

A young man and woman are smiling together. The man is on the right, wearing a plaid shirt over a tan t-shirt. The woman is on the left, wearing a dark top and large hoop earrings. The background is a vibrant, abstract pattern of blue, green, and orange with floral and swirl motifs.

Navigating Teen Dating Relationships

A Parent's Handbook

Why you need to talk to your teen about dating relationships and pressure to engage in risk behaviors

Healthy Relationships

As your son or daughter transitions from middle or junior high school to high school, friendships and peer groups often take priority over family relationships. It is a natural phase of separation from parents and experimentation with peers. And new findings show that the parts of the brain that are responsible for functions such as self-control,



judgment, and emotions are still developing during the teen years. This may help to explain certain teenage relationship behaviors, such as poor decision-making and emotional outbursts.

Healthy teen relationships can positively influence your son or daughter's ability to make safe and good decisions when pressured to engage in adolescent risk behaviors - sexual activity, alcohol or drug use,

and/or violence. Teens who learn to develop healthy relationships are more likely to have healthy relationships throughout their lives.

As parents, we want to know how to help our teens form healthy relationships. Teens learn how to act in relationships from parents, siblings, friends, and the media. You should provide reliable and accurate information to your teen about what a healthy relationship feels like, looks like, and sounds like.

You can help your teen recognize the characteristics of healthy relationships by talking with your son or daughter about healthy relationships and listening to his or her opinions about healthy or unhealthy relationships. One of the most effective ways of teaching your son or daughter about healthy relationships is to model positive relationships.

Even when you think your teens are not listening to you or watching you, they often are. Parents play a critical role in providing a good example and teaching teens the importance of healthy relationships.

As parents, we need to help our teens recognize and discuss the full range of emotions that connect people to one another. Without emotions and an awareness and understanding of them, it is difficult to build or maintain strong, healthy relationships. Encourage your teen's emotional awareness - the ability to recognize moment-to-moment emotional experience and to express all of his or her feelings effectively.

Healthy teen relationships are the most effective protection against adolescent risk behaviors.

Characteristics of Healthy Relationships

Engage your teen in discussions about dating relationships using the following guidelines for characteristics that a healthy relationship should include:

Respect – Are you accepted by your girlfriend or boyfriend for who you are? No one should pressure you into doing things you are not comfortable with, such as drinking, drugs, or unwanted physical contact.

Safety – Do you feel safe emotionally and physically in all your relationships? Emotional safety means you feel comfortable being you without fear of being put down. Physical safety means you are not being hurt or pressured into unwanted physical contact.

Support – Does your boyfriend or girlfriend care for you and want what is best for you? Your boyfriend or girlfriend should understand if you are unable to hang out because you need to study or if a parent asked you to spend time with family.

Individuality – Do you pretend to like something you don't or be someone you aren't just to fit in or be liked by certain people? Be yourself; after all, being an individual is what makes you you!

Fairness and Equality – Do you have an equal say in your relationships? From the activities you do together to the friends you hang out with, you should have an equal say in the choices made in all your relationships.

Acceptance – Does your girlfriend or boyfriend accept you for who you really are? You shouldn't have to change who you are or compromise your beliefs to make someone like you.

Honesty and Trust – Are you always honest and is your boyfriend or girlfriend honest with you? Honesty builds trust. You can't have a healthy relationship without trust. If you have ever caught someone in a lie, you know that it takes time to rebuild your trust.

Communication – You should listen to one another and hear one another out. Do you talk face-to-face (not just text) about your feelings? One of the most important characteristics in any healthy relationship is effective communication. Assertive communication and emotional awareness can help you deal with conflict. Good communication builds the foundation for healthy relationships.

Understand Risk Behaviors and Pressures on Teens

As your teen negotiates high school, he or she will struggle with the pressure to fit in and will likely be exposed or pressured to experiment with risk behaviors, such as sexual activity, alcohol or drug use, or violence. The connection between adolescent risk behaviors and peer or dating relationships is often overlooked. Unhealthy or abusive peer or dating relationships almost always add to the pressure to participate in risk behaviors. It will often be the teen's skills in negotiating, decision-making, and problem-solving in the context of relationships that will determine his or her degree of risk.

Healthy relationships can protect teens from the pressures to engage in risk behaviors. As parents, we need to teach our teens the skills needed to identify and develop healthy relationships before they are exposed to pressures to engage in risk behaviors.

