



# parent discussion guide on youth healthy relationships

A national study of adolescent dating relationships and parenting determined that “positive parenting” contributed significantly to adolescents being less tolerant of unhealthy and abusive relationship behaviors.<sup>1</sup> As teens and young adults learn how to navigate relationships, parents and influencers (ex. teachers, coaches, and aunts/uncles) — like you — play a pivotal role in modeling healthy relationship behavior. **Youth want and crave our connection and support.**

While youth may be an open book to their friends, they may seem disengaged or uninterested in a conversation with you. Have you ever asked your child, “How are things going?” or “Tell me about your day?,” only to be met with the answer of “It was fine” while they stared down at their phone? This guide will provide information and resources for having meaningful conversations with the youth in your life and empowering them to have relationships that are healthy, respectful, and free from abuse.

## dating abuse is happening

Young people are still learning what makes a relationship healthy, unhealthy, or even abusive. The ideas and beliefs that enable abuse can be changed, so the earlier we intervene with education and support, the earlier we can prevent abuse. One national survey of teenagers showed that almost 70% of teens aged 12-18 who had been in a dating relationship in the past year [reported](#) experiencing some type of abuse. We know that the intersection of identities with youth on the margins presents challenges related to racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and more, which can create even more risks for marginalized youth navigating relationships. Transgender people face significant discrimination, even from people in the gay community ([Read Kayden's story](#)).

## have a conversation about healthy relationships

A healthy relationship has basic but **essential elements**: **respect, communication, trust, boundaries, honesty, and equality**. The absence of one or more of these elements can mean that a

relationship is unhealthy or even abusive. [love is respect](#) hosts several [online quizzes](#) that young people can take to determine their relationship's health status.

**Have you considered having a discussion with a young person in your life about healthy relationships?** This can be effective in helping them identify the healthy behaviors they should look for in a partner, and how to recognize unhealthy behaviors.

Consider these key questions to get the conversation started:

### What do you look for in a dating partner?

- A good dating partner always treats you with respect and understands you need to have your own goals in life.
- Sometimes you will disagree and that's okay as long as you feel you can have an open, honest discussion about your feelings.
- You should feel free to express yourself, share your opinions, and make decisions that are best for you. A partner who tries to control you (what you wear, who you see, where you go) isn't respecting you.

### Sometimes a dating partner may ask someone to quit things they love, like cheerleading or basketball. What do you think about that?

- A dating partner should be supportive of your hobbies and your relationships with friends, family, and coworkers. If they ever pressure you to skip class or work, drop out of a club or sport, or stop seeing friends they don't like, that's not healthy.

### When you go out with your dating partner, who pays?

- Regardless of who has more money, no one has the right to control someone else's finances. It's okay if you want to treat them to something or help them out (or vice versa), but you/they shouldn't feel pressured to pay, and you should have a discussion about your financial boundaries if it becomes a pattern.

## types of dating abuse

**Dating abuse** is a pattern of destructive behaviors used to exert power and control, oftentimes through isolation and intimidation, over a dating partner. Knowing the types of abuse is critical for parents and influencers, but can also lead to more questions. To learn more about types of abuse, [visit this webpage](#).

**Digital abuse:** Let's say your teen shares that their partner went through their phone, read their messages, or made them download a location tracking app. That's a violation of privacy, and a key indicator that their partner is exerting power over them using technology.

**Emotional abuse:** Emotional abuse is extremely common and often the first type of abuse someone experiences. You overhear your child telling a friend about their partner "always making them feel like they are crazy or imagining things." Gaslighting is a common tactic used by those causing harm to make someone feel like they are losing their minds in order to negate their experiences and feelings.

**Financial abuse:** Financial abuse is lesser-known and is when someone attempts to control and/or limit someone's finances. This is one of the most significant barriers to leaving an abusive relationship. Examples for young people, depending on their own financial independence, can look different. Perhaps one partner is always expected to pay for movies or food, or one partner always borrows money but never pays it back. For young adults or college students, it may show up when a partner is encouraged or pressured into skipping class, extra-curricular activities, or even work to be with their partner. This can have long-term effects on a young person's education or career path and financial stability.

**Physical abuse:** Physical abuse is never okay, and it is important to ask questions like, "What does it look like when you and your partner argue?" if you observe bruises, marks, or witness their partner being "too physical" during disagreements. Once you find out more, you can start talking about ways they can stay safer and get support.

