

# What Parents Can Do To Promote Healthy Relationships

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE IS A PATTERN OF ABUSIVE BEHAVIORS THAT ONE PARTNER USES TO GAIN POWER AND CONTROL OVER ANOTHER. The abusive behavior may include, but is not limited to physical, emotional, verbal and/or sexual violence. Teen dating violence does not discriminate; the violence occurs consistently across racial and ethnic backgrounds. Dating relationships begin younger than most parents and guardians might think; in fact, almost half of 11-to-14-year-olds report already being in a dating relationship. Among 11-to-14-year-olds in dating relationships, 62% report they have a friend who has been verbally abused by a partner.

While significant levels of abusive behaviors are reported in tween dating relationships, abusive behavior increases dramatically in the years 15 through 18. One in four adolescents report being verbally, physically, emotionally, or sexually abused by a dating partner.

It is never too early to have a conversation with your child about healthy boundaries in relationships.



## What is a healthy relationship?

Healthy relationships include behaviors and attitudes that promote mutual respect and equality. An example of this may include assertive, non-violent communication and appropriate responses to conflict. Having conversations with your teen about healthy behaviors is just as important as recognizing the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship. Talking with your teen about everything from healthy relationship boundaries, the potential abuse of technology in dating relationships, and that you are there for them to talk about healthy relationships will increase their knowledge and safety.

Some conversation starters for parents/guardians to approach teens about their ideas of relationships include:

- If you have a problem with your partner, how would you let them know how you feel?
- Is it ok to have your own time and space away from your partner?
- What are some ways your partner shows you they care about you?

Creating an environment where teens feel like they are heard can make the difference between them keeping a potentially dangerous situation to themselves, or trusting you.

## What is an unhealthy relationship?

There are many different ways that an unhealthy relationship may begin. Teen dating violence is different than a conflict where both parties can voice how they feel and there is a solution or agreement. In an abusive relationship, one partner is not looking for a solution, but rather to assert power and control, often through fear and intimidation.

Warning signs of an unhealthy relationship may include, but are not limited to:

- Calls or texts excessively
- Makes the other person ask, "Have I done something wrong?"
- Uses guilt to control or manipulate
- Isolates from family and friends
- Monitors technology use and access
- Embarrasses the other person in public and on purpose
- Threatens self harm if the person threatens to leave the relationship

There are things you can do if you suspect your teen may be in an unhealthy relationship. Adults and teens often use different terms to define relationships and these terms have different meanings. Additionally, adults and teens may have varying expectations about the acceptability of certain behaviors within a relationship.

Being empathetic can help when addressing teen dating violence with youth. Empathetic phrases may include:

- I hear you say...
- I wonder if...
- Do you feel...
- You must have felt...
- I don't understand, can you explain more...

These phrases show empathy without judgment and allow teens to share their thoughts in their own way. Teens are more likely to confide in their friends if they are being abused. To create an environment where teens feel comfortable, it's important that you ensure they are heard, listen without judging, and provide clear information about what you may be able to do to help them.

Teens often deny, minimize and feel confusion about the violence in their relationships. They may feel embarrassed, ashamed or fearful about the consequences of disclosing an unhealthy relationship. Below are common responses from teens and open-ended statements for adults to use to provide support and resources.

Teen statements:

- *It's not that bad. It is not like they hit me.*
- *I know he gets mad when I hang out with my guy friends. He told me not to and I did anyway. I guess I deserved it.*
- *I am scared of what will happen if they know I told someone.*
- *I don't want them to get in trouble. I just want it to stop.*

Adult statements:

- *It is not your fault. No one can make another person use violence.*
- *I am worried about you. Emotional and verbal abuse is serious too.*
- *No one deserves to be hurt. There is nothing that you could say or do that would make it okay for someone to hurt you.*
- *I understand that this may be scary for you. It took a lot of courage to talk about it. Let's talk about next steps to keep you safe.*
- *I understand that you want to feel safe. Let's talk about your options.*

Avoid phrases that may come off as blaming or judgmental like:

- *Why don't you just break up with them?*
- *You shouldn't have let this happen to you.*
- *Why do you let them treat you this way?*

The abuser is responsible for their actions. Dating abuse is a choice by one partner to hurt another to gain power and control.

### **For more information**

For more information, training or services such as confidential counseling or referrals, go to the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence's website at [www.fcadv.org](http://www.fcadv.org) or call the Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-500-1119 or TTY 1-800-621-4202, 24 hours a day/7 days a week to speak to a trained advocate.

## HERE'S HELP

Use the **Family Resources** on **pages 91–95** to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.