

Healthy Relationships

Equip Your Teen to Make Safer Decisions

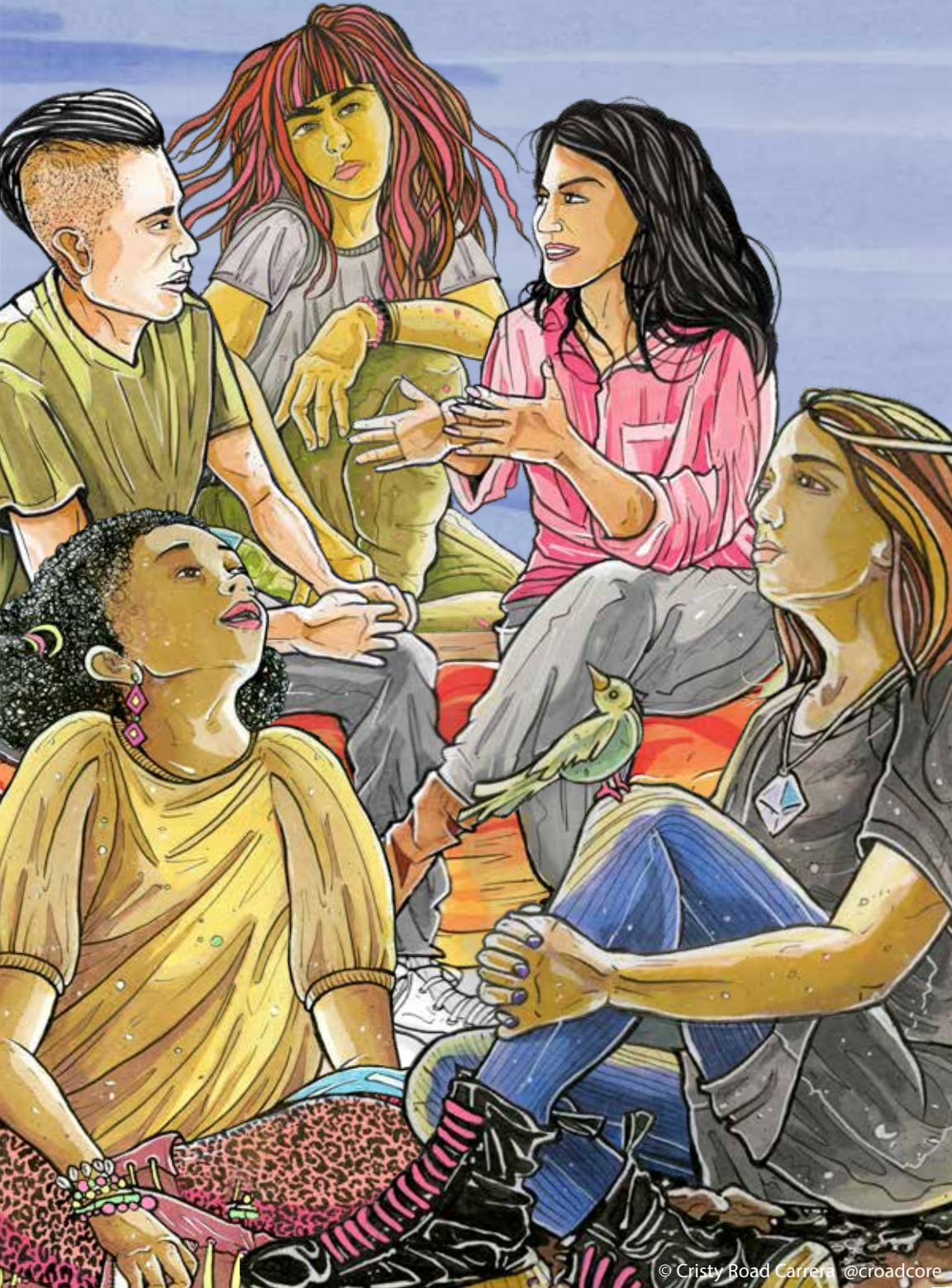


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Healthy Relationships

Equip Your Teen to Make Safer Decisions

As your teen transitions to middle school or high school, they will undergo many emotional and physical changes. It is developmentally appropriate for young people during these periods to explore boundaries and identities — often through relationships with peers.

In this time of identity development, young people may feel pressured to conform to what their peers decide is acceptable. Identity development is difficult. They need validation of their concerns about being humiliated, bullied, threatened, or even hurt. They will also likely be exposed or pressured to experiment with risky behaviors, such as sexual activity, alcohol or drug use, or violence. Unhealthy or abusive peer or dating relationships can increase the likelihood of these behaviors.

Young people in abusive relationships are at risk for other health problems as well. There can be lifelong impacts for young people who have experienced teen dating violence and abuse. Young people who experience dating abuse are more likely than their peers to report binge drinking, suicide attempts, physical fighting, and current sexual activity. Rates of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use are more than twice as high in girls who report physical or sexual dating violence than in girls who report no abuse.

Healthy relationships, whether romantic or otherwise, can be effective protection against risky behaviors. Healthy relationship skills such as negotiating, decision-making, and problem-solving can help young people navigate life when presented with difficult decisions. You are well positioned to model and guide young people in developing these skills both before and during times when they feel pressured to engage in unhealthy or risky behaviors.

