

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

10 QUESTIONS TO START
THE CONVERSATION



DEAR PARENT OR GUARDIAN:

Could violence be a part of your teen's social life or dating relationships? The answer may surprise you. While we might think that relationship violence is something that could never affect the lives of our children, the truth is that nearly a third of girls surveyed said they know at least one student at school who has been physically abused by a person they were dating.¹ The good news is that there is a lot we as parents can do to step in and help. All it takes is a little time, focus and a commitment to reach out, listen and talk to our teens.

No one is better positioned to make a difference in the lives of young people than parents. Your concerns about your child staying clear of abuse, being respectful of others and finding healthy relationships need to be discussed. Your values are the ones that matter most.

This handbook can help parents talk with their teenage sons and daughters about the violence that can occur within a relationship and the confusion and pain it causes. The questions in this handbook provide a framework for one, two or ten conversations and can offer important information and insights into dating abuse. These talks can spark a discussion about preventing abuse and give you a chance to share your beliefs about healthy, non-violent relationships with your child. More importantly, these questions can lead to a conversation about what is happening in your teen's relationships and how you can help.

Want to reach out to your teen about relationship abuse? All you have to do is ask.

¹ "Social Control, Verbal Abuse and Violence Among Teenagers: Teen and Parent Opinion" survey, sponsored by Fifth & Pacific Companies, Inc. and conducted by GFK Custom Research LLC.

OTHER HANDBOOKS IN THE LOVE IS NOT ABUSE SERIES:

[A Woman's Handbook: A Practical Guide to Discussing Relationship Abuse](#)

[A Parent's Handbook: How to Talk to Your Children About Developing Healthy Relationships](#)

[A Teen's Handbook: What You Need to Know About Dating Violence](#)

[Tough Talk: What Boys Need to Know About Relationship Abuse](#)

WHAT IS RELATIONSHIP ABUSE?

Dating violence or relationship abuse is a pattern of violent behavior that someone uses against a girlfriend or boyfriend. Abuse can cause injury and even death, but it doesn't have to be physical. It can take many forms, including threats, emotional abuse, insults, isolation from friends and family, name-calling and controlling what someone wears or with whom they socialize. It can also include sexual abuse. It can happen to anyone, at any age, no matter what their race, religion, sexual orientation, level of education or economic background.

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 85% of all relationship abuse victims are female and most abusers are male. For that reason, this handbook uses "she" when referring to victims and "he" when referring to abusers. Whether the victim is male or female, violence of any kind is unacceptable in relationships.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Your child is probably already dating — perhaps more seriously than you realize. Eighty-nine percent of teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18 say they have been in dating relationships.² And while it may seem like innocent "puppy love" to you, relationships between teenagers can seem incredibly intense and all-consuming to them. Though it may be uncomfortable for you, adults must understand and accept the realities of teen relationships and sexuality in order to make a real impact on the issue of teen dating violence. Don't let your discomfort with the topic blind you to possible warning signs of relationship abuse or stop you from reaching out and communicating with your child.

² Children Now/Kaiser Permanente poll. December 1995

A NOTE TO PARENTS WITH SONS

Many parents understand the importance of talking with their daughters about learning how to stay safe. But every violent relationship has a victim and an abuser — and the vast majority of the time the abuser is male. According to Jackson Katz, founder of Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) and an expert in relationship abuse prevention, it is critical that we talk with our sons about healthy relationships.

"When it comes to abuse in teen relationships, frequently we react after the fact," says Katz. "But if we're going to prevent the abuse before it starts, we need to be more honest about who's doing it. While young women are capable of acting cruelly or even using violence, the vast majority of abuse in teen relationships is perpetrated by young men. It is not anti-male to say this. It is simply acknowledging reality. If parents have any reason to suspect that their son might be mistreating his girlfriend or other young women, they have a special responsibility to address this with him immediately so that he gets help to deal with his problems."

GETTING STARTED

Finding the right moment to talk about abuse can seem like a daunting task. We asked Rosalind Wiseman, author of “Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence,” for some tips on dealing with this delicate, but important conversation:

Q: WHAT'S A GOOD SETTING TO HAVE THIS CONVERSATION?

Never tell your teen you want to talk in front of other people, except perhaps your child's other parent or guardian. Take your child out to a coffee shop or for a drive, away from siblings and distractions for both of you. Avoid going to a place where either one of you may run into someone you know. You will get answers if you set up a comfortable environment and listen respectfully.

Q: WHAT SHOULD I HOPE TO GET OUT OF THE CONVERSATION?

First, you want to have a productive conversation. This means that through the process of your conversation, you want to support your child and confirm that you are a good resource and a non-judgmental listener. Second, you want to give your child realistic strategies for confronting the problem effectively. You will never accomplish the second goal without the first.

Q: ARE THERE ANY OTHER NUTS AND BOLTS TIPS ON HAVING THE ACTUAL CONVERSATION?

