you are cared for on a profound level, and respected.” How can young people succeed at healthy relationships? Dr. Gatins says, “You just have to stay aware, that’s all. When you make a mistake, you can say, ‘Okay, that felt lousy, I’m not doing that again.’ And you’ll get that [learning process] through relationships with your parents, your siblings, romantic partners, your teachers and your coaches. You’re going to make a lot of mistakes, and as you move on, you’ll start to realize what it means to be respected and to give respect. You will know who you’re comfortable openly communicating with, you’ll know who you are going to trust, and you will know who you’re not going to trust. You will know how long you’re going to wait in a relationship before you’re ready to take it to a certain level of trust. All those things will come in time,” she assures viewers. “As you move into adulthood, you’ll have better skills, but the process never stops. You work on this your whole entire life—and you just get better and better at it.”