

## DEAR PARENT OR CAREGIVER

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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.

With this challenge in mind, we have created "*A Parent's Handbook: How to Talk to Youth about Healthy Relationships*." Our goal is to help adults create an environment in which youth can learn the skills to create and foster positive, healthy relationships with peers and dating partners. It is our hope that the application of these skills will help prevent dating abuse and break the cycle of violence.

With the help of this handbook and the love and support of important adults in their lives, 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.

As parents, it is quite common to want to take charge of potentially harmful situation and make what we believe are the best decisions for our children. However, we can ensure that the youths within our life feel both protected and empowered to make informed decisions about their relationships. Finally, it's okay not to have all of the answers. We've provided a list of resources at the end of the handbook to help answer some important questions that might come up as you begin this important conversation.

## KNOWING THE RELATIONSHIP SPECTRUM

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As youth enter into more complex and intimate relationships, it is critical that we help them understand that relationships exist on a spectrum. That is, we often have an idea of what is healthy and unhealthy, however; we may lack the words we need to describe those feelings. We have provided some definitions to help you get started, as well as to make sure that everyone is on the same page when using this booklet.

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

Partners should...

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

An **unhealthy relationship** can often be difficult to distinguish from healthy or abusive relationships. A behavior may start out healthy, but can become unhealthy when partners do not communicate their boundaries in relationships and one partner begins to dominate the decision-making.

For example:

- [ Young people use technology more than ever to communicate. Texting a partner can be positive and 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 always put their needs aside to meet your own, and requiring that a partner share their account passwords.

When partners don't discuss such behaviors and do not set boundaries in the relationship, unhealthy behaviors can get worse and may lead to more severe 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.

Dating abuse can include...

- [ name-calling
- [ threats of violence and insults
- [ withholding of money or other resources
- [ isolating a dating partner from friends and family
- [ coercion

- [ violent acts, including forced sexual activities and significant physical injury
- [ forced sexual activities
- [ stalking or monitoring

Technology can also be a medium through which abuse can occur. Insulting 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. Abuse in a relationship can happen to anyone, at any age, no matter what their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, level of education or economic background.

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### A NOTE ABOUT GENDER AND LANGUAGE

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You may have noticed that nowhere in our definitions did we identify boys as abusers and girls as victims. This was intentional. While most of the time violence reported is by men against women, this is by no means the case every time. Girls can abuse boys. Girls can abuse other girls. Boys can abuse girls and boys can abuse other boys. Boys are often bombarded with countless messages instructing them on what it means to "be a man," which often focuses on not being vulnerable, not expressing emotions, and being "tough". These discussions have both excluded men and boys who have been survivors of dating abuse, and have also not proactively engaged them in talking about dating abuse overall. However, we know that it is critical to talk to *all* youth about recognizing abuse and how to build healthy relationships. This includes protecting a young person who is a victim of dating abuse, as well as intervening if your child is perpetrating abuse.

## GET THE CONVERSATION STARTED

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While it's not easy to bring up conversations focused on sex and relationships, communication between a parent and child about these topics is important. The support of trusted adults can impact a young person's confidence, decision-making skills, and even safety. Here are six steps to encourage young people to talk about these difficult issues.

### 1) CREATE AN OPEN ENVIRONMENT

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Give the young people in your life plenty of opportunities to talk to you about relationships. Avoid criticizing them for having questions, even if they raise ideas that are disturbing to you. Be available to listen. Always remember that big ideas often begin as little thoughts slipped into the middle of a conversation about something else. For some children, it can be difficult to open up to a parent, so think about what would make you more comfortable if you were in their shoes.

### 2) START THE TALK

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"What do I say first?" "Will this make sense?" "I don't want to offend my child." These are all common thoughts that parents or caregivers may have when 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 with your child.

### 3) MAKE SURE LOCATION AND TIMING ARE APPROPRIATE

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Always make sure that your child is comfortable with the time and place to have the discussion. While we want to keep the lines of communication with our child open, sometimes the perception that others may hear your discussion can prevent a youth from opening up and talking to you. Think of times when the two of you are alone. For example, talking over lunch on a weekend, starting a conversation on the way to the store, or even bringing the topic up while watching television can all be opportune types to bring up the conversation in a private relaxed setting.

### 4) GIVE YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION

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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.

### 5) THINK OF RELEVANT EXAMPLES

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When possible, use examples that you know your child will understand to illustrate your points. These examples can come from TV, from movies or songs, or from your own experiences with relationships. Keep your ideas clear and be sure that they relate directly back to your example.