Ways to Talk with Your Teen About Relationships

It's never too late to help your teenager develop healthy relationship skills and equip them with tools when they engage in risk-taking associated with dating relationships. Young people first learn about relationships from parents or guardians, siblings, friends, and media. This is a critical period for youth to learn strategies for maintaining healthy relationships throughout the rest of their lives. It is important to provide reliable and accurate information to young people about what a healthy relationship feels like, looks like, and sounds like during this period.

As parents or guardians, you are role models for healthy relationships. You can encourage and help youth explore, identify and navigate their full range of emotions. Without an awareness and understanding of emotions, it can be difficult for your teen to build or maintain strong, healthy relationships. Encourage your teen to be reflective about their actions and emotions. Your own experiences with unhealthy relationships can impact your relationship with young people in your life — be honest when you make mistakes and model being accountable. Normalizing making mistakes and modeling how to repair them will also be

helpful to young people's development. Young people not only model your behavior when you are well; they also model your behaviors when you are in crisis or experiencing difficult decisions.

Reflect on your own relationship experiences

Before starting a conversation about healthy dating relationships, you should examine your own values, behaviors, and experiences with relationships. The young people in your life will likely have many questions. You do not have to have all the answers, but be clear about your own values and beliefs first. How have your values and beliefs manifested in your life? What were your first dating relationships like? How did you resolve conflict in the relationship? Be honest. What did you find difficult? What did you find enjoyable?

Keep the dialogue going

Talking with young people about dating relationships is not a single conversation, but an open and ongoing dialogue. These conversations should be developmentally appropriate and become more complex as the young person continues to mature and is faced with other experiences. To keep the dialogue going, welcome and respect your teen's opinions, thoughts, and ideas. Reflect on what made you feel heard and valued in your relationships with trusted adults and try to provide that for them. Vulnerability and authenticity goes both ways. Young people can tell when you are being authentic — this encourages them to also do the same.

Take young people's experiences seriously

Relationships between young people can seem incredibly intense and all-consuming to them. Just like adults, young people are capable of experiencing attraction and love. Navigating new feelings may be difficult for young people who are dating. Extend compassion and care.

Support your teen's exploration and understanding of their sexuality and gender identity. Understand that experimentation is a normal and natural part of adolescence.

Young people who come out as Queer, Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, or Non-Binary are often at their most vulnerable. They may endure isolation and abandonment if family or friends react negatively when they share



that they are Queer or Trans. It is vitally important to support the young people in your life when they tell you who they are. Telling them you love and support them reminds them that they are not alone. Do not be surprised if the young person continues to feel distraught if their friends reject them — supportive parents and guardians are important but can never take the place of peer support and connection. As queer and transgender/non-binary identities become increasingly visible and acceptable in mainstream society, especially among younger generations, it is vital that adults provide open-minded support for young people's health, confidence, and performance in school.

Characteristics of Healthy Relationships

Mutuality – You see each other clearly for each other's authentic selves. You interact with each other in ways that are balanced and supportive of one another.

Respect – You value each other's beliefs and opinions. You love and appreciate one another for who you each are as people.

Kindness – You are caring and understanding of one another's feelings. You provide comfort and support to each other.

Trust – You are confident your partner is honest and you feel safe and secure in the relationship. Your partner has your best intentions at heart.

Honesty – You can be truthful and open without fearing how the other person will respond.

Fun – You enjoy spending time together. You bring out the best in each other.

Independence – You have space to be yourself outside of the relationship, and have other friendships and relationships with people you care about. You participate in activities that center you and do not always include your partner.

Comfortable Pace – Your relationship moves at a speed that feels enjoyable to all. You've discussed your boundaries and respect decisions to do or not do something and agree on how slow or fast the relationship is moving.

Healthy Conflict – You openly and respectfully listen to one another and discuss issues and confront disagreements without judgment.

Taking Responsibility – You are responsible for your own actions and words. If you hurt someone, you apologize, understand the impact of your actions, make amends, and change your behavior so the harm does not happen again.

Safety – You feel comfortable being you without fear of being put down. You can be vulnerable with concerns, ideas, or mistakes without being punished or humiliated. You are not physically hurt or pressured into unwanted activities.

Adapted from One Love at www.joinonelove.org

Create Opportunities for Discussion

Anywhere that is comfortable for both you and your teen is good, as long as there is privacy and enough time to discuss whatever issues might come up. Watching a TV show together or driving long distances in the car can provide opportunities to connect with one another. Scheduling regular times to be together may be helpful.

Be Present

Try to be present when your teen wants to have a conversation. Being present means staying away from multi-tasking and actively listening and engaging in the conversation. Repeat what you heard and ask questions. Let them ask you questions and create opportunities for them to start the conversation. If you cannot be fully present when young people want to have a conversation, tell them that you would like to continue the conversation at a different time, but first find out if they are in immediate harm. If they are, take appropriate action to ensure their safety. If the conversation can be delayed, find a specific time and place when both of you can be present and focused. Be sure to follow up.

Direct and Indirect Communication

Watch for signs that indicate your teen wants to talk, such as hanging around but not saying anything or saying that they do not feel well when nothing is physically wrong. Continue to engage in activities that build trust. When the young person is ready, they will have the conversation. Offer to connect them with another adult if they feel more comfortable with them or, if possible, a counselor. Don't take it personally if they feel more comfortable talking to someone else about sensitive subjects. It can feel bad in the moment, but it is more important your teen talk to someone.