Pressure to conform to what other teens decide is acceptable is one of the strongest pressures faced by teens. Teens want to be accepted for who they are, but it can be difficult, if not impossible, if they are worried about being humiliated, bullied, threatened, or even hurt. These pressures are particularly real for teens who seek more individuality,



have unusual interests, come from different cultures, have a different sexual orientation, or who are noticeably different in any way.

For many teens, the pressure to change their beliefs, values, or boundaries in order to keep a boyfriend or girlfriend is tremendous. Teens face much more pressure today to be "racy" and sexually active than ever before. Both genders report feeling these pressures.

Teens need to know the difference between dating and sex. Dating is not an avenue to sex; it is an opportunity to get to know someone better. Sex should be discussed openly before dating starts (even group dating), and teens should recognize that abstinence is always an option. It is important that you share your values and concerns before your teen starts dating.

Strategies to encourage healthy relationships

- Be sensitive to the pressures of adolescence and provide understanding, support, and guidance – but know the limits you must set for your teen’s safety.
- Create positive connections and interactions with your teen. Spend time listening and talking with your teen every day. Maintain family traditions and involve other trusted adults in his or her life.
- Be aware of your teen’s use of technology and set age-appropriate limits. Ask his or her opinion about unhealthy relationship messages in popular music (lyrics offer great teachable moments), books, video games, television, and movies. When appropriate, express your concern or opinion about the accuracy of the popular media, sexism, racism, or violence.
- Be involved. Encourage and support your teen’s individual interests and involvement in his or her school or community.
- Be an assertive parent – not too strict or too loose – with a balance of sensitivity and firmness. Be firm about expectations and the consequences of actions.
- Encourage and model healthy and safe relationships. Discuss what a healthy relationship looks like, feels like, and sounds like.
- Express clear values and expectations. Talk about your views, especially your views on sexual activity, drugs and alcohol, abusive relationships, and other risk behaviors such as self-harming (e.g., cutting) and eating disorders.
- Prepare your teen to handle the pressures of adolescence. Role playing will help your teen prepare for the exposure to risk behaviors.
- Encourage your teen’s emotional awareness - the ability to recognize moment-to-moment emotional feelings and to express all feelings (good and bad) appropriately.
- Encourage and model equality in gender roles and behavior.

Warning signs of use of technology and unhealthy relationships

- Relationships with friends or peers that require constant contact
- Skipping activities, meals, and homework or a drop in grades
- Sleeping with a cell phone under his or her pillow or on his or her chest
- Having irrational reactions to being without a phone or Internet access or having to answer the phone right away
- Substantial increases in the amount of time spent talking, texting, or on social networking sites
- Taking unnecessary risks such as using a cell phone at inappropriate times (during class, etc.)

New Pressures on Teens & Risks of Technology

More than any previous generation, today's teens are connected to one another, and to the world, via digital technology. Recent data suggests that social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have surpassed email as the preferred method of communication in all age groups. While today's teens may be more digitally savvy than earlier generations, their lack of maturity and life experience can quickly get them into trouble with these new social venues.

Teen relationships are impacted by cell phones and social networking sites. It is important that you talk with your teen about social media and monitor a young teen's use of social networking sites to help them navigate this new online social world.

As a parent, you should learn about these electronic technologies first hand – there is simply no better way to learn than to have a profile yourself.

Parents need to consider creating age appropriate limits on the use of these technologies. Make sure you are clear with your teen about what you consider appropriate "electronic" behavior. Just as certain language is unacceptable in your house, make sure you let your teen know what is and is not allowed online. Give reminders of those expectations from time to time. It doesn't mean you don't trust your son or daughter, it just reinforces that

you care about him or her enough to be paying attention.

For all teens, emphasize that everything sent over the Internet or by cell phone can be shared with the entire world. So, it is important your teen uses good judgment in sending messages and pictures and that he or she set appropriate privacy settings on social media sites. Parents need to discuss what “good judgment” means and the consequences of poor judgment – ranging from minor punishment to possible legal action in the case of sexting or bullying. Remember to make a point of discouraging your teen from gossiping, spreading rumors, bullying, or damaging someone’s reputation via texting or other technologies.

To keep your teen safe, have your teen show you where the privacy features are for the social networking sites he or she is using. The more private the settings, the less likely inappropriate material will be received by your teen or sent to his or her circle of friends.

Young Teens and Technology

As a parent, you will need to strike a balance between safety concerns and the normal developmental need of young teens to separate from their parents. As a safety precaution, parents should consider some level of monitoring of your young teen’s use of these technologies. Periodically check chat logs, emails, files, and social networking profiles for inappropriate content, friends, messages, and images.