Share your own experiences, especially the ones when you were your teen's age, made mistakes and learned from them. Avoid talking about what you have recently experienced because you need to maintain boundaries — they need a parent figure now, not a friend. The hard reality is that you can't always fix things for your kids, you can only try to give them the skills and support that set the foundation for doing it themselves.

Q: HOW CAN I TELL IF MY TEEN MIGHT WANT TO TALK TO ME?

Anytime your teenager wants to talk to you, drop everything and pay attention. Watch for signs of your teen wanting to talk, such as if your teen hangs around where you are but doesn't necessarily say anything, or if your teen says he or she doesn't feel well but there doesn't seem to be anything physically wrong. Notice if your teen tries to get you alone, away from others — for example, if he or she volunteers to drive somewhere with you in the car. If your teen wants to talk to you but also couches it as “no big deal,” don't believe it. Just by bringing it up, he or she is already telling you that it is a big deal.

QUESTION 1: HOW ARE THINGS GOING?

Make your first question a general one, rather than one related specifically to dating violence — otherwise, you might put your teen on the spot.

Says Rosalind Wiseman, “Keep an eye on the goal of the conversation. For example,

you might hear, 'Why do you care all of a sudden?' Remember, underneath the provocative tone, your child is telling you something. Beyond the problems he or she may be having with friends, your child wants you around more. Before you go any further, it is critical to acknowledge these feelings. Ask your teen 'Why would you say something like that? I really want to know.' Then listen."

QUESTION 2: WHAT ARE YOUR FRIENDS' DATING RELATIONSHIPS LIKE?

What's the difference between "going together" and "being committed?" How long do your teen's peers stay together? Do they make any kind of commitment to each other? Are there certain things boys want that girls don't? Are there things girls want in these relationships that boys don't want? Your teen may have very set notions about the roles of males and females. A boy may have the mistaken impression that guys are always in control while girls are supposed to follow along. You may be happy to hear your teen thinks mutual respect is a key part of any relationship. You will only find out by asking questions.

QUESTION 3: HAVE YOU SEEN ANY KIND OF ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE WHO ARE GOING OUT?

Here's your chance to define "abusive behaviors" or "violence" and compare your definition to your teenager's.

Also, look at the warning signs on the following page from the perspective of a potential abuser. Don't look the other way if you see red flags in your teen. Reach out to help now, when he or she needs your support and guidance most.

QUESTION 4: WHY DO YOU THINK ONE PERSON WOULD ABUSE THE OTHER WHEN DATING?

Society repeatedly tells boys that in order to be a man, they must be powerful, strong and in control. In relationships, this control can occur as psychological or emotional abuse, threats, possessiveness and jealousy, intimidation and isolation, and actual violence. All too often, this behavior is excused.

This discussion may bring up some uncomfortable disagreements or questions about what you as a parent really believe. What examples is your teen learning in your house and in your interactions? Be honest and open about your thoughts, questions and answers.

QUESTION 5: WHY MIGHT A PERSON STAY IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

There are many reasons why teens might stay in abusive relationships:

- In high school, status and self-esteem are often intricately linked to a teen's relationship.
- She may be in love and want the violence to end, but not the relationship.
- In an abusive relationship, a teen can feel like no one understands the abuser but her.
- She might fear that if you find out, you won't let the couple date any longer.

- She may not have healthy relationships to compare this to, and she may see abusive behavior modeled at home. She might think this is just what “being in love” is like.
- She might fear bringing shame to the family. She may worry that you will be disappointed in her.

QUESTION 6: WHAT MAKES A RELATIONSHIP HEALTHY?

A healthy relationship is one in which the partners have a commitment to making the relationship work, and at the same time they respect each other’s individuality and personal boundaries. A healthy relationship is also one in which you would not hurt the other person emotionally, physically or sexually.

WARNING SIGNS

Here are some signs to look for:

1. She apologizes for his behavior and makes excuses for him.
2. She loses interest in activities that she used to enjoy.
3. She stops seeing friends and family members and becomes more and more isolated.
4. When your daughter and her boyfriend are together, he calls her names and puts her down in front of other people.
5. He acts extremely jealous of others who pay attention to her, especially other guys.
6. He thinks or tells your daughter that you (her parents) don’t like him.
7. He controls her behavior, checking up on her constantly, calling and texting her, demanding to know who she has been with.
8. She casually mentions his violent behavior, but laughs it off as a joke.
9. You see him violently lose his temper, striking or breaking objects.
10. She often has unexplained injuries, or the explanations she offers don’t make sense.

QUESTION 7: WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU HAVE A FRIEND WHO IS THREATENED - OR A FRIEND WHO IS ABUSIVE?

Here are some ways for your teen to respond if they have a friend with unexplained bruises or someone’s boyfriend seems rough and uncaring:

TALKING TO TEENS WHO ARE ABUSED

Talking to a friend dealing with dating violence can make an enormous difference to her. She is probably feeling very isolated and alone.

