



**Teen Dating**

**Violence:**

**What Parents**

**Need to Know**

The purpose of this resource is to help open lines of communication and honest conversation between parents and teens about relationships.

24-Hour Hotline: 815-932-5800

Chatline: [harborhousedv.org](http://harborhousedv.org)

*Information included in this resource comes from [Loveisrespect.org](http://Loveisrespect.org), [Futureswithoutviolence.org](http://Futureswithoutviolence.org) and the U.S. Center for Disease Control.*

## Why should we talk about teen dating violence?

Teen dating violence can affect anyone, no matter gender, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, geographical location, age or race.

- Nearly **1.5 million high school students** nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year.
- **One in three adolescents** in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner, a figure that far exceeds rates of other types of youth violence.

Dating violence has long-lasting effects on teens, especially if not addressed properly and promptly.

- Violent relationships in adolescence can put the victims at higher risk for substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior and more domestic violence.
- Teens who experience dating violence are more likely to experience depression and anxiety; use tobacco, drugs, and alcohol; exhibit antisocial behaviors; and think about suicide .

## Signs of teen dating violence

Do you suspect your teen is in an abusive dating relationship? Watch for these signs. If you notice one or more of these, start an honest, open conversation with your teen. **Call Harbor House's 24-hour hotline at 815-932-5800 or use our chatline at [harborhousedv.org](http://harborhousedv.org) at any time to receive support and help**, including speaking to a domestic violence counselor. Following are some common signs of teen dating violence.

- Spending less time with family and friends.
- Excessive text messaging, phone calling, emailing or visiting with his or her dating partner.
- Giving up things that used to be important to her/him.
- Declining grades or missing school.
- Worrying about upsetting her/his partner.

- Apologizing or making excuses for her/his partner's behavior.
- Extreme jealousy or possessiveness by her/his partner.
- Unexplained marks or bruises.
- Signs of depression or anxiety.
- Noticeably different ways of dressing and behaving.

## What are the types of abuse?

Teen dating violence consists of one or a combination of the following types of abuse all used by the abuser to maintain power and control over the victim.

### Physical abuse

Physical abuse is any intentional and unwanted contact with you or something close to your body. Sometimes abusive behavior does not cause pain or even leave a bruise, but it's still unhealthy. Following are some types of physical abuse.

- Scratching, punching, biting, strangling or kicking.
- Using a gun, knife, box cutter, bat, mace or other weapon.
- Smacking your bottom without your permission or consent.
- Forcing you to have sex or perform a sexual act
- Grabbing your face to make you look at them.
- Grabbing you to prevent you from leaving or to force you to go somewhere.
- Blocking a doorway to keep you from leaving
- Driving crazily

### What to explain to your teen about physical abuse

You have the right to refuse physical contact with another person. There is no acceptable reason for another person to disrespect your rights and boundaries for physical contact.

### Emotional/verbal abuse

Emotional abuse includes non-physical behaviors such as threats, insults, constant monitoring or "checking in," excessive texting, humiliation, intimidation, isolation or stalking. Following are some types of emotional abuse.

- Calling you names and putting you down.

- Telling you what to do and wear.
- Blaming your actions for their abusive or unhealthy behavior.
- Accusing you of cheating and often being jealous of your outside relationships.
- Using gaslighting techniques to confuse or manipulate you. (In other words, making you question reality or feel crazy.)
- Making you feel guilty when you don't consent to sexual activity.
- Threatening to expose your secrets, such as your sexual orientation or immigration status.

## What to explain to your teen about emotional/verbal abuse

Sometimes verbal abuse is so bad that victims actually start believing what their partner says. They begin to think they're stupid, ugly or worthless. They agree that nobody else would ever want to be in a relationship with them. Constantly being criticized and told they aren't good enough causes them to lose confidence and lowers their self-esteem. As a result, they may start to blame themselves for their partner's abusive behavior.

## Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse refers to any action that pressures or coerces victims to do something sexually they don't want to do. It can also refer to behavior that impacts a person's ability to control their sexual activity or the circumstances in which sexual activity occurs, including oral sex, rape or restricting access to birth control and condoms. Following are examples of sexual abuse.

- Unwanted kissing or touching.
- Unwanted rough or violent sexual activity.
- Rape or attempted rape.
- Refusing to use condoms or restricting someone's access to birth control.
- Keeping someone from protecting themselves from sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Threatening someone into unwanted sexual activity.
- Using sexual insults toward someone.

It is important to know that just because the victim "didn't say no," he/she doesn't mean "yes." When someone does not resist an unwanted sexual advance, he/she is not giving consent. Sometimes physically resisting can put a victim at a greater risk for further physical or sexual abuse.