Be transparent about any type of monitoring and let your young teen know what you are doing. Transparency is critical to continue to build trust between you and your young teen. Some families may check once a week and others more sporadically. Other parents might consider formal monitoring systems



to track your young teen’s email, chat, instant messaging, and image content. Whatever level of monitoring you choose as a parent, talk with your teen and let them know why you are concerned about their safety. As your teen matures, you should allow them more privacy and autonomy.



The Problem of “Sexting”

“Sexting” refers to sending a text message with a photograph of a person who is naked, engaged in a sexual act, or is otherwise inappropriate. According to a recent survey, about 20 percent of teen boys and girls have sent such messages. The emotional pain it causes can be enormous for the teen in the picture as well as the sender and receiver – often with legal implications.

Begin the conversation about sexting before your teen has a problem – either receiving an inappropriate text or being pressured to send one:

- Start the conversation with questions like, “Have you heard of sexting?”
- Be very specific that “sexting” often involves pictures of a sexual nature, is considered pornography, and may be illegal.

- Make sure your teen understands that sexting is serious and considered a crime in many jurisdictions. In all communities, if he or she “sexts,” there will be serious consequences, quite possibly involving the police, suspension from school, and notes on his or her permanent record that could hurt his or her chances of getting into college, the armed forces, or getting a job.
- Monitor headlines in the news for stories about “sexting” that illustrate the very real consequences for both senders and receivers of these images. Start a conversation about these headlines with questions like: “Have you seen this story?,” “What did you think about this?” Or “What would you do if you were this teen?” Rehearse ways your teen can respond if asked to participate in inappropriate texting.

Parents are encouraged to support school and community efforts to educate parents, teachers, and students on issues involving sexting.

[New Pressures on Teens and Risks of Technology and The New Problem of “Sexting” was adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics website.]

Talk to your teen about cell phones

Safety – Do not give your phone number to anyone you do not know. Do not answer any calls or reply to any texts unless you know the caller.

Phone usage – Do not send abusive or humiliating texts or pictures or make pranks. If you are harassed on the phone, show an adult you trust. Know and follow your school policy on cell phones. Turn the phone off while you are doing your homework and at bedtime. At night, consider leaving the phone in the kitchen for charging until the next morning.

Inappropriate usage – Do not use your phone to send threatening phone or text messages or to intimidate others. Bullying or being mean with a cell phone, while less personal, is no less wrong. Do not use your phone to cheat in school. Texting answers to tests or using a phone to search the web during a test is cheating.

Cameras – Sending or forwarding sexually explicit photographs is against the law. If you receive any pictures from friends that make you uncomfortable, tell a parent or an adult you trust about it. Also, secretly taking photos or taking video clips of someone invades that person’s privacy and is wrong.

Accountability – Be responsible for helping out with the bill (paying for the texting, pay for half, chores in exchange for the phone bill, etc.). Review the bill together.

Consequences – If any of the above rules are broken, the phone will be taken away for a period of time to be determined by the severity of the violation.

Effective Ways to Talk with Your Teen About Dating Relationships

It's never too late to help your teen develop healthy relationship skills and to be concerned about risk-taking associated with dating relationships.

Talking with your teens about dating relationships shouldn't be a single conversation, but an open and ongoing dialogue. Keep the lines of communication going and look for opportunities to engage your teen in conversations about healthy dating relationships. The surest way to keep the dialogue going is to show that you respect and welcome your teen's opinions, thoughts, and ideas.

Before you start a conversation about healthy dating relationships with your teen, you should examine your own values, behaviors, and experiences with relationships. Think about what kind of behaviors and ethics you have modeled. What were your first dating relationships like? What problems came up? How did you resolve conflict in the relationship?

Think about what a healthy dating relationship is to you. From watching you, your teen will learn more about how to treat others than from anything you might say. You don't have to be a perfect role model. If you want your teen to talk with you and be honest about his or her own experiences, you have to be honest about your own experiences (but you do not have to share all of your experiences).

There is a good probability that your teen is already dating (perhaps even more seriously than you realize). Sixty-one percent of teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18 say they have been in a relationship, dated someone, or "hooked up."

Relationships between adolescents can seem incredibly intense and all consuming to them – just because your teen is young doesn't mean that he or she cannot fall in love or wonder about sex. However, because they have few previous relationships to compare with, they may be even more vulnerable to an unhealthy, violent relationship than an adult would be.

