

**Break** the Cycle

Empowering Youth to End  
Domestic Violence



it's time to start  
the conversation

CONVERSATION GUIDE | FEBRUARY 2015

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# it's time to start the conversation

## Dear Parent or Caregiver,

We developed “A Parent’s Handbook: How to Talk to Youth about Healthy Relationships” to help you support the young people in your lives to learn the skills to create and foster positive, healthy relationships with peers and dating partners. By building these skills and applying them, young people will be the key to preventing dating abuse and breaking the cycle of violence.

Today’s young people have access to more information than ever before and are inundated with often contradictory messages about healthy relationships. They’re accustomed to sifting through these messages to consider what is relevant to them, and parents and caregivers are valuable to supporting them in this challenge. Youth can build the skills they need to engage in balanced, rewarding and loving relationships. By using some of the techniques and examples found in this handbook, you can establish a strong and lasting foundation for effective communication with your children.

Nowhere in this handbook do we identify young men as abusers or young women as victims. This is intentional. While most of the intimate partner violence that is reported is by men against women, this is not always the case. Young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender may not experience violence in this traditional framework. These discussions have also excluded men and boys who have been survivors of dating abuse. It is critical to talk to all youth about recognizing abuse and how to build healthy relationships.

## Knowing the Relationship Spectrum

Most of us have an idea of what is healthy and unhealthy in relationships based on our own relationship experience. Many young people do as well, however, they may lack the words to describe those feelings.

A *healthy relationship* has open and honest communication and an even playing field in which partners share control over decisions. Partners should...

- respect each other's individuality
- have equal say in the relationship
- respect each other's boundaries
- feel safe being open and honest
- be able to share feelings without negative consequences

A behavior may start out healthy, but can become an unhealthy behavior when partners do not communicate their boundaries and one partner begins to dominate. For example, young people use technology more than ever to communicate. Texting a partner can foster openness in a relationship as long as each person is comfortable with the amount and type of messages. However, using texts to monitor a partner's whereabouts is an unhealthy behavior. Other unhealthy behaviors include putting down a partner because they may make decision you don't agree with, demanding that a partner put their needs aside to meet your own, and requiring that a partner share their account passwords.

When partners do not do not set boundaries in the relationship, unhealthy behaviors can worsen and may lead to more severe, abusive behaviors. We

often refer to dating abuse as a pattern of abusive behaviors used to exert power and control over a dating partner. Abusive relationships have a power imbalance in which one partner tries to exercise control and power over the other through verbal, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse. Much of the abuse that young people experience now happens via technology. Insulting a partner on a social media site, sending threatening text messages, or tampering with a person's email account or other social media accounts can all be a part of dating abuse. Dating abuse can also include...

- name-calling, insults or put-downs in public or in private
- verbal, written or other threats of violence
- withholding money or other resources such as not paying for child-care, rent, or groceries if their partner doesn't do what they want
- threatening to out someone's sexual orientation before they are ready
- threatening to report undocumented family members
- isolating a dating partner from friends and family
- sexual coercion, forced sexual activities
- violent acts, including forced sexual activities and significant physical injury
- stalking, harassment or monitoring

## Before the Conversation...

### Assess your own “relationship values”

We often speak from our own experiences. Take a moment to reflect on your own relationship values. How do you expect your partner to act in your own relationship? How should people behave when they disagree? How do you share decisions making in a relationship? Make sure that you can explain your reasoning and can support it with examples.

### Offer another perspective on dating

Many young people are first exposed to social norms of dating by their peers in the locker room, at slumber parties, or on social media. Take time to understand where your child’s opinions about dating are coming from and what they think dating looks like before telling them what is appropriate behavior in a dating relationship.

### Be ready to talk whenever it happens

You never know when your child may want to talk. Be available to listen whenever they choose to have the conversation. Big ideas often begin as little thoughts slipped into the middle of a conversation about something else. Your child may raise ideas that are disturbing to; be prepared to respond without criticizing them.

### Create an open environment to talk

Small things matter when creating trust with your child and opening up a potential sensitive conversation. For example, the perception that others may hear your discussion can turn your child off from wanting to talk. Think of times when the two of you are alone, maybe talking over lunch on a weekend, on the way to the store, or even while watching television. These can all be opportune times to bring up the conversation in a private relaxed setting.

### Think about how to open the conversation

“What do I say first?”; “Will this make sense?”; “I don’t want to shut down the conversation before it starts.” These are all common thoughts before starting a difficult conversation with a child. When you feel ready, start the talk in the way that you think is best. Don’t get discouraged if it doesn’t go well the first time. Consistently open the door for conversation. Most importantly, be patient. It may seem like your child isn’t hearing you, but you never know what will work.