## What to explain to your teen about sexual abuse

If you are in a sexual relationship with a partner, that does not mean you have to have sex anytime your partner wants to. **Everyone has the right at any time to say no.**

## Financial abuse

Financial abuse can be very subtle. It can include telling a person what they can and cannot buy or requiring them to share control of their bank accounts. Explain to your teen that at no time does a person you are dating have the right to use money or how you spend it to control you. Following are examples of financial abuse.

- Preventing you from going to work by taking your car or keys.
- Getting you fired by harassing you, your employer or coworkers on the job.
- Spending money on themselves but not allowing you to do the same.
- Giving you presents and/or paying for things like dinner and expecting you to somehow return the favor.
- Using their money to hold power over you because they know you are not in the same financial situation as they are.
- Use of your personal credit cards and bank accounts.

## What to explain to your teen about financial abuse

Do not share credit or debit card information with anyone you are dating at any time. Also, do not share passwords or other important personal information with a person you are dating.

## Digital abuse

Digital dating abuse is the use of technologies such as texting and social networking to bully, harass, stalk or intimidate a partner. Often this behavior is a form of verbal or emotional abuse perpetrated online. Following are examples of digital abuse.

- Telling you who you can or can't be friends with on Facebook and other social media sites.
- Sending you negative, insulting or even threatening messages.
- Using social media sites to keep constant tabs on you.
- Sending you unwanted, explicit pictures and/or demanding you send some in return.

- Pressuring you to send explicit videos or sexts.
- Stealing or insisting on being given your passwords.
- Constantly texting you and making you feel like you can't be separated from your phone for fear that you will be punished.
- Looking through your phone frequently, checking up on your pictures, texts and outgoing calls.
- Adding a tracking app or sharing app to your phone.

## What to explain to your teen about digital abuse

Protect your phone at all times. Do not share your passwords, account names or any other personal identification information with a person you are dating. Refusing to do so is not a sign of distrust or a lack of caring about the person you are dating.

## Stalking

A person is a victim of stalking when another person repeatedly watches, follows or harasses you, making you feel afraid or unsafe. This can be a current or past dating partner. Following are some examples of what stalkers may do.

- Show up at your home or place of work unannounced or uninvited.
- Send you unwanted text messages, letters, emails and voicemails.
- Make inappropriate comments to you or about you on social media.
- Leave unwanted items, gifts or flowers.
- Make unwanted phone calls to you.
- Constantly call you and hang up.
- Use social networking sites and technology to track you.
- Call your employer, teacher or professor.
- Wait for you at places you hang out.

## What to explain to your teen about stalking

Wanting to spend every moment and be involved in every part of a current or past dating partner's life is not normal dating behavior. Anytime you feel uncomfortable or smothered by him/her, alert adults who can help you deal with the situation. If you feel like you're being followed or tracked, alert adults immediately and seek help. Trust your gut.

## How to help your teen address dating violence

**Listen and give support.** Teens can find it difficult to open up about abuse. Many teens fear that their parents will overreact, blame them, or be angry. Try to be supportive and non-accusatory. Ask your child how you can help. If your teen doesn't want to talk with you, help your teen find another trusted person to talk to such as a teacher or domestic violence counselor at Harbor House.

**Accept what your child is telling you.** Showing skepticism or disbelief can make your child feel unsupported and isolated. Believe them when they share their experience.

**Show genuine concern.** Try saying something like, "You don't deserve to be treated like this, and I want you to know this is not 'normal' relationship behavior. I am concerned for your safety."

**Talk about the specific behaviors, not about the dating partner.** Instead of saying, "Your partner is controlling and I don't like him/her," you can say, "I don't like that your partner texts you so often to see where you are. How do you feel when you get so many messages asking where you are?" Do not put down the abuser because your teen will become defensive.

**Avoid ultimatums.** Resist the urge to say, "If you don't break up with him/her now, you are grounded." This cuts your child off from support, and he/she may be less likely to trust that you're a safe person to talk to in the future.

**Be prepared.** Educate yourself on dating abuse and ask your teens to learn about abuse dynamics with you. Read articles together and then ask for their thoughts. Create a safety plan. Call the Harbor House 24-hour hotline at 815-932-5800 for assistance and support.

**Decide on next steps together.** Ultimately, the decision about next steps will need to come from your teen, but you can still play a role in helping to identify safe options. Help your teen find additional support from a Harbor House advocate by calling the 24-hour hotline at 815-932-5800 or using our chatline at [harborhousedv.org](https://harborhousedv.org).

## How to create a safety plan

A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan that can help a victim avoid dangerous situations and know the best way to react when he/she is in danger. Help your teen

think ahead about ways to keep him/her safe if he/she is in a dangerous or potentially dangerous relationship. **Take whatever safety measures are necessary** including calling the Harbor House 24-hour hotline at 815-932-5800 or 911 if your teen is in immediate danger.