Create Opportunities for Discussion

Anywhere that is comfortable for the both of you is a good place to be, as long as you have privacy and enough time to discuss whatever issues might come up. Watching a TV show together or driving in the car often provide opportunities. Try to wait and listen, let silence fill the space instead of immediately asking questions. Most teens will talk given the opportunity.

Always be Available

If you can, drop everything and listen anytime your teen wants to talk. When the opportunity for discussion presents itself, make sure your teen knows that he or she has your undivided attention. Let them ask you anything and create opportunities for them to start the conversation. Make sure your teen knows that you are always there for his or her questions or concerns.

Watch for Signs

Watch for signs of your teen wanting to talk, such as hanging around but not saying anything or saying that he or she does not feel well when nothing is physically wrong. If your teen tells you that he or she wants to talk to you, but says it is “no big deal,” don’t believe it. Simply by bringing the subject up, your teen is telling you that it is something of importance to him or her.

Be a Good Listener

Support your teen and confirm that you are a good resource and a non judgmental listener. Avoid giving critical or judgmental comments, even if you don’t agree with what he or she says or feels. Provide realistic strategies for confronting problems effectively.

Talk with Your Teen on His or Her Level

Teens don’t always understand when you speak to them in abstractions. Real life examples work better. Share your own experiences, especially the ones where you made mistakes and learned from those mistakes. Describe situations you experienced as a teen, but remember to maintain boundaries – be a parent, not a friend.

Answer Questions Honestly

Give answers that are honest and correct. Don’t worry about not being an expert. If you don’t know how to answer the question, say so and assure your teen that you can research it and come up with a solution together.

Talk to Your Son

Your son hears all kinds of messages about what it means to “be a man” – that they have to be tough and in control. There are numerous conflicting and some harmful messages being given about what constitutes “being a man” in a relationship. So teach boys early, and teach them often, that there is no place for violence in a relationship.

Your son only knows what it really means to “be a man” if he is taught about respect, how to deal with conflict, and how to build healthy relationships. Fathers, coaches and any man who

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spends time with boys or teens will have the greatest impact when they “walk the walk.” They will learn what respect means by observing how you treat other people. It is critical that we talk to our sons about forming healthy relationships in the same way that we talk with our daughters.

Strategies for Dating Relationship Safety

Although it may be uncomfortable for you to recognize that your teen is in a romantic or even sexual relationship, adults must understand and accept the realities of teen relationships and sexuality. In the 2009 Idaho Youth Risk Behavior Survey high school students reported:

- 39% have had sexual intercourse.
- 7.5% drank alcohol or used drugs before they had sexual intercourse the last time
- 14.4% of females and 5% of males report they have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse

These Idaho statistics reinforce the importance of talking with your son or daughter about the realities of teen dating relationships and risk behaviors.

Developing a strategy for dating safety is generally more effective than establishing “rules.” Think about what you are trying to protect by creating dating rules. Are you trying to protect your teen against sexual activity, alcohol or drug use, or date rape? Do traditional dating rules protect your teen against these common parental concerns? Not necessarily. Parents and teens should develop a strategy together to protect what is important to both of them. When you and your teen discuss strategies for safety, consider:

- Defining dating and the age when dating will be permitted.

- Setting the permitted age difference in dating partners. During adolescence, an age difference of three years or more usually indicates an imbalance of power and control and substantially increases the risk of sexual activity, alcohol or drug use, and/or dating abuse.
- Encouraging your teen to listen to and trust his or her instincts.
- Discussing the safety of group dates versus individual dates. Group dates do not always mean a safe date, especially when drugs or alcohol are involved or sexually active couples, or if the group is comprised of teens your teen does not know.
- Planning for an uncomfortable or dangerous social situation by letting your teen know that you are always available to come pick him or her up – whenever or whatever the situation – no questions asked.
- Providing your teen 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 your teen can either call you and say the password or can text you or a friend who knows what the password means.
- Avoiding alcohol or drugs and discussing the decreased ability to react under their influence.
- Encouraging your teen to set sexual limits and communicate them clearly.

If you are having difficulty talking about these issues with your teen, or if you feel that your teen is experiencing problems that are too difficult for you to handle, seek help from a counselor, social worker, or medical professional.

When your teen does start dating, make yourself available after the date to talk if your teen wants. Show your interest, but avoid prying. If you decide not to wait up that night, be sure to let your teen know beforehand that you will be available to chat in the morning. Finally, a parent's intuition will often spot the first signs of trouble, whether that means alcohol, drugs, an abusive relationship, a significant age difference, or anything else that worries you. But don't wait for your intuition to tell you your teen is in trouble – ask about how things in his or her life are going before serious problems arise.