Deep Listening

Wait and listen. Breathe. Let silence fill the space instead of immediately asking questions. Young people want to share their thoughts and feelings if they feel safe and valued. Support your teen and affirm that you are a good resource and a nonjudgmental listener. Allow opportunities for them to give you feedback about your listening. Avoid giving critical or judgmental comments, even if you don't fully understand. When you hear something that makes you uncomfortable, ask respectful questions.

Developmentally Appropriate Conversations

Your teen may not always understand if you speak to them in abstractions. Real life examples work best. Share your own experiences, especially the ones where you made mistakes and learned from those mistakes. Describe situations you experienced as a young person — be honest about what you felt.

Answer Questions Honestly

Give answers that are compassionate, honest and correct. Don't worry about not being an expert. If you don't know how to answer the question, offer to do

research together using a credible source so that they can refer to it on their own.

Talking to Masculine & Masculine Presenting Young People

Traditional masculinity — defined by competitiveness, dominance and aggression — is, on the whole, harmful. Boys and masculine presenting young people socialized in this way are less likely to engage in healthy behaviors. Healthy masculinity is possible when our teens are taught about respect, how to deal with conflict, and how to build healthy relationships. Fathers, coaches, and anyone who spends time with boys or young people will have the greatest impact when their actions match their teachings. They will learn what respect means by observing how you treat other people. It is critical that you talk to your sons about forming healthy relationships in the same way that you talk with your daughters and femme identifying youth, including transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary youth. For more information about healthy masculinity, go to www.acalltomen.org



Technology & Relationships

Young people’s relationships are impacted by cell phones and social media. It is important that you talk to your teen about social media. Discuss with them and model safe and healthy usage of social media sites to help them navigate this new and ever changing online social world.

As parents or guardians, take time to learn about these social media platforms — there is simply no better way to learn than to have a profile yourself. You can also use this as an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your teen by asking them to teach you about these platforms.

You may want to consider creating age appropriate limits on the use of technologies. Make sure you are clear about what you consider appropriate behavior on social media or messaging applications. Give reminders of those expectations from time to time. It doesn’t mean you do not trust your teen, it just reinforces that you care about them and are paying attention to their health and safety.

Emphasize that everything sent over the internet or by cell phone can be shared publicly. It is important that they use good judgment in sending messages and pictures and that they set appropriate privacy settings on social media sites. Discuss what “good judgment” means and the consequences of poor judgment — ranging from embarrassment to minor punishment or possible legal action in the case of sexting or bullying.

Make a point of encouraging your teen to avoid gossiping, spreading rumors, bullying, or damaging someone’s reputation via texting or other social media. Keep in mind that your own social media engagement sets an example as well.

Invite your teen to show you where the privacy features are for the social media platforms they use. The more private the settings, the more secure their data will be. Encourage them to read the terms and conditions of the social media platform that they utilize. And remember, even with the most secure settings on social media, there are still vulnerabilities to safety and privacy.

Monitoring Technology

While it may be tempting to monitor young people’s online activity, this is generally discouraged in order to build trust between you and your teen. Instead, invite open and ongoing discussions regarding what they are seeing and sharing online, and why. Encourage them to be just as intentional and aware with their actions online as they are in real life. Together, you can explore the ways in which they have been affected by the actions of other people online as a way to learn together about how they can use social media to support connection and enjoyment, rather than as a tool to hurt or manipulate others. If there are indicators they are engaging in risky behaviors, you should engage in conversations about accountability and set guidelines together on technology to support healthy decision making.

Cell Phones

Safety - Talk about who they should give their phone number to and when to respond to calls or messages from unknown numbers. Also encourage young people to memorize a few phone numbers of trusted adults or friends to use in the event they need to get a hold of someone and do not have or cannot use their phone.

Phone usage - Discourage using phones to send abusive or humiliating texts or pictures or engage in pranks. Talk to them about what to do if they are harassed on the phone, including notifying a trusted adult. Read and discuss applicable school policies on phone usage together. Consider co-creating guidance around phone usage, such as turning it off or putting the phone on do not disturb during homework time or leaving the phone in the kitchen for charging until the next morning.

Inappropriate Usage - Talk about what constitutes inappropriate usage. Explore how bullying or harassment via phones, while less personal, is no less harmful than doing it in person.

Cameras - Explain that secretly taking photos or taking video clips of someone invades that person's privacy.

Boundaries - Co-create boundaries about the use of phones and brainstorm accountability practices, such as limits on the amount of time on the cell phone during school days, and what happens if the boundaries are not followed.

Sexting

Sexting refers to sending a text message with or without a photograph of a person who is naked, engaged in a sexual act, or is otherwise sexually suggestive. If shared, the embarrassment and emotional pain it causes can be enormous for the person in the picture.

The act of sending or forwarding sexually explicit photographs may be against the law. If young people exchange sexually explicit images, it may be considered teen pornography and they can be charged with a crime. Talk to your teen about what to do if they receive any pictures from friends that make them uncomfortable or are otherwise inappropriate. Encourage them to connect with you or another trusted adult to talk about what happened.

