

# SUPPORTING TEENS THROUGH DATING VIOLENCE

Being a parent or caregiver of someone in an abusive dating relationship is challenging. Knowing or even suspecting that a teen is being harmed can be both frightening and frustrating.

As a parent or caregiver, you are a crucial part of helping teens develop healthy relationships and providing the support necessary to build confidence and maturity to identify healthy relationships. Caregivers are attuned to identifying safety concerns and accustomed to intervening and protecting their children when harmful circumstances arise.

Maintaining mutual trust depends on demonstrating to teenage children that you are trustworthy — that means respecting their decision-making even when you disagree with them. You can't force them to trust you and you can't live their lives and that includes sometimes decisions about their relationships.

## Digital Dating Violence: How to Help Teens Build Healthy Relationships

With the misuse of digital technologies, digital violence in relationships is instantaneous and often widespread. It is often not physical so it can be hard to detect and has the potential to reach thousands of people in a matter of seconds with one click of button. Here are some helpful tips to support your teen.

### Preventive Actions

*Challenge and discuss negative images in the media that promote violence in relationships. Point out that **violence is never justified**.*

*Highlight healthy relationships in which partners respect, support and trust one another. Point out the healthy behaviors in these relationships. For example: couples making shared decisions, communicating, or supporting each other's independent interests.*

*Teach teens to protect themselves. Make them aware of issues involving dating violence and brainstorm with them ways of handling different situations to ensure their safety.*

*Teach teens to respect each other. Help teenagers feel good about who they see, what they do, or what they wear. Tell them no one has the right to control or hit anyone else. Practice what to say if they feel someone is being disrespectful to them and **remind them that violence is never justified**.*

## Some Warning Signs of an Unhealthy Relationship

- **Isolation.** Are they disconnected from friends or family? Have they lost interest or abandoned interests that were once important?
- **Emotional and Physical Changes.** Have you seen sudden changes in mood or personality? Do they seem afraid of their partner? Constantly nervous or anxious, depressed, acting out, or secretive? Do they have unexplained bruises, scratches or injuries?
- **Constant Monitoring.** Does your teen seem upset or anxious when they miss the partner's phone calls? Does it seem like the partner is always checking up on them?
- **The Partner's Behaviour.** Does the partner control the teen's behaviour, make their decisions, act extremely jealous or possessive and demand to know where your teen is and who they are with?
- **Making Excuses for Partner's Behaviour.** Does your teen apologize for the partner's behavior towards you or others? Have they casually mentioned the partner's temper or violent behavior and then laughed it off as a joke?

Your instinct is probably to try to get your teen out of their relationship as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, ending an abusive relationship is never as easy as simply leaving and efforts to make your teen's decision on their behalf could isolate them further.

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*The best support you can offer is motivated by unconditional love and the trust that they are capable of making their own decisions.*

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Here are some tips to keep in mind when trying to support your teen:

### Listen & give support

Be calm, supportive and non-accusatory in conversations about your teen's relationships. Reassure them that their partner's behaviour is not their fault and that no one deserves to experience abuse. If they open up, it's essential to be a good listener so that they feel comfortable returning to you for help.

If they don't open up, don't be disappointed, blame them, or overreact. Let them talk to you on their own terms and meet them with understanding when they do.

### Accept what your teen is telling you.

Believe your teen, even if what they tell you is hard to hear. Your teen will likely be reluctant to share experience out of fear of how you'll react. Showing skepticism could make them less likely to share things about their life, and ultimately drive them closer to the person abusing them. Offer your unconditional support and make sure they know you believe them.

## **Show concern.**

Let your teen know that you're concerned for their safety by centering their experience in your conversation. Remind them that they deserve to be treated with respect and that abuse is *not* their fault.

Don't put down your teen. Don't give the message that you think they are stupid or senseless for being in the relationship. Try: *"This isn't your fault. You're not to blame; no matter how guilty the person makes you feel. Your partner shouldn't be doing this to you."*

## **Focus on behaviors, not the person involved.**

Focus on your teen's positive behavior, like coming to talk to you.

Remember that your teen may still have feelings for the person who is harming them. Speaking negatively about their partner could discourage your teen from seeking your help in the future. Discuss the abusive behaviors you observe, not your feelings about the person involved.

Don't threaten violence against the abuser. Threats reinforce the idea that problems are solved with violence, because if it's okay for you, then it's okay for the abuser. Instead, let your teen and their partner know that you will call the police if you ever witness violence.

## **Avoid ultimatums.**

Don't blame or punish your teen. Avoid questions like *"What did you do to make him/her hit you?"* or *"Why did you let this happen?"* Instead, let your teen know that s/he does not deserve to be hurt. Try: *"It's that person who has a problem, not you. It's not your responsibility to help him/her change."*

Your teen has the right to make their own decisions. Resist the urge to give them ultimatums or punish them for making decisions about their abusive relationship that you dislike. If you force the decision, they may feel further isolated and return to their abusive partner. Trust that your teen knows their own situation better than you do, and that they'll make the decision to leave when they are ready.

## **Be prepared.**

Educate yourself on dating violence to help your teen identify warning signs of unhealthy behaviors in their relationship and discuss what healthy relationships can look like. Identify relationships in your family that exemplify these qualities and help them understand the ways you can support them.

Remember that leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous period of time. If your teen breaks up with the abusive partner, work with your teen to create a safety plan that fits

their situation. You can also ask a domestic violence agency about how to get an order of protection and other ways to protect your teen.

## Decide on next steps together.

The final decision about what to do has to come from your teen themselves. Ask what next steps they'd like to take and help them find support to do so, including additional support if they are too uncomfortable discussing the situation with you.

- Reassure your teen of your love and concern. Reinforce your wish to help do what's best for him/her. Try: *"I care about what happens to you. I love you and I want to help."*
- Respect your teen's choices. Forbidding your teen from seeing the abusive partner may cause him/her to go behind your back. Your teen may be less likely to come to you for help. If you offer patient support, your teen will be more likely to come to the decision to end the relationship, and learn how to have healthier relationships in the future.
- Allow your teen as much control as possible. Empower him/her to make healthy decisions. Even though safety is your first concern, it is important to allow your teen to make decisions whenever it is safe because the abuser has taken away your teen's power and control. If you do the same, it might make matters worse.
- Get your teen counseling. Contact a counselor or agency that specializes in domestic violence and teen relationship abuse. Counseling will help your teen work through the emotional damage caused by the abuse and learn to avoid abusive relationships in the future.

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*Understanding how to support them lovingly and in non-judgmental ways will help you maintain the connection your children need to feel comfortable reaching out for help.*

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If you are struggling to communicate with your teen, try:

- "Sometimes people behave in ways that are scary and make you feel threatened – even without using physical violence. Pay attention to your gut feelings. If you feel afraid, it's important to talk about it."
- OR, "It's important to talk about this. If you don't want to talk with me, find someone you trust and talk with that person. You can also talk to someone at a confidential hotline that can help you sort things out."
- If you suspect your teen is abusing others, get him or her to think about the behaviour and why s/he feel they need to act out that way. Expose any myths about the way that guys and girls are supposed to act and talk about the serious consequences of abusive behaviour for both partners

If they are ready, encourage them to talk to one of the organizations listed below. BC teens are not alone and they have you and confidential safe support services available to them.

- [PEACE Program for Children and Youth](#)
- [Kid Help Phone](#)
- [Victim link](#)
- [KUU-US Crisis Line Society](#)
- [Society for Children and Youth BC Child and Youth Legal Centre](#)

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*Spark Teen Digital Dating Violence Project*

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