**Sexual abuse:** Coercion into sexual contact or interactions is extremely damaging for young people — ignoring consent, pressuring for sex, refusing to use contraception, or sabotaging birth control are just some examples. Here is a [story](#) that touches on peer pressure, love defined as a teen, and the escalation of abuse that ended in sexual assault.

## understanding and responding to warning signs of abuse

Unhealthy behaviors and dating abuse can be hard to spot, especially if the young person experiencing the abuse (or the person causing the harm) is trying to hide it. Responding to what you are observing is critical, and our suggestion is to approach the conversation from a supportive and nonjudgmental place by:

- **Listening:** Teens/young adults are more likely to be open with their parents when they don't feel pressured. Approach the conversation using curiosity: *"I noticed your phone has been going off a lot lately, aren't you the popular one?"* Depending on their response, you're likely to hear more about what's going on.
- **Asking open-ended and strategic questions:** *"I noticed you haven't been hanging out with your friends much, I miss hearing you all laughing and playing music. Is everything okay?"*

Let's say you observe that your child's normal activities have changed. They are more withdrawn, isolating from friends and family, or not engaging in activities they normally enjoy. Perhaps they are missing classes or got dropped from the basketball team. Start a conversation by asking, *"How are things going? I noticed you have been keeping to yourself a lot, are you okay?"*

**If you observe warning signs, please know there is support for you.** The resources listed for parents in this guide are a great first step if you have concerns that your child is experiencing or at-risk for dating abuse.



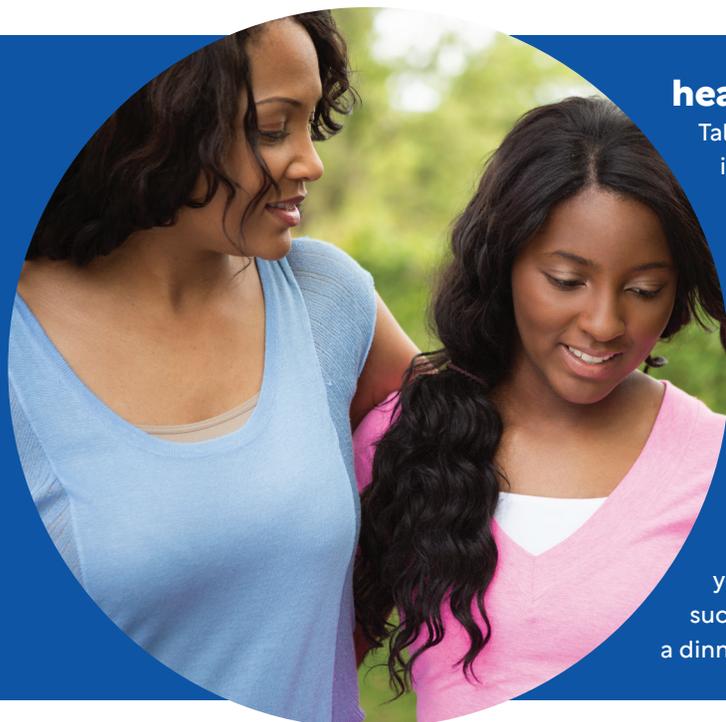
## how to have a conversation about dating abuse

Navigating when and how to have a conversation can be difficult. Supporting a young person who has experienced abuse can be even more difficult. However, starting the conversation is one of the best things you can do to create a safe space for the young people in your life to share their experiences and ask for support. Important points to keep in mind when having the conversation include:

- **Give support:** Be supportive and non-accusatory or judgmental in conversations about the relationship. *“I can see that was hard to share, I appreciate you trusting me — You deserve to feel equal in a relationship.”*
- **Validate, empathize, and create a space where they feel safe. For example, if your teen tells you:**
  - *“I feel like my partner wants to pressure me into doing things I don’t like or know if I am ready for,” you can respond by saying something like, “That sounds like a really challenging thing to go through. Feeling like your partner is forcing you or not respecting your boundaries can bring up all kinds of hard emotions. What happens when you try to talk to them about it?”*
  - *“I really love my partner, but they keep demanding I skip work. I’m worried I might be fired,” you can respond by saying, “It’s okay to communicate to them how that makes you feel. You have a right to space and responsibilities outside of your relationship and your partner should be supportive of your independence. Your feelings are valid.”*
  - *“I am not sure why my partner wants my password, but I don’t want to share it,” you can respond by saying, “Passwords are private, and it is important to have digital boundaries in a healthy relationship. Boundaries are yours to build.”*