Sexual Contact Between Teens

Sexual contact is any type of intimate physical contact between people, including romantic kissing or fondling. Under Idaho law:

- Any sexual contact, including sexual intercourse, between a person 18 or older and someone under 16 is a crime.
- Sexual contact, besides sexual intercourse, between males or females aged 16 or 17 and an adult, who is 5 years or older than the victim, is a crime. For more information on teens and sexual intercourse, please see the section entitled Idaho

Laws on Teens and Rape.

Even if the teens or their parents are okay with any of the above, it is still against the law.

Talk With Your Teen About Consent for Sexual Contact

Even for sexual contact that is not prohibited by Idaho law, consent is still required by both individuals who decide to engage in a sexual contact.

As parents, we need to be clear with our son or daughter that going on a date with a person, previously having sexual contact with that person, or being willing to participate in sexual contact does not constitute consent for any future sexual contact!

The easiest way to determine if someone is consenting to a particular activity is to ask – every time!

The greater the degree the following four conditions are present, the greater the likelihood consent has been given:

- Both participants are fully conscious (neither party is under the influence of drugs or alcohol);
- Both participants are equally free to act (both participants feel like they can say no);
- Both parties have clearly communicated their willingness/permission; and
- Both parties are positive and sincere in their desires.

Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault and Date Rape

Adolescence is a period of emotional, psychological and physical change: teens push for greater independence; their bodies mature physically and sexually; and their curiosity about sexuality increases dramatically. All of these changes can make teens more vulnerable to sexual harassment or sexual assault, including date rape. It is important to make sure that your son or daughter has the information and skills to help them stay safe.

Sexual Harassment

Make sure that your teen understands what sexual harassment is and what they can do about it. Tell them:

- 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.

- Sexual harassment is illegal.

It is important for teens to examine their behavior and make sure that they are not harassing without being aware of it. If harassed, they should report it—whether it occurs in or out of school—and tell you about it so that you can help them make sure the harassment is addressed by the proper authorities.

Schools are liable for harassment that occurs on school premises. If the incident is not addressed in a satisfactory manner, you can pursue legal action against the school to protect your teen. Contact the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education for assistance.



Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is any type of unwanted sexual contact and may include written, verbal, or physical acts of a sexual nature such as:

- Unwanted kissing, touching, or sexual activity; or
- Threatening or pressuring someone into unwanted sexual activity.

A person may decide at anytime that they no longer consent to the sexual activity. Consent for one behavior does not mean there is consent for any other behaviors or even the same behavior at a different time.

Idaho Laws on Teens and Rape

Rape is vaginal, oral, or anal penetration with a penis when one person involved is “unable to consent.” Being “unable to consent” is defined by Idaho law in different ways, such as:

- One person is under 16 years old and the other person is 18 or older; or
- One person is 16 or 17 years old and the other is three years older (measured by birthdates); or
- One person has diminished mental capacity – he or she is drugged, drunk, high, unconscious, or has a developmental disability; or
- One person resists sex, but is physically overcome by force, or is prevented from physically resisting by threats of physical harm.

Another law prohibits sexual penetration with a foreign object, including fingers.

Those who are not married cannot legally have sex under Idaho law.

Having sex with someone under 16 may be considered rape or the crime of lewd conduct with a minor child.

Rape

As parents, we need to talk to our daughters, especially college students who are on their own for the first time, about the risk of being raped. According to the American Association of University Women:

- 20 to 25 percent of college women are raped during their college career.
- 65 percent of these attacks go unreported.
- Alcohol is involved in 75 percent of attacks.

By far, most victims of rape are women, but this isn't always the case. Teen boys and male college students are at risk of being raped too.

Most victims are raped by someone the victim knows. Most rapists are not strangers. This type of rape is known as date rape or acquaintance rape. What's more, the majority of rapes are planned. Forced intercourse is not the only kind of rape. While the definition of what constitute rape varies, you should know that all unwanted sexual contact is sexual violence, and it's wrong.

No one ever deserves to be raped. If your teen is ever the victim of sexual violence, please help your teen to understand that what happened was wrong, that it was not her or his fault, and encourage your teen to seek help.