### Be prepared to tell the whole truth...

#### Good and bad

Young people will keep some parts of their relationship private from you or other adults. That is ok and is normal. Encourage them to talk to someone about their dating life, even if it is not you. They may not want to talk to you about a problem because they want to show they are independent and can fix it on their own. Being strong can also mean relying on support systems, from friends, to parents and teachers, to the police, if necessary. It is also common for young people, and adults, to romanticize dating relationships. Being realistic will go a long way with your child. All relationships have ups and downs and letting them know you understand will help build openness.

### Think of relevant examples or conversation openers

It can be helpful to use TV, movies or songs to naturally open a conversation about dating. This can be tricky because it may seem like you are trying to “be cool,” but if you do it authentically, it can be an easy way to both open the conversation and to illustrate your points. Keep your ideas clear and be sure that they relate directly back to your example.

## Conversation Starters

What does dating mean to you? Does anyone you know date? If not, what do they call it?

What are some things that you like about your friends? What about how they treat you?

What are some things you don't like about how your friends act or how they treat you?

Let's say you are seeing someone. How would you like someone you are hanging out with to treat you?

Choose one couple you know of who you think has a good relationship and one couple who you think has an unhealthy relationship. Why did you pick these couples?

Do you think there is a good way to argue? Do you think there are unfair ways to argue? Have you ever argued unfairly? What could you have done to make it a fair argument?

What does it mean to stand up for yourself? When you stand up for yourself, how does it make you feel? Do you think you are being strong, bossy or pushy? Why?

What should you do if someone you're dating threatens you? What if someone you are dating tells you to keep quiet and not tell anyone, even though you know it is wrong?

## During the Conversation...

### Teach assertiveness, not aggressiveness

No matter your child's age, they can always learn more about their personal warning signs for anger. This can be the hardest type of conversation to have with your child. Think about how their anger response: do they have clenched fists, gritted teeth or do they name call, withdraw, or say things they don't mean? Helping your child learn to identify when and why they are feeling angry and to acknowledge the emotions involved is a good first step. Taking turns to talk when things are getting heated, or taking a minute to breathe are positive steps to managing an argument. Help your child recognize that thoughts of aggression are signals of frustration that are normal but that need to be acknowledged. Help your child learn how to make their feelings known by stating their opinions, desires and reactions clearly. If they don't want to do something within their relationship, they should feel safe to say so.

### Assist with problem solving; don't solve the problem

Complex problems can be difficult for anyone to solve. Teaching basic problem solving techniques such as identifying an issue, figuring out several different ways in which it can be resolved, considering the consequences of each of the alternatives and discussing their choice is a great way to build these skills. You want to give them all of the tools they need to feel confident to figure out solutions. Feelings of love, intimacy, and jealousy may be new for young people, so work with them to understand and name their own feelings as a part of problem solving.

### Help recognize warning signs

You never know when your child may want to Most young people know that certain behaviors in a relationship make them feel bad or angry, but they

may not know that they are abusive or they may think that the behaviors are not that bad. Point out why warning signs may not be abusive on their own, but can become unhealthy and develop dynamics of power and control over time. Giving examples of what the behaviors may look like in real life will help young people work through, on their own, what feels healthy, unhealthy or abusive in their relationships.

### Give your undivided attention

When you begin to talk, always focus your attention on the conversation. This lets your child know what they have to say is important and valued, and that you are available. If it's a really bad time to talk, schedule another time, but first make sure that waiting is okay with your child.

### Check-in often

Frequent talks are a great way of communicating, reinforcing your support and letting your kids know that you are interested in their lives. This can also take the pressure off both of you because there will be other opportunities to ask important questions.

### Understand questions and answer honestly

If you're not sure what your child is asking, it's okay to say, "Help me understand" or "Can you explain more about that?" Once you understand the question, answer honestly and assure your child that you can come up with a solution together. Let them guide the conversation to the questions and ideas they'd like to discuss. Don't avoid uncomfortable topics of sex and sexuality. Talk to them about what healthy sexuality means to them, and acknowledge that sex, whether they are engaged in it or not, is an integral part of dating and can also be a tool of power and control.

## Resources

### National Domestic Violence Hotline: Dating Abuse Helpline

*Text “loveis” to 22522 or Call 1-866-331-9474*

The Helpline offers real-time, one-on-one support from peer advocates. We train these young leaders to offer support, information and advocacy to those involved in dating abuse relationships as well as concerned friends, parents, teachers, clergy, law enforcement and service providers.

### Loveisrespect

*[www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org)*

Love is Respect is a site that aims to educate individuals on what it's like to be in a relationship that is abusive and the importance of being able to identify healthy relationships.

### Break the Cycle

*[www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org)*

Break the Cycle is the leading national nonprofit organization working to provide comprehensive dating abuse programs exclusively to young people. Whether it's innovative violence prevention program, hosting public campaigns or championing effective laws and policies, we inspire and support young people to build healthy relationships ad a culture without abuse.

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