Begin the conversation about camera use when your teen first gets a phone, before an inappropriate text is sent or there is pressure to send one:

- Explain specifically that sexting often involves pictures of a sexual nature and is considered teen pornography which is illegal.
- Remind them that technological abuse and sexting can lead to suspension from school and/or notes on their permanent record that could hurt their chances of getting into college, the armed forces, or getting a job.
- Read over the school policy about technological abuse together. Ask if they have questions about the policies and if they fully understand that their actions may have consequences.



Setting Boundaries in Dating Relationships

Although it may be uncomfortable when our teens are in a romantic or even a sexual relationship, adults must understand and accept the realities of relationships and sexuality in young people. Dating can be part of development and the adolescent experience. It is healthy and normal for young people to date.

Talking with teens about sex, including the prevention of HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and pregnancy, is a positive parenting practice. The most important thing is that adults in their life guide them in approaching romantic relationships in healthy ways. Planned Parenthood provides more information to support conversations about sex. (<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/relationships>)

Co-creating a strategy for dating safely is generally more effective than establishing “rules.” Adults and young people should develop strategies together to protect what is important to all involved. When you and the young person in your life discuss strategies for safety, consider:

- Defining dating and the age when dating will be permitted. Distinguish between what is your comfort level and what are safety parameters.
- Setting the permitted age difference in dating partners. During adolescence, an age difference of three years or more may indicate an imbalance of power and control and substantially increases risk factors.
- Encouraging your teen to listen to and trust their instincts, that often sounds like a voice inside their head, a funny feeling in their stomach.
- Discussing the safety of group dates versus individual dates. Let them know that, if they do go on a group date, they should be aware of who is going and what they will be doing.
- Planning for an uncomfortable or dangerous social situation by letting your teen know that you are always available to come pick them up — whenever or whatever the situation — no questions asked.
- Providing the young person with emergency money and a cell phone as a means of contact.
- Establishing a prearranged password indicating the need for intervention or help. In an emergency, the young person can either call you and say the password or can text you or a friend who knows what the password means.
- Addressing the impact of alcohol or drugs and the decreased ability to react under their influence.
- Discussing consent and what it means to them, both sexually and otherwise. Affirm that communicating what they are and are not comfortable with is an important aspect of a healthy relationship. Encourage them to ask about and respect their partner’s boundaries.

When the young person in your life starts dating, be available after the date if they want to talk. Show your interest, but avoid prying. If you decide not to wait up that night, be sure to let them know beforehand that you will be available to chat in the morning. Your intuition may tell you when something is wrong, but if you have not made talking with your teen an ongoing practice, they may not feel comfortable talking with you. So, start having conversations with your teen now, so that, if the time comes, they are accustomed to talking to you. If they are experiencing problems that are too difficult to handle, seek help from your local domestic and sexual violence program or school counselor.

Sexual Contact Between Young People

Young people may have questions about sex. When they are ready to have this conversation with you, it is important to be prepared and to provide medically accurate information to be able to make informed decisions.

Remember that simply providing information about sex does not encourage young people to have sex. Being informed about sex and encouraging conversations can promote healthy relationships. It enables your teen to make and communicate decisions around sexual activity that are right for them. Avoid using shame. Shame can negatively impact how they perceive themselves, their partners and relationships and stifle conversations.

Sexual contact is any type of intimate physical contact between people, including romantic kissing, fondling, and sexual intercourse. Be aware of the laws in your state that prohibit sexual contact based on the age of the young person/s and the age a young person can legally consent to sexual intercourse.

Even for sexual contact that is not prohibited, consent is still required by both individuals who decide to have sexual contact. Adults should be explicit with young people about their right to withdraw their consent at any time — regardless if they have been dating for months or if any sexual contact has begun or in the middle of sexual contact. Just because they have had consensual sex in the past does not mean that their partner is entitled to sex in the future.

It is important to remind the young person in your life that the easiest way to determine if someone is consenting to a particular activity is to ask — every time. Active consent is the preferred form of consent and the following four conditions can help young people navigate with consent. The indication of consent increases with each additional condition being present in any given interaction:

- Both participants are fully conscious and neither party is under the influence of drugs or alcohol;
- Both participants feel like they can say no;
- Both parties have clearly communicated their willingness and permission for each type of sexual activity; and
- Both parties are positive and sincere in their desires.

It is also important to have conversations with your teen about unwanted sexual contact, such as sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment can include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, nonverbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. It is important for young people to examine their behavior and make sure that they are not harassing without being aware of it. If harassed, young people should be able to tell a trusted adult. If a young person discloses to you that they have experienced sexual harassment, support their self-determination in how they want to respond to the harm.

Sexual assault is generally unwanted sexual contact including, but not limited to:

- Unwanted kissing, touching, or other sexual activity;
- Engaging in sexual activity with someone when they cannot give consent because they are incapacitated, unconscious, or unaware of the nature of the act.
- Threatening or pressuring someone into unwanted sexual activity.

If your teen experiences sexual harassment or sexual assault, help them to understand that what happened to them was wrong, that it is not their fault, and encourage them to seek help from your local rape crisis center or domestic and sexual violence organization.