Strategies for Safety

Teens need to know that they should not accept or engage in any form of violence and that they can come to you for help. Here are some strategies you should discuss with your teen:

- Know their own wishes, limits, and values, and clearly communicate them to their dates. They should listen to their limits and respect them.
- Trust their feelings and intuition; if they are feeling pressured, they're right. Both males and females have the right to say "no" at any time.

clearly and manage one's behavior. It makes it harder to resist sexual aggression or reduce ability to be aware of instincts.

- Know that alcohol is the most widely used "date rape drug." If your teen is going to drink at a party, she or he should know how much they have been drinking and always pour their own beverages and keep them within sight. Date-rape drugs can be put in drinks and are often undetectable and can induce a loss of muscle control, consciousness and affect memory.
- Avoid isolation and darkness, especially at the beginning of a new relationship.
- Tell someone about the date, where it will take place, and what time it will end. Also, come up with a safety word that can be said or texted to a friend to notify them of an emergency. Be sure to create a password that can be easily worked into a conversation.
- Go to parties with a friend and look after each other. Always have a safe way home.

Encourage your teen to trust their instincts, if he or she is feeling afraid, there is a good reason to be afraid.

- Be assertive and act immediately if their limits are reached – even if it means making a scene.
- Understand that it is never too late to say "no" and never too late to stop.
- Accept that "no" means "no." If a teen says "no" and the date continues to force intercourse, it is rape. This is true even if the couple has been dating for a long time or if they have had consensual sex before.
- Encourage your teen to avoid drugs or alcohol. Substance use reduces one's ability to think

It can be unsettling for parents when your teen starts going to parties and on dates. However, honest and open discussions about this stage of teens' lives, sexual values and limits, healthy dating relationships, and how teens can protect themselves can make a difference in a teen's ability to make safe and healthy choices.



Teen Dating Abuse

Your teen could be in an abusive relationship

Teen dating abuse can include verbal, emotional, sexual, and/or physical abuse. Teen dating abuse can occur in heterosexual and same-sex couples. In some relationships abuse happens only occasionally, while in others it can happen every day.

Eighty-one percent of parents of teens either think that teen dating abuse is not an issue or admit that they do not know if it is an issue. The 2009 Idaho Youth Risk Behavior Survey reports:

- 10.6% of high school students were slapped, pushed, or hit by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the 12 months before the survey.

This statistic does not even address verbal, emotional, digital, or sexual abuse.

As parents, you should know that adolescents in abusive relationships are also at risk for other health problems. Teens who are victims of 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.

Abusive experiences during adolescent dating relationships may disrupt normal development, including the development of a stable self-concept, self-esteem, and body

image. And, adolescents who are in abusive relationships often carry unhealthy patterns of abuse into future relationships.

What would your teen do if he or she felt trapped in an abusive relationship? Would your teen feel comfortable coming to you for help? Only 33 percent of teens who have been in or have known about an abusive relationship told anyone about it. Seventy-three percent of teens said that if they were in an abusive relationship they would turn to a friend for help.

Teens – both boys and girls – say that parents most influence their decisions about dating and relationships. But, about one in four teens say it is difficult to talk to their parents about relationship issues. Teens report that if they don't feel comfortable talking to an adult, or if they do not have any close adult figures in their lives, they will look to their peers for advice. While it may not always be easy to bring up some of these subjects, parents have an obligation to create an open environment in which to start the conversation.

Signs of Abusive Relationships

As a parent, trust your instincts. A parent's intuition will often signal the first signs of trouble, whether that means alcohol, drugs, an abusive relationship, or anything else that worries you. If you feel that your teen is experiencing problems that are too difficult for you to handle, seek help from a pediatrician, school counselor, social worker, mental health counselor, or faith-based organization. Some warning signs can include:

- Calls frequently to find out where your son or daughter is, who they are with, or what they are doing.
- More than 3 years age difference in middle, junior or high school dating relationships.
- Has to be with boyfriend or girlfriend all the time.
- Your son or daughter cries a lot about the relationship.
- The boyfriend, or girlfriend acts jealous, possessive, or controlling and makes all the decisions in the relationship.
- Follows your daughter or son, or shows up uninvited.
- Isolates your son or daughter or restricts contact with family and friends.
- Decrease in friends or activities.
- Grades have declined in the past weeks or months.

Questions to engage your teen in a discussion about dating violence

How are things going?

Your teen is more likely to be open and honest if he or she feels comfortable and is able to think through what you are talking about. Depending on how your teen feels that day, you may get an answer anywhere from “okay,” to “bad,” to a much longer venting of everything that is going wrong. It is also possible that your teen will act sullen, refuse to participate in a conversation, or even try to start an argument. Remember the goal of the conversation is to show your support.