Every dating violence situation is unique; the list below provides examples of considerations the teen and parent and/or trusted adult can explore together when designing a personalized safety plan.

- What adults can you tell about the violence and abuse?
- Which people at school can you tell in order to be safe: teachers, principal, counselors, security?
- Consider changing your school locker or lock.
- Consider changing your route to/from school.
- Use a buddy system for going to school, classes and after school activities.
- Which friends can you tell to help you remain safe?
- If stranded, who could you call for a ride home?
- Keep a journal describing the abuse.
- Change your cell phone number.
- Block the abusive person from all social media accounts.
- Keep the Harbor House 24-hour hotline 815-932-5800 in your phone and the numbers of people who could help you no matter the day or hour.
- Where could you go quickly to get away from an abusive person?
- What other things can you do?

## Talk to your teens before abuse happens

It's never too early to talk to your child about healthy relationships and dating violence. **Starting conversations – even if you don't think your child is dating – is one of the most important steps you can take to help prevent dating violence.**

- Here are some sample questions to start the conversation:
  - Are any of your friends dating? What are their relationships like? What would you want in a partner?
  - Have you witnessed unhealthy relationships or dating abuse at school? How does it make you feel? Were you scared?
  - Do you know what you would do if you witnessed or experienced abuse?



- Has anyone you know posted anything bad about a friend online? What happened afterwards?
- Would it be weird if someone you were dating texted you all day to ask you what you're doing?
- Other ways to empower your teens
  - Provide your child with examples of healthy relationships, pointing out unhealthy behavior. Use examples from your own life, television, movies or music.
  - Admit to not knowing the answer to a particular question. This response builds trust.
  - Reinforce that dating should be fun! Stress that violence and abuse is never acceptable.
  - Discuss the options your child has if they witness dating abuse or experience it themselves.
  - Remind your son or daughter they have the right to say no to anything they're not comfortable with or ready for. They also must respect the rights of others.
  - If your child is in a relationship that feels uncomfortable, awkward or frightening, assure them they can come to you. And remember – any decisions they make about the relationship should be their own.
  - Be prepared to make mistakes. You *will* make mistakes. Accept that you will make mistakes, but continue to help teens make responsible choices while trying to maintain that delicate balance of being sensitive, but firm.

## How to Address Unhealthy Behaviors in Teens

At Harbor House, we talk a lot about how to support someone you care about if they are being abused. But what if the person you care about is the one who is being abusive toward their partner? What if they're a member of your own family?

This can be an incredibly difficult situation. You love your teen, but you know that what they're doing is harmful. You may not want to admit that it's happening. These are all normal reactions.

It's important to remember that you have the power to be an active parent. Ultimately, your teen is the only person who can choose to stop the abuse, but there are a few things you can do to encourage them to behave in healthier ways.

**Educate yourself on the dynamics of dating violence and domestic abuse.** Abuse is about power and control, and the signs are not always obvious. Learning the warning signs of abuse can help you help your teen identify their abusive and unhealthy behaviors. If you witness behaviors that you feel are unhealthy or abusive, try not to be silent about them. You might say things like, “I don’t think it’s healthy to talk to your partner that way,” or “If you care about someone, I think you should treat them with respect.” Be sure to focus on the behaviors and actions.

**Avoid blaming the victim or excusing abusive behavior.** If you witness the abuse, or if your teen tells you about a time they behaved abusively, try not to place blame on their partner or make excuses for the abuse. For example, avoid saying things like, “Well, what did they do to make you act that way?” or “You couldn’t help it.” There is no excuse for abuse; it is a choice, and it’s one that no one has to make. Although you may care about your teen, it’s important to focus on identifying the abusive behaviors. Even if their partner stays in the relationship, that doesn’t mean they deserve to be abused. Remember, you’re not turning against your teen. You’re just trying to help them have a healthier relationship.

**Realize that you can’t make them change.** You can’t “save” or “fix” another person. It’s up to them to decide that they want to change. Acknowledging that their behavior is abusive is the first step, and change can be a long and difficult process. Encourage them to seek professional help or to reach out to Harbor House’s 24-Hour Hotline at 815-932-5800. Remind them of the effects that their abusive behaviors are having on their partner. And remember, your teen’s decision to be abusive is not a reflection on you.

## Resources

- Harbor House 24-hour hotline: 815-932-5800
  - Services include: youth counseling, adult counseling, support group, emergency shelter, support with the court system, safety planning, prevention and community presentations
- Loveisrespect.org
- Furtureswithoutviolence.org