Abusive Relationships

Teen dating violence or abusive relationships can include verbal, emotional, sexual, and/or physical abuse. Teen dating violence or abuse can occur in any youth relationship regardless of sexuality or gender identities. Abusive experiences during adolescent dating relationships may disrupt normal development, including the development of a stable self-concept, self-esteem, and body image. Young people who are in abusive relationships often carry unhealthy patterns of abuse into future relationships. This does not mean that young people are incapable of reaching wholeness — do not underestimate young people’s resilience and ability to heal. However, it can be important to seek counseling and/or other culturally relevant modes of healing if they have experienced dating violence.

Signs of Abusive Relationships

Many young people who have been in or have known about an abusive relationship don’t tell anyone about it and the great majority of young people say they would turn to a friend for help if they were in an abusive relationship.

Some warning signs that the young person in your life might be experiencing abuse can include their dating partner:

- **Overwhelming Involvement:** Expressing extreme feelings and behaviors that feel too heavy or fast.
- **Possessiveness:** Acting jealous and trying to control who they spend time with and what they do; constantly calling/texting or making them feel like they have to respond at all times; monitoring them, their phone number or social media; or accusing them of cheating.
- **Put Downs:** Receiving messages from their partner that make them feel bad about themselves, especially in front of others, and negatively impacts their self confidence.
- **Isolation:** Intentionally keeping them from friends, family, or other people, and making them afraid to tell others.
- **Manipulation:** Controlling their partner’s decisions, actions or emotions or making them feel responsible for harmful actions or makes them feel like it’s their job to keep them happy; engaging in unwanted touching or sexual activity; preventing them from using birth control or refusing to use birth control themselves; or threatens to hurt themselves if they break up.
- **Gaslighting:** Manipulating their partner by psychological means into questioning their own sanity, memory, and judgment.
- **Sabotage:** Purposely harming their reputation, achievements, or success, or threatening to “out” them or share information to harm.
- **Guilt Trips:** Wrongly accusing them of everything or making excuses for their unhealthy or abusive behavior or says things like “you must not love me.”

- **Explosiveness:** Having strong, unpredictable reactions that make a partner feel scared or intimidated, destroys their things, or threatens or physically hurts a partner.
- **Age Difference:** Having more than a 3-year age difference in middle, junior or high school dating relationships.
- **Change in Behaviors:** Decreasing interest in friends or activities. Grades have declined in the past weeks or months.

Why are Young People in Abusive Relationships?

Young people may not recognize abusive behavior. Status and self-esteem are often intricately linked to young people's relationships and identities. Young people may feel that it is better to be in an abusive relationship than in no relationship at all.

The young person who is experiencing harm may be in love and want the violence to end, but not the relationship altogether. Reasoning and logic can become extremely difficult when someone is experiencing abuse or trauma. Be patient and kind with them despite the emotions that may come up for you. A young person experiencing harm is likely already feeling shame and guilt.

A young person in an unhealthy relationship may also believe that they can change the person who is causing them harm, or believe the person who is causing the harm when they promise to stop. Also, it is common that the person who is causing harm in a relationship threatens to hurt themselves if the relationship ends. Someone who is committing self harm is experiencing mental illness — offer to contact the school counselor or mental health professional and be aware if you have a duty to report.

Young people experiencing dating violence may feel deep shame and isolation. They might be afraid to tell you about the relationship for these reasons. They may be afraid the relationship will end once you know of the harm. Remind them that they are not in trouble and that it is not their fault. Your priority is that they are safe and well.

All gender identities can be abused by their partners. Young people experiencing harm may also hesitate telling you that they are experiencing harm because they may be in a non-heterosexual relationship. Coming out requires a lot of support from family and friends.

What if Your Teen is Being Abused?

This is not an easy subject. Create an open environment in which to start the conversation. Always begin the conversation by meeting your teen where they are and be willing to listen to their thoughts and feelings.

It is important to trust your instincts. Tell your teen you are worried about them and give specific examples of abusive behaviors you have witnessed. Let them know that the abuse is not their fault and that all people are deserving of love and care. It's okay to seek support from a pediatrician, school counselor, social worker, mental health professional, or counselor when intervening. Do not feel embarrassment or shame in asking for help.

Young people need to know that they do not have to accept or engage in any form of violence in relationships. Here are some suggestions.

- Tell them that they are worthy of love that is healthy and to be clear about where their boundaries are. Remind them to listen to their limits and respect them.
- Encourage young people to trust their instincts. If they feel fearful, validate their concern and ask them what would make them safer. This is an ongoing conversation and recognize that their needs may change.
- Be attentive to the safety of the young person. Ask them, "Is there anything I can do to make you feel safer in this moment?"
- Let them know help may be available from a community or tribal domestic or sexual violence organization, counseling, and other mental health resources. It can be helpful for them to process the relationship with outside sources.
- After experiencing trauma, they may require assistance doing everyday tasks and may ask you to accompany them in public.
- Encourage them to keep a journal describing the abuse (dates, times, places, specific injuries, threats, etc.). These could be helpful if there is an investigation or legal action taken — but make sure not to include anything you wouldn't want disclosed to the person using abuse during a criminal trial.