What are your friends’ dating relationships like?

Your teen’s view on his or her friends’ dating relationships can give you valuable insights into how he or she views relationships. If your teen thinks that after a week, two people are committed for the rest of high school, then you may have some explaining to do about timing and how long it normally takes for people to become intimate emotionally. You may find that your teen has incorrect perceptions of the role of males and females.

Your son may have the mistaken impression that guys are always in control while females are supposed to follow along. Encourage equality in gender roles and behavior, and flexibility in attitudes toward the same.

Have you ever seen an abusive dating relationship?

Most teens report having seen abusive relationships. If your teen has not seen abuse in relationships, give examples from current events, movies, or by possible situations your teen may have witnessed. Define the range of “abusive behaviors” and compare your definition to your teenager’s.

Why do you think someone would abuse someone they were dating?

Many teens understand that abuse or violence is learned behavior. An abusive teen may be modeling behavior learned at home or may be responding to his or her low self-esteem by controlling a dating partner.

However, boys are also swamped with media influences outside of the home with all kinds of messages about what it means to “be a man” - they have to be tough and in control. There are numerous conflicting and some harmful messages being given to boys about what constitutes “being a man” in a relationship.

Tell your son what you think “being a man” is. What examples is he learning in your house and in your interactions? Be honest and open about your thoughts, questions, and answers. If you feel comfortable, share any stories you may have about dealing with abusers in your life – friends or family members – who have had problems with controlling behaviors or violence in their relationships.

What if your teen is being abused

As parents, it is important to listen and support your teen. Trust your instincts, if you think your teen is being abused, they probably are. Tell your teen you are worried about him or her and give specific examples of abusive behaviors you have witnessed. Let your teen know that the abuse is not his or her fault.

Why would your teen be in an unhealthy or abusive relationship?

Teens may not recognize abusive behavior. Status and self-esteem are often intricately linked to a teen's relationship. Teens may feel that it is better to be in an abusive relationship than in no relationship.

The teen may be in love and want the violence to end, but not the relationship altogether. The teen may know that it is an unhealthy relationship, but is still grieving for the perfect relationship.

The teen may also believe that they can change him, or believes the abuser when he promises to stop. The abuser may have threatened to hurt him or herself if the teen ends the relationship. The teen might fear punishment – that if you find out, you won't let the couple date anymore. Teens resist authority and naturally crave independence. Abused teens often feel very ashamed, isolated, and alone.

Abusive relationships can be difficult for boys because there is even more shame associated with being an abused male. Boys can be abused by their girlfriends, and they can also be abused by another boy if they are in a same-sex relationship.

Ending the Relationship

Expect your teen to be conflicted towards their boyfriend or girlfriend – ending any relationship takes time, and it can be even harder when abuse is involved. Unless your teen's life is at risk it may not be a good idea to forbid your teen from seeing his or her boyfriend or girlfriend. Your daughter or son is the one who is going to have to separate from the relationship – not you. Ask your teenager "what can we/I do to help you?" They might not have the answer, but they need to feel supported by family and friends.

Tips for Parents

- Listen and support your teen.
- Tell your teen you are worried and give specific examples of abusive behaviors you have seen.
- Trust your instincts, if you think your teen is abused, they probably are.
- Ask your daughter or son if they are safe and what you can do to help. Encourage your teen to trust her or his instincts.
- Contact a domestic violence program to engage the school and your teen to think about strategies for safety to deal with the "what ifs."

What if your teen is abusive

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

Abusive teens need help. They can change the behavior. Let your teen know that you love him or her, and that you don't think he or she is a terrible person. Nevertheless, be firm in letting him or her know that there are consequences to his or her behavior (both legal and non-legal) and it has to change. Offer to help him or her by locating community resources that can provide counseling.

Ask him or her questions and listen to your teen about how he or she thinks things got to this point in the relationship. Be prepared to look honestly at your own actions and the behaviors you have modeled in your home. Take responsibility if you are responsible for your teen's ideas about men and women that may have influenced the abusive behavior. Let your teen know that he or she can come and talk to you about this anytime without fear of punishment. Helping your son or daughter now is one of the most important things you as a parent will ever do for your child.



Tips for Parents

- Be specific about what you saw and how it made you feel.
- Let your son or daughter know that you won't stand by and let the behavior continue.
- Make sure your teen realizes that his or her actions have consequences and that he or she could get into serious trouble – from getting expelled from school to going to jail.