When talking to this friend, there are several key things your teen should keep in mind:

Listen to what she has to say, and don’t be judgmental. Let her know you are there for

her whenever she needs to talk, and that you are worried about her. Let her know that you won't tell anyone she doesn't want you to about her situation — and then keep your word (unless you fear for her physical safety). Be specific about why you are concerned. Let her know about behavior you have seen and how it made you feel. Find someone knowledgeable about abuse that she can talk to and volunteer to go with her.

TALKING TO TEENS WHO ABUSE

Most guys who hurt their girlfriends are in denial about their actions and don't consider themselves "abusers." But reaching out and talking to a friend who is being violent in his relationship is truly an act of friendship, though it may seem like the hardest thing to do. When talking to a friend who is being abusive, here are some tips your teen can keep in mind: Be specific about what you saw and let your friend know you won't stand by and let the behavior continue. Make sure he realizes that his actions have consequences and he could get into serious trouble — from getting expelled from school to going to jail. Urge him to get help from a counselor, coach or any trusted adult, and offer to go with him if he wants support. Let him know that you care about him, and that you know he has it in him to change.

QUESTION 8: WHAT KIND OF MESSAGES ABOUT DATING ABUSE AND RELATIONSHIPS DO WE SEE IN THE MEDIA?

This is where your values come in. Listen to your child's music and talk about the messages you hear. What posters hang on your teen's walls? Are they heroes whose values you agree with? If not, talk to your teen and find out why negative messages are resonating with him or her. Explain your views and listen to what your child has to say, it may tell you a lot about the pressures and social dynamics your teen is facing every day.

QUESTION 9: IF YOUR TEEN IS DATING SOMEONE, ASK "HOW IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP GOING?"

If your teen is not dating someone, ask "When you think about going out with someone, what are some behaviors that would be okay and what are some that you would have a problem with?"

Be prepared for the possibility that there is indeed violence in your son's or daughter's relationship. How will you respond? You may feel guilty, blaming yourself for not seeing the problem sooner. Before doing anything else, stop, take a breath and remember this is really about your teen.

Start by letting your daughter know that you love her. Thank her for trusting you and tell her she can always talk to you about it. Ending any relationship takes time, and it can be even harder when abuse is involved. While it may feel frustrating and scary, it is not a good idea to forbid your daughter from seeing her boyfriend. This won't make her safe — it will just make her stop confiding in you about the problem. Ask her "What can we do to help you?" She might not have the answer, but she needs to feel in control. Find a counselor who specializes in teen dating violence and continue to support her by being loving, open and non-judgmental. Contact a domestic violence agency, or call the **National Dating Abuse Helpline (1-866-331-9474 or 1-866-331-8453 TTY) or visit www.loveisrespect.org** for advice on how to handle your daughter's particular situation.

If your son confides in you that he has become violent in his relationship, you need to support him as well. Let him know that you love him, and that you don't think he is a terrible person. Nevertheless, be firm in letting him know that his behavior has to change. Offer to help him by locating community resources that can provide counseling. Look honestly at your own actions and the behaviors you have modeled in your home, and take responsibility if you have instilled in your son ideas that may have influenced his abusive behavior. Let him know that he can come and talk to you about this anytime without fear of punishment.

QUESTION 10: WHERE CAN YOU GO TO FIND HELP IF YOU OR YOUR FRIEND NEEDS IT?

Where does your teen look for help? It could be a relative, friend of the family, clergy member, teacher, school counselor, coach or even the police. A local domestic violence program or the **National Dating Abuse Helpline (1-866-331-9474 or 1-866-331-8453 TTY) or visit www.loveisrespect.org** can tell you if there is a program or support group in your community.

AFTER THE QUESTIONS - AND ANSWERS

Remember, communication is an ongoing part of your relationship with your child. Re-visit these questions over time, and keep checking in with your teenager. Knowing that you are there for them, to listen, talk to, support and accept them as they navigate the challenging waters of adolescence, can put them way ahead of the game in forming healthy, respectful, non-violent relationships.

We hope the questions in this handbook will serve as a guide to begin these important conversations. With a little time, energy, compassion and engaged listening, you can make the most of your role in the life of your son or daughter.

RESOURCES

If you or your teen knows someone who is in an abusive relationship and needs help, go online to loveisrespect.org or call the **National Dating Abuse Helpline at 1-866-331-9474 or TTY 1-866-331-8454** for the hearing impaired.

CONTRIBUTORS

Elisabeth Bernstein, Elisabeth Bernstein Communications

Dominic Cappello, author of "Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Violence"

Jackson Katz, founder of Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP)

Rosalind Wiseman, author of "Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence"

All of the handbooks in our series can be downloaded on our website at www.loveisnotabuse.com