Expect young people to be conflicted about ending a relationship. Ending any relationship is messy, sad, and takes time, and it can be even harder when abuse is involved. Unless the young person's life is at immediate risk, it may not be a good idea to forbid them from seeing their romantic partner. The person experiencing harm is the one who is going to have to separate from the relationship — not you. Ask them, "What can I do to help you?" or "What are your immediate needs?" They might not have the answer right away; it might take some time or the answer may never come. It is critical that they feel supported and can seek help when the time is right.

Additional Considerations for Queer and Transgender Youth

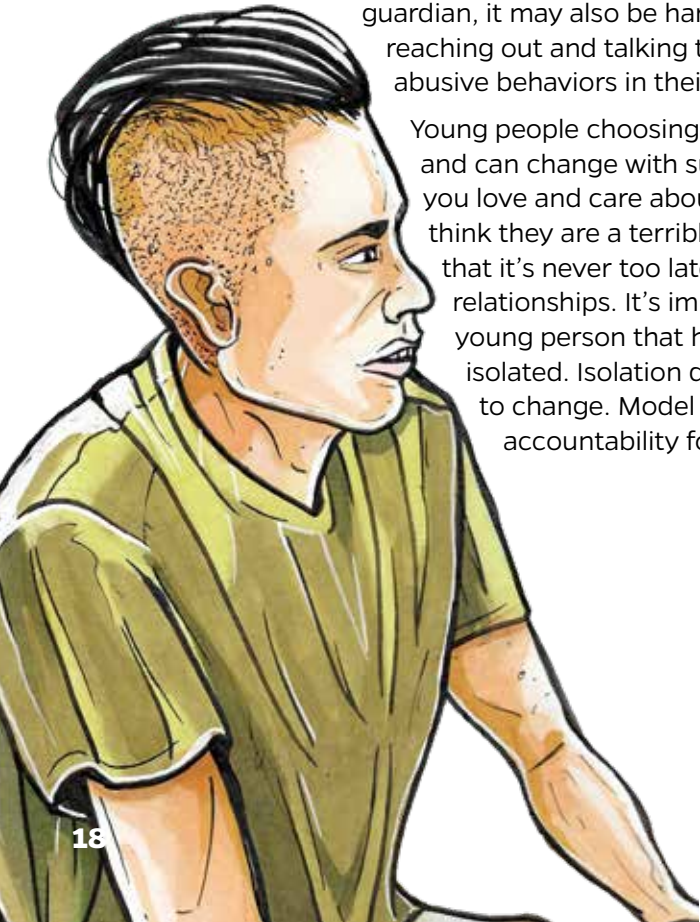
Queer and Trans youth may be very vulnerable to abuse when they are coming out and even after. If they are in a relationship with their partner who is harming them, the isolation of the young person becomes useful to their partner engaged in harmful behavior. Consider whether the young person in your life would feel comfortable coming out to you. If a young person is not out to their family, friends, schoolmates, or community, their partner may threaten outing them as a way to control and coerce them into staying in the abusive relationship or engaging in activities they don't want.

Be sure to consistently check in on the young Queer and Trans people in your life. Make sure they know that their identities should never be used to hurt or control them. Remind them that being Queer and Trans is a beautiful aspect of who they are, but no one should ever force a person to publicly share information about themselves until they are ready.

What If Your Teen is Engaging in Abusive Behaviors?

Most people who are abusive don't consider themselves abusers. Many are in denial about the severity of their actions. As a parent or guardian, it may also be hard for you to believe, but reaching out and talking to your teen about engaging in abusive behaviors in their relationship is critical.

Young people choosing abusive behavior need help and can change with support. Let them know that you love and care about them and that you don't think they are a terrible person. Explain to them that it's never too late to change their behaviors or relationships. It's important to make sure that the young person that has caused harm doesn't feel isolated. Isolation does not encourage people to change. Model and encourage responsible accountability for their actions that have



harmed others. An apology is a great start, followed by tangible actions that show they recognize the harm and are looking to change their behaviors.

Offer to help them by locating community resources that can provide counseling. Also, explain that there are consequences to actions that may result in the school or the criminal legal system getting involved. An additional consequence may be that the person who experienced harm does not want contact with the person who caused harm. This can be a temporary or a permanent separation. It's sometimes helpful to remind the person who caused harm that the healing of the person who experienced harm takes priority — sometimes that healing is separation and that those wishes and separation must be respected.

Ask questions and listen to the young person who has caused harm about how they think they got to this point in the relationship. Be prepared to look at your own actions and the behaviors you have modeled in your home and family. Trauma that is passed down generation to generation in our bodies can appear in many different ways (called generational trauma).

Be accountable if you are responsible for your teen's ideas about harmful ideas of masculinity that may have contributed to abusive behavior. Let the young person who has caused harm come and talk to you about this anytime without fear of punishment. Moving and struggling together with the young person who has caused harm is one of the most important things you as a parent or guardian will ever do.

Tips for Parents and Guardians

- Be specific about what you saw and how it made you feel. Be honest about how you could have contributed to their behavior.
- Let them know that causing harm to other people disregards the other person's humanity. Intervening earlier can help prevent the escalation of harm.
- Explain to the young person that has caused harm that there are consequences to their actions. The school or criminal legal system may get involved depending on the severity of their actions. Be clear about what processes of accountability are going to happen and why they are happening.
- Seek the support of a friend or counseling if this is causing you, the parent or guardian, distress. The young person's actions may cause your own traumas to come up and may interrupt your ability to assist the young person who has caused harm. They will need a lot of support and care!