### 6) CHECK-IN OFTEN

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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.

### 7) UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION AND ANSWER HONESTLY

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If you're not sure what your child is asking, it's okay to say, "Help me understand." 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.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

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- [ *Choose one couple you know of who you believe has a healthy relationship and one couple who you think has an unhealthy relationship. Why did you pick these couples?*
- [ *What's a healthy way to argue? What's an unhealthy way to argue?*
- [ *Can you think of a situation in your life where you argue 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, do you think you are being strong or pushy? Why?*
- [ *What values do you think are important in friendships? What values do you think are important in dating relationships?*
- [ *Whose relationship would you most like yours to be like? 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?*

## HAVE HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

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Having conversations about healthy relationships with an open mind, honesty, and kindness can model healthy ways to work through difficult conversations in the future. Giving your child respect in the conversations you have with them can be a model of good communication in relationships.

### 1) ASSESS YOUR OWN “RELATIONSHIP VALUES” BEFORE YOU TALK TO YOUR KIDS

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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.

### 2) PROVIDE ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

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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. It is important to take time to understand where your child’s opinions about dating are coming from, and give them clear examples of what is appropriate behavior in a dating relationship.

### 3. TELL THE WHOLE TRUTH...GOOD AND BAD

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It is common for kids to romanticize dating relationships. Support these expectations, but also let them know that all relationships have ups and downs. Stress that regardless of the situation, physical, sexual or emotional abuse is never acceptable. This may be a perfect time to have your children think about what their boundaries are in a relationship, and teach them to assert their boundaries and respect those that their partners set. Don’t avoid uncomfortable topics of sex and sexuality, either. 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.

### 4. TEACH ASSERTIVENESS, NOT AGGRESSIVENESS

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One of the best skills parents can teach their kids is to make their feelings known by stating their opinions, desires and reactions clearly. For example, if they don’t want to do something within their relationship, they should feel safe to say so. However, they should not take their partner’s lack of a ‘no’ as a ‘yes.’ Your children should know that if they are ever unsure of what their partner’s boundaries are, they should ask. Finally, when there is conflict— if things cannot be settled — encourage them to always take a break and cool down before feelings get hurt. Model these behaviors in your own relationships, including your relationships with your children.

### 5. TEACH ANGER CONTROL

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Help your kids recognize their personal warning signs for anger. Do they have clenched fists, gritted teeth, tensed arms and shoulders? Do they name call, withdraw, or say things they don’t mean? Teach them ways to calm down and that conflicts are better resolved when both parties feel more even-tempered. Also model this behavior in your own relationships.

### 6. TEACH PROBLEM SOLVING

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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 in being able 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.

## 7. TEACH NEGOTIATION SKILLS

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Help your children understand that compromising and taking turns are positive steps to a healthy relationship and that violence, threats and insults have no place in respectful negotiation. Teach your children to negotiate and acknowledge the situation, as well as communicate their emotions. State each person's point of view honestly and discuss options that allow both people to "win."

## 8. HELP RECOGNIZE WARNING SIGNS

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Teach them to recognize that thoughts of aggression are signals of frustration that need to be acknowledged and dealt with. Help young people understand that warning signs of abuse in a relationship are predictors of very serious problems that are very likely to continue and escalate. 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.

## 9. SHARING

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Young people may wish to keep some parts of their relationship private from adults, and this is okay. Help them understand that secrecy that isolates them from friends and family entirely, however, can be the first sign of manipulation and coercion. Teach your kids that being strong can also mean relying on their support systems, from friends, to parents and teachers, to the police, if necessary.

## 10. BE A ROLE MODEL

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Young people learn by observing those around them, especially trusted adults and role models. It is critical that you respect yourself, your partner, and other people, particularly when you have bumps in your own relationships. Modeling healthy disagreement and problem solving, including with your children, can have a lasting impact on their own behaviors.

## KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

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You may have already had the conversation with your children about dating abuse. They are familiar with all of the definitions and what it means to be in a healthy relationship. However, the conversation doesn't stop there. Keep the lines of communication consistently open with the young people in your life. A youth's ideas, beliefs or circumstances around relationships may change quickly without you knowing it. Keep checking in and make sure that they know you are always available if they want to talk. Here are few additional tips for you to keep in mind as you continue to talk to your children.

### 1) DISCUSS RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

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What's the difference between "hooking up" and "going out" or "dating?" How does your teen perceive their peers' relationships? Your teen may have very set notions of gender roles and how people interact when they are dating. You will only find out by asking questions and discussing with your child why they think what they do, and if it's accurate or an over-generalization. If your child has expectations that are problematic, discuss with them the reasons why what they believe may not lead to healthy relationships, either in their life or with their friends'.

