

It can be difficult to think about your child being the victim or the perpetrator of dating violence. Fortunately, there are steps you can take as a parent to help prevent involvement in dating violence. Teens and parents can form a powerful partnership to increase healthy relationship patterns.

HOW DO I PREVENT TEEN DATING VIOLENCE?

Educate yourself and your teen. Aggressive and violent behaviors range from emotional to physical to sexual in nature. Learn about healthy and unhealthy behaviors in relationships, including psychological or nonverbal behavior that can be harmful. Psychological or emotional abuse can be as damaging as physical abuse¹ and is more common.^{2,3,4} It is important to become familiar with many types of unhealthy behaviors so that you can recognize them. Make it a point to learn about the negative consequences of dating violence for both victims and perpetrators and share this information with your teen. Teens who do not believe there will be consequences for dating violence are more likely to perpetrate dating violence.³ Parents have more influence over their children's developing attitudes and behaviors when they are young,⁵ so it is important to learn and practice positive relationship skills with your children early in life.

Talk to your teen. Family communication is an essential part of preventing violence and reducing the negative effect of violence on children and teens.⁶ Talk to teens about their expectations of relationships. Learn what they witness in their peer groups and some of the experiences they have had in their own relationships. Having this information helps you to connect to your teen and also can help you identify areas in which more education and skill building is needed.

Model healthy behavior. Your behavior in interactions with your child and with others establishes a model that your child will use and expect in his or her future friendships and intimate relationships. Show healthy relationship behaviors by example in your personal relationships and within the family. Some healthy family interaction patterns that may reduce teens' use of violence include: supportive relationships between parents and children, consistency in parenting behaviors, respectful communication with family members,⁷ rewards (e.g., praise) for positively interacting with others,⁸ and nonaggressive discipline. Teens report using violence out of fear, jealousy, and anger, and because they do not know other ways to solve conflict.⁹ Teaching and modeling how to handle emotions, challenges, and difficult interactions with peers will help your teen navigate interpersonal relationships.^{10,11,12,13}

Stay involved. Research has shown that teens with involved parents are less likely to become involved in dating violence. For instance, teens whose parents know their whereabouts¹⁴ or whose parents teach them that violence is not a sign of love are less likely to become involved in dating violence.⁷

Promote gender equality. Examine your own assumptions about the characteristics of girls or women and the characteristics of boys or men. Because rigid gender roles are associated with

dating violence,¹⁴ promotion of gender equality and flexible gender roles is important. Teach and encourage the following traits equally in girls and boys: respect, empathy, and compassion for others; problem-solving and conflict resolution skills; autonomy, or the ability to be age-appropriately independent; honesty and the ability to openly share emotions.

I SUSPECT MY CHILD IS INVOLVED IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP. WHAT DO I DO?

Contrary to popular assumptions that intimate relationships are "not other people's business," it is the responsibility of parents and the community to help teens be safe and to learn positive relationship skills. When initiating a conversation with your teen, it may be helpful to explicitly ask about teen dating violence, as this appears to increase the likelihood that a teen will disclose violence.¹⁵ Research has shown that teens are unlikely to disclose dating violence⁴ for fear that adults will not believe them or that they will become embarrassed.¹⁶ This may be particularly true if disclosure of dating violence might lead to discovery of the teen's sexual activity or other behaviors the teen wants to keep from adults. It is normal to have reservations about conversations with your teen that may lead to a discussion of sexual activity. However, refraining from discussing dating violence could have significant consequences for your teen and the family. By providing a safe environment in which to have discussions about teen dating violence, you are taking an important step to increase the likelihood that s/he will report such violence to adults. In all cases, listen carefully without interrupting your teen and seek help through community agencies and law enforcement, if necessary.¹⁷ If you find you are too angry or unable to listen, find another adult whom you and your teen trust and can confide in, and who can provide additional resources to help you.¹⁸ Use the experience as an opportunity to discuss the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

If your teen has been a victim. Resist the urge to suggest or assign blame to your teen by asking questions such as "What were you wearing?" or "What did you expect?" These types of questions may add to your teen's distress.¹⁷ If the teen decides to end the abusive relationship, be supportive, and work with a trained professional to create a safety plan to follow after the breakup. Share this plan with important parties.¹⁸

If your teen has perpetrated violence. You might find yourself wanting to defend your child or attempt to justify his/her behavior. You may even think, "It wasn't that bad." Helping your teen take responsibility for his/her actions is an important step in developing healthy relationship patterns. Your teen now has the opportunity to learn appropriate conduct in relationships with your help. Use community resources to get your teen help and to support the teen as s/he learns to behave in a more respectful and appropriate manner.

The Alverno College Research Center for Women and Girls generates and applies scholarly research, develops curricula, and conducts program evaluation and outreach for the purpose of supporting, transforming and inspiring initiatives to improve the lives of women and girls in the state of Wisconsin and beyond. For the complete *Teen Dating Violence: A Resource and Prevention Toolkit*, with more extensive summaries of current research, resources for further reading, and action items for parents, teachers, and community members, please visit: Alverno.edu/research.