

HOW TO HELP IF YOUR TEEN IS IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

This information is taken from the Office of Women's Health, US Department of Health and Human Services. <https://womenshealth.gov/blog/unhealthy-teen-relationships>

April 30, 2019

loveisrespect

As a parent, the scariest thing you can imagine is your child getting hurt. Yet, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that among women and men who have experienced intimate partner violence, 26% of women and 15% of men first experienced violence by a partner before they turned 18.

One thing we can do to help protect our children is to teach them about building safe, respectful relationships. Start by talking to your teens about what healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships look like and how to know when something isn't right. The signs of abuse can be subtle, and teens might not recognize behaviors as unhealthy or abusive, so help them understand the warning signs.

Warning Signs of Dating Abuse:

Before she met her boyfriend, she had more friends than she does now.

Her grades have declined in the past weeks or months.

Before she began dating him, she was more outgoing and involved with her family, school activities, and/or place of worship.

She frequently cries or is very sad.

If he calls or texts her, she must get back to him immediately.

He told her that he loved her early in their relationship.

He is jealous if she looks at or speaks casually with another boy.

He accuses her of behavior she doesn't actually engage in.

He is aggressive in other areas of his life: he puts his fist through walls or closets, bangs his fist to make a point, throws things when angry or is mean to animals.

He frequently roughhouses or play-wrestles with her.

She makes excuses for his poor behavior or says it's her fault.

He calls and texts her many times an hour, frequently between midnight and 5 a.m.

He has a "tragic" home life: he is or was physically abused or verbally demeaned, and/or one or both parents are alcoholics or use drugs.

He frequently gives her "advice" about her choice of friends, hairstyle, clothes, or makeup.

He calls her demeaning names, then laughs and tells her he was only kidding or that she's too sensitive.

He checks her cell phones, emails or social networks without permission

He belittles her or puts her down

He has an explosive temper

He isolates her from family and friends

He has erratic mood swings

He physically inflicts pain or hurts her in any way

He pressures her to have sex

At home, you can model healthy behaviors in your own relationships and call out unhealthy and abusive behavior in relationships on TV. Lastly, remind your teens of their self-worth and value as their own, independent person.

What should you do if you suspect your teen is in an abusive relationship? You might feel angry, confused, protective, or scared. Your instinct may be to demand information or jump into the situation to help your child in whatever way you can. While well-intentioned, rushing into action can sometimes backfire and stop the conversation before it begins. Here are some ways you can help your teen if he or she is experiencing abuse.

Listen and Give Support

When talking to your teen, be supportive and don't make accusations. If they do open up to you, it's important to be a good listener. They may feel ashamed of what's happening in their relationship. Many teens fear that their parents will overreact, blame them, or be disappointed. Others worry that their parents won't believe them or understand. If they do come to you to talk,

let it be on their terms, and meet them with understanding, not judgment. You might say something like, "It seems like you might be worried about something. Want to tell me about it?" Of course, if your teen is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or go to an emergency room.


Accept What Your Child Is Telling You

It's important to know that your teen might be experiencing physical or emotional abuse. Emotional abuse includes insulting or attempting to scare your partner in an attempt to wear down their self-worth and isolate them from their support systems. Abusers may tell their partners things like, "Nobody will believe you." Showing doubt, then, may reinforce that idea and make your teen hesitant to tell you when things are wrong in the future. It might also drive your teen closer to their abuser. Offer your unconditional support and make sure they know you are taking them seriously.

Show Concern

Show your teen concern by reminding them of how they deserve to be treated. Try saying things like, "You deserve to be with someone who treats you with respect," "This is not your fault," or "I'm worried that you feel scared and unsafe in your relationship."

Talk About the Behaviors, Not the Person

Since people who abuse seek to isolate their partners, your teen may be hearing things like, "Your parents hate me. They're trying to sabotage our relationship and control your life." Because of this, it is often more effective to speak to your child about specific behaviors you don't like, rather than being critical of the abusive partner or the relationship as a whole. For example, instead of saying, "Your partner is controlling," you could say, "It concerns me that they tell you who you can or can't text. In a healthy relationship, partners trust  each other to talk to anyone they want." Remember that there still may be love in the relationship and respect your child's feelings. Talking badly about your child's partner could discourage your teen from asking for your help in the future.

Avoid Ultimatums

Resist the urge to give an ultimatum. For example, "If you don't break up with them right away, you're grounded." For a breakup to be truly successful, your teen must be ready to walk away from the relationship. If you force the decision, they may be tempted to return to their partner

because of unresolved feelings. Also, leaving is the most dangerous time for those experiencing abuse. Trust that your teens know their situation better than you do and will leave when they're ready. If they're not ready to leave the relationship, or if they do leave and then get back together many times, it's still important to be supportive. You can brainstorm ways they can stay safer in their relationship.

Decide on Next Steps Together

Creating a safety plan can help someone who is experiencing abuse feel prepared for different situations and be more independent when they are ready to leave the relationship. When you're talking to your teen about a safety plan, know that the decision has to come from your teen. Ask what next steps they would like to take. If they're uncomfortable discussing this with you, help them find additional support. Suggest that they reach out to a trusted friend, counselor, or advocate, and direct them to free and confidential resources for help.

As a parent, you play an important role in helping your teen develop healthy relationships and can provide life-saving support if they are in an abusive relationship.