

Parenting for prevention dating violence



In a study of teens who had been in an abusive dating relationship, less than one-third (32%) had confided in a parent about their abusive relationship (Liz Claiborne, Family Violence Prevention Fund). The same study found that the reason the conversations were not happening, or that the conversations were unproductive, was because both teens and their parents reported feeling “extremely uncomfortable talking to each other about the most serious aspects of dating abuse.” You can make these conversations comfortable by making them more frequent! When conversations between caregivers and teens are on-going, informal, and include time spent talking about the good things in their relationships, it makes it easier to talk about the harder stuff.

The two biggest warning signs of an abusive relationship are **jealousy** and **put downs**. These behaviors can start showing up early in the relationship. Jealousy in particular can sometimes feel good at first, like the person just REALLY cares about the relationship. It can be masked as love (let’s just spend all of our time together) or a lack of trust (I don’t trust them with you, or I don’t trust you with them). Jealousy is used to isolate someone from their friends, family, or other support systems.

Put downs and insults may be subtle at first. They may only come out during arguments, or are minimized as “just jokes.” No matter what is happening in a relationship, there is no healthy reason to name call or make someone feel bad about themselves.

Abusive behaviors trickle in slowly, which can make it look like one-off incidents and harder to identify a pattern of abuse. Having an open dialogue with your teen about their relationships is important for their development of safe and healthy relationships. You want to be someone who they can go to with questions. If you are worried, be careful not to make them feel like you are judging who they choose to date. This may make your teen feel defensive and think that you are not a safe person to talk about things. Explain the behaviors that are concerning, be curious about what your teen thinks of the relationship, and model healthy ways to be in relationships. Share with them times when you have faced challenges in your own experience. Failures and mistakes can be just as valuable to discuss. If you are worried that your teen may be unkind or careless with whom they are dating, express your concerns about the behaviors that are controlling, insulting, or dismissive. Reinforce your values and encourage your teen to be a kind and respectful dating partner. Remind young people that it is okay not to be in a relationship if it does not work for them!

Some Conversation Starters:

- What do you like about your crush? What are the great parts of your relationship?
- How does it make you feel when person does X?
- What are the things you worry about in your relationship? How do you talk about your concerns with your partner?
- Do you ever notice that there are expectations or assumptions about your relationship that you never agreed to? Where did they come from? How do you bring those up with your partner?
- What do your friends/peers think about your relationship? What are the trends at school about dating? How do you feel about those?