What if Your Teen Has a Friend in an Abusive Relationship?

When someone is abused or sexually assaulted, they usually tell a friend first, if they tell anyone. Sometimes they don't say anything, but your teen may notice something wrong with their friend and be worried about them.

Share that it can be hard to know what to do and that they have a lot of influence in encouraging their friend to get the help they need. Here are a few suggestions you can share with your teen to help a friend in an abusive relationship:

- **Start the Conversation:** Begin with a conversation from a place of concern, avoid judgment or lecturing. Let your friend know what you've noticed and don't be afraid to tell them that you're worried. Be sure your friend knows that no one deserves to be hurt and that you aren't blaming them.
- **Listen and Be Supportive:** Ask them to share anything they feel comfortable sharing, then really listen. It's not your job to gather all the facts, just to support and listen. Let your friend talk about the abuse in the way that they need to. Make them feel safe with you as the person they choose to talk to and give them time to share their experiences.
- **Know that your friend may not recognize their experiences as unhealthy or abusive.** They might be afraid or embarrassed to talk about it, or may even be confused about what happened to them. Also understand that your friend may not realize that coerced sex (when someone manipulates, tricks, or guilts a person into sex) is sexual assault. If your friend didn't want it to happen, then it shouldn't have. If your friend was sexually assaulted, encourage them to seek immediate medical treatment.
- **Things to Say:** Encourage your friend to get help from a trusted adult and help them connect to resources. The adult may have a duty to report that a minor is being harmed. Don't judge your friend. Here are examples of things to say: "I'm here for you." "I'm sorry this happened to you." "No one deserves to be hurt." "It's not your fault." "I'm worried about you." "How can I help?" and "What do you need?"
- **Stay Connected:** Your friend needs you to listen and to be supportive. Respond with understanding and empathy, not anger. Your friend may not want help from anyone. Understand what you see or hear may make you frustrated and/or upset. Don't close the door of communication by threatening to do something that they don't want. Also, expect that your friend may share and then not say anything to you for several weeks or even months. Don't pressure them to talk, just let them know you are available when they want to talk.
- **Get Support:** Your friend may feel more comfortable talking with someone anonymously. In that case, help them reach out to a local domestic or sexual violence organization, or one of the helplines at the end of this booklet. You can also call the helplines to learn how to help your friend.

Options and Resources

It is important for young people experiencing trauma to have autonomy regarding any decisions in response to abuse or sexual assault — being able to make their own choices is crucial to their healing.

If your teen is under 18, be aware of mandatory reporting laws that may require any person, including doctors, teachers, counselors, to report certain crimes. Know this going forward because a person may feel forced to report what your teen tells them to a policing agency or another agency.

Community or Tribal Domestic & Sexual Violence Organizations

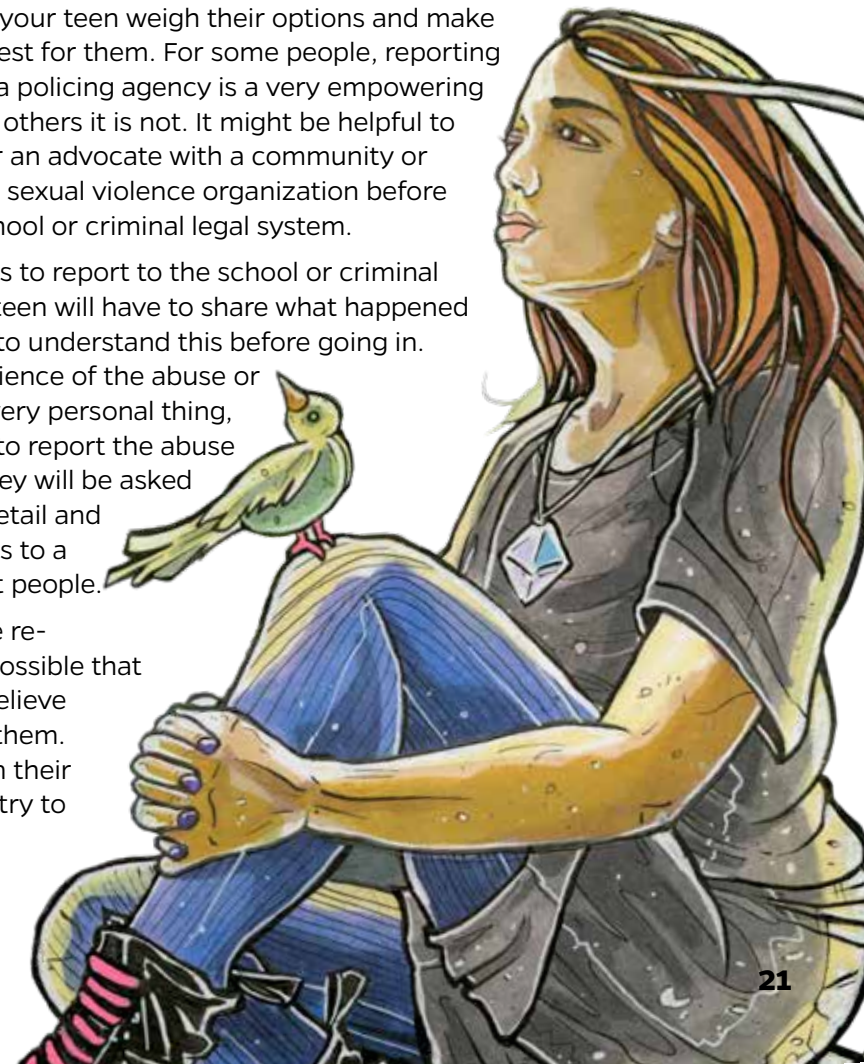
Your local community or tribal domestic and sexual violence advocacy organization can provide resources to young people experiencing abuse or sexual assault, such as safety planning, counseling, support groups, or assessing criminal or civil legal options.