If your teen has a friend in an abusive relationship

Encourage your teen to have his or her friend seek help by talking to a counselor or trusted adult. Your teen should tell the friend he or she is concerned for their safety. Acknowledge that the abuse is not the friend's fault. Don't blame the victim for the abuser's actions. Do not confront the abuser. It can be dangerous for the friend or your son or daughter.

Know where to get help

If your teen does not feel comfortable talking with you, let him or her know it is okay to talk with another trusted adult – a relative, friend of the family, a clergy member, teacher, school counselor, coach, or the police.

If you or your teen need help now, the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline is available 24/7 at 1-888-293-6118.

Strategies for Safety

- Encourage your teen to trust his or her instincts. If your teen feels fearful, there is a good reason.
- Tell everyone the relationship is over.
- Avoid any circumstances where your teen would be alone.
- Change his or her school locker or lock, route to and from school and/or work, and cell phone number, email address and/or passwords.
- Keep a journal describing the abuse (dates, times, places, specific injuries, threats, etc.).
- Ask the school counselor about dating violence support groups, and encourage your teen to join.

Civil Protection Orders

Your teen may be eligible for a civil protection order. A civil protection order is a court order that can restrict or prohibit contact between a victim of dating abuse and the abuser. If an abuser violates the protection order they will be punished by the court.

Filing for a civil protection order is free and does not require an attorney.

A parent or a guardian can apply for a civil protection order on their teen's behalf by filling out a form describing the abuse. The form is available at the clerk's office at your local courthouse.

A judge will review the Petition and if the judge finds that there is a danger of immediate harm, a temporary protection order, which will last up to 14 days, may be issued. You can ask the judge to make changes that will enhance your teen's safety – changing a class schedule or restricting the abuser from attending school events. If the judge grants a protection order, police officers will serve the abuser with the Order and a Notice of Hearing. The protection order is **not effective** until served.

A second hearing will be scheduled to occur within 14 days to decide if a long-term order should be signed. At that second hearing, both the Petitioner and the abuser will be able to testify, call witnesses, and present other evidence.

Both parties have the right to be represented by a lawyer, or they can represent themselves. If either party comes to court with an attorney at the second hearing the other can ask to reschedule the hearing to have time to find a lawyer.

DISCLAIMER Legal information is not legal advice. The information provided to you is general legal information and should not be construed as legal advice to be applied to any specific factual situation.

National Resources

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline

Phone: (866) 331-9474

TTY: (866) 331-8453

Website: www.loveisrespect.com

Idaho Resources

Center for Healthy Teen Relationships

Center for Healthy Teen Relationships: Love What's Real

Website: www.lovehatsreal.com

Center for Healthy Teen Relationships

A project of the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence
300 E. Mallard Dr., Ste. 130,
Boise, ID 83706

Phone: (208) 384-0419 or
(888) 293-6118

Start Strong Idaho

Start Strong Idaho: Building Healthy Teen Relationships

Website: www.startstrongidaho.com

Start Strong Idaho

A project of the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence
300 E. Mallard Dr., Ste. 130,
Boise, ID 83706

Phone: (208) 384-0419 or
(888) 293-6118

Other Resources

Murray, Jill A., *But He Never Hit Me:*

The Devastating Cost of Non-Physical Abuse to Girls and Women, Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2007.

Murray, Jill, *But I Love Him: Protecting Your Teen Daughter from Controlling, Abusive Dating Relationships*, New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2000.

Wolfe, David. A., *What Parents Need to Know About Teens: Facts, Myths, and Strategies*, CAMH, 2007.

For more information on the Center for Healthy Teen Relationships or Start Strong Idaho, ontact the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence at 1.208.384.0419

For a chance to win a \$25.00 Amazon.com gift certificate, please participate in a short survey about this handbook by logging on to: www.surveymonkey.com/s/navigatingteendatingrelationships

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Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence

Idaho Department of Education

St. Luke's Children's Hospital

Idaho's Domestic & Sexual Violence Programs

American Academy of Pediatrics – Idaho Chapter

Boys & Girls Clubs of Ada County

Central District Health Department

Eastern Idaho Public Health District

Family Advocacy & Education Center (FACES)

Idaho Coordinated Response to Domestic & Sexual Violence

Idaho Department of Health & Welfare

Idaho Legal Aid Services

Men Today/Men Tomorrow

Nampa Family Justice Center

Panhandle Health District

Silver Sage Girl Scout Council

Treasure Valley Family YMCA

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