### 2) MAKE SURE THEY MAINTAIN OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR DATING PARTNER

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Discuss the importance of having open and honest conversations in dating relationships. You can give your child tips to help them foster trust and respect in their relationships. Keep in mind that your child knows their relationship best; go over the suggestions with them and if they feel any of these tips would put them in danger, do not pressure your child to use them.

### 3) RELATIONSHIP BOOSTERS

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Even in healthy relationships there are some ups and downs. You may want to share some tips with your children for how they can re-connect with a partner:

- | Talking about what both partners want out of a relationship
- | Going on a walk together
- | Scheduling a date night
- | Making time to be together
- | Making time to be apart

### 4) RESPECT BOUNDARIES & PRIVACY.

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Your child may feel that being in a relationship means that they have no secrets, or should be together all the time. While you want to stress truthfulness, honesty and sharing, it should also be emphasized that time away from their partner is important in strengthening trust in the relationship and maintaining their own individual identity.



Healthy boundaries shouldn't restrict their ability to go out with friends without their partner nor should it ever feel like they have to share passwords to e-mail or social media sites, or that they are entitled to their partner's passwords. This also applies to allowing your child to have privacy from you; if they do not feel comfortable telling you things, try to encourage them to talk to other trusted adults in their life.

## 5) RELATE TO YOUR CHILD

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You can help your child by sharing your own experiences, especially the ones you had when you were your child's age. Seeing that you made mistakes or faced similar difficulties may help your child understand that they can also overcome obstacles and that they are not alone. Use examples from your own life, television, movies or music, but try to avoid judgment and stigmatizing people who have experienced abuse.

## 6) DISCUSS WHY PEOPLE STAY IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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Helping your child understand the many reasons why someone might stay in an abusive relationship can be very effective in helping them identify and possibly avoid some of those same barriers to leaving. The reasons why young people might stay in abusive relationships may include, but are not limited to:

- A young person's status, identity, and self-esteem may be intricately linked to their relationship—this can be especially true if they are in school with their dating partner.
- A victim of abuse may want the violence to end, but not the relationship to end.
- Someone experiencing abuse can feel like no one understands the partner perpetrating abuse but them, or vice versa.
- A young person might fear telling their parents about the abuse because their parents don't know that they are dating or because they fear their parents will overreact.
- A young person may not have healthy relationships to compare this to, and may see abusive behavior modeled at home. They may think this is just what "being in love" is like.
- The victim of abuse may worry that their family will be disappointed in them.
- The perpetrator of abuse may threaten to reveal secrets their partner does not want to reveal, such as their partner's sexual orientation or immigration status
- The partner perpetrating abuse may threaten to take or keep away a child in common from their partner if they break up.

[ The victim of abuse may fear violence or other repercussions from the partner perpetrating abuse, their friends or their family.

[ The victim of abuse may want to protect their partner from being involved with police or getting in trouble with school, for fear of ruining their future.

## 7) DON'T JUDGE

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As a parent, be prepared to discuss your child's dating partners with them. You may not always be happy with the person your child has decided to date or the decisions they make. That is OK. While it

is important to have open communication, focus on supporting your child, not judging their partner or behaviors.

- [ Judging or engaging in any sort of victim blaming can create additional barriers rather than encourage youth to talk to adults about dating abuse. If your child feels as though they are being judged, they may just simply refuse to talk to you about the relationship or more importantly, ask for help.
- [ Even if you discover that your child's partner is engaging in unhealthy behaviors, don't demonize their partner. Focus on how these behaviors are impacting your child.
- [ Sex and sexuality are topics that young people often are hesitant to open up to adults about for fear of being judged, but lacking support and resources can leave them vulnerable. Work hard to support healthy sexual decision making while supporting your child's decisions.

### ALWAYS REMEMBER...

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Always remember these conversations are the beginning of what will hopefully be an ongoing process of communication. Keeps the conversation going by continuing to tailor your conversations to what is impacting your child at the moment. While conversations are important, modeling your own behavior and communications styles in a healthy manner might be even more effective at getting your point across. The first conversation may go great or it may feel a little awkward, but be patient. Having these conversations may be new and will most likely take time to develop. Even if it doesn't feel like you're getting to where you want to be, you are making an impact just by modeling healthy communication in your own life.

### RESOURCES

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#### **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)

Founded in 1996, Break the Cycle provides comprehensive dating abuse prevention programs exclusively to young people.