Reporting to School or Criminal Legal System

It is important that your teen weigh their options and make the choice that is best for them. For some people, reporting to the school or to a policing agency is a very empowering experience, but for others it is not. It might be helpful to seek a counselor or an advocate with a community or tribal domestic and sexual violence organization before reporting to the school or criminal legal system.

If your teen chooses to report to the school or criminal legal system, your teen will have to share what happened and it is important to understand this before going in. Sharing their experience of the abuse or sexual assault is a very personal thing, and if they choose to report the abuse or sexual assault they will be asked to talk about it in detail and possibly many times to a number of different people.

This process can be re-traumatizing. It is possible that not everyone will believe what happened to them. People will question their experience or may try to



blame them. Be mindful that the criminal legal system cannot guarantee that a person who has harmed another can be found guilty or convicted. It's important to consider that what your teen needs may not be something that the criminal legal system can provide.

Your teen might feel a loss of control and this can be re-traumatizing. Not everyone finds reporting to be empowering, some feel a loss of control because decisions about what happens with their information are made for them.

Having an advocate support your teen during the process can help them regain control in this confusing process, since they have a better understanding of the system and can explain it to them. The criminal legal process can be long and drawn out. Unfortunately, your teen will not have much control over the events or the outcome. This does not necessarily mean it will be a negative experience, but it can be.

School-based Reporting Options

Your teen has the option to report the abuse to their school. Schools that receive money from the federal government (almost every school) are required under Title IX to ensure an environment free from sex and gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence. Generally speaking, schools are legally required to ensure that individuals who experience violence in relationships can continue their education.

Examples of options a middle school or high school may offer to someone who is in an abusive relationship or who has been sexually assaulted include academic accommodations or schedule changes, school-based no contact orders, class transfers, and mental health support.

Regardless of whether your teen reports the abuse or assault to a policing agency, the school should take its own actions, which may include reporting it to policing agencies. The

school may also conduct a thorough and impartial investigation, which may result in possible suspension or expulsion of the partner who engaged in harmful behavior. If your school does not take the abuse or sexual assault seriously or is not responding, consider contacting a civil attorney.

Criminal Reporting Options

Your teen also has the option to file a police report. The length of time that passed since the abuse or sexual assault may guide what happens when they contact the police. If your teen reports the abuse to policing agencies, they may be assigned a victim witness coordinator who works for the prosecutor's office. A victim witness coordinator assists you through the criminal legal process. The goal is for the coordinator to make a confusing legal process clearer, to lessen exposure to re-victimization, and connect your teen to community resources. As employees of the criminal legal system, victim witness coordinators have limits on confidentiality. They may be required to share information told to them with others, such as a police officer, detective, or prosecutor, who may be required to provide the information to the defense attorney who is representing the person accused of the harm. After the police investigation, the prosecutor in the location where the crime occurred decides whether or not to file criminal charges.

Civil & Criminal Orders of Protection

The civil and criminal legal systems have two types of orders. Civil laws are applied when an individual has had his or her rights violated or when individuals have disputes with other individuals or organizations. Criminal law cases are only conducted through the criminal court system. A community or tribal domestic violence program advocate may be able to help your teen decide if they want to access a civil protection order.

Civil Protection Orders (CPO) – A civil protection order is a document from a judge that tells one person to stay away from another person's home, school, or workplace. The order may also ban calling or texting. Most states have options for minors in an abusive relationship to file a petition for a civil protection order. There is no cost to file the petition and you do not need an attorney. The paperwork for a civil protection order is available at your local court clerk's office in the courthouse. If a person violates a civil protection order they may be arrested and criminally charged.

Criminal No Contact Orders (NCO) – If there is an ongoing criminal case regarding abuse in your relationship, the judge will usually issue a no contact order requiring that the person causing harm (the defendant in a case) to stay away from and not harass the person experiencing the violence. You can ask the court to change or terminate an order, but a judge may or may not agree to that change. Generally, NCOs are only in effect as long as a case is ongoing (so if the charges are dropped, the order ends). You can have both a civil and criminal order (either at the same time) or one after the other.



National Helplines

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474 – Speak with peer advocates or text LOVEIS to 22522. The crisis text line provides round-the-clock support for anyone in crisis which can be reached by texting HOME to 741741.

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673 – Get help and referrals from advocates.

Trevor Lifeline (for LGBTQ youth): 1-866-488-7386 – Crisis intervention and suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 – Free, confidential support for people in crisis.

National Runaway Safeline: 1-800-786-2929 – Share your story and build a plan.

National Street Harassment Hotline: 1-855-897-5910 – Support, advice, and information.

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