- **Accept what they are telling you:** Believe them, even if what they tell you is hard to hear. *“Thank you for being honest. I believe you, and what you are describing sounds like unhealthy behavior which could lead to abuse — what you are feeling is valid.”*
- **Focus on behaviors, not the person(s) involved:** Remember, it is normal that youth may still have feelings of love, connection, and compassion for the person who is harming them. *“The behaviors you are describing sound very unhealthy. It is not okay to be forced to do something you are not comfortable with. I am not saying they are a bad person, but calling and texting you constantly is very concerning.”*
- **Talk about their safety in a non-judgmental, supportive way:** Recognize that leaving the relationship may not resolve the issue, especially if they go to the same school or are in the same extracurricular activities or social circles. **Learn more here:** [When A Survivor Asks You for Help](#)
- **Decide on the next steps together:**
  - *“What do you feel comfortable doing next?”*
  - *“Do you fear your friends will judge you?” “What can I do to support you?”*
  - *“Do you think changing classes would be helpful?”*

As a parent, especially if your child is under the age of 18, sometimes it is necessary to take immediate steps and help them find support, including reaching out to love is respect and getting information about [safety planning](#).



## healthy financial relationships

Talking to young people about finances may feel uncomfortable, but it's important. In a recent survey conducted by Junior Achievement and The Allstate Foundation, nearly 1 in 3 U.S. teenagers aged 13-18 have experienced an unhealthy financial warning sign in a romantic relationship. The study also found that 61% of teens trust their parents or guardians the most to teach them about healthy shared finances with a romantic partner or friend. While pressure to skip class or work may feel small, the acceptance of these behaviors can have significant financial impact on a young person's financial future. You can model healthy financial relationship behaviors by sharing how you manage finances with a partner (budgeting, savings, credit cards, etc.). You can also have open discussions with the young person in your life to reinforce healthy behaviors of romantic relationships — such as being supportive of school and work and sharing costs such as a dinner out or concert tickets.

## supporting someone choosing to cause harm

As a parent or influencer, it can be very hard to hear or witness that the young person in your life may be causing harm to someone. Attempting to track someone's location using an app, forcing someone to stop seeing a friend, or insulting/tearing down someone are examples of concerning behaviors. Talking about these behaviors is a critical first step in preventing abuse. Try to convey empathy by validating their feelings and frustration without validating the behavior or actions.

- Identify healthy alternatives and coping mechanisms when the young person is having thoughts of acting out unhealthy or abusive behaviors. This can be counting to ten and breathing deeply when they have feelings of anger, reaching out to a friend or family member to talk through their feelings, or seeing a counselor.
- Share information on how to build [healthy relationship behaviors](#).



### resources available to parents/influencers

#### [love is respect](#)

- 📞 Call 1-866-331-9474
- 💬 Chat at [loveisrespect.org](#)
- 📱 Text "LOVEIS" to 22522

#### [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)

- 📞 Call 1-800-799-7233
- 💬 Chat at [thehotline.org](#)
- 📱 Text "START" to 88788

#### [National Parent Helpline](#)

- (only available Monday – Friday 10 AM – 7 PM PST)
- 📞 Call 1-855-427-2736

### resources available to teens & young adults

#### [love is respect](#)

- 📞 Call 1-866-331-9474
- 💬 Chat at [loveisrespect.org](#)
- 📱 Text "LOVEIS" to 22522

#### [Crisis Text Line](#)

- 📱 Text "HOME" to 741741
- 📘 Send a [Facebook message](#)

#### [The Trevor Project](#)

- 📞 Call 1-866-488-7386
- 💬 Chat at [thetrevorproject.org](#)
- 📱 Text "START" to 678678

#### [Your Life Your Voice](#)

- 📞 Call 1-800-448-3000
- 📱 Text "VOICE" to 20121
- ✉ Email at [yourlifeyourvoice.org](#) (response within 48 hours)

The creation of this guide was funded by [The Allstate Foundation](#). Since 2005, The Allstate Foundation has been committed to ending domestic violence through financial empowerment. They empower survivors with the education and resources needed to achieve their potential again and equip young people with the information and confidence they need to help prevent unhealthy relationships before they start.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) is a vital service: our mission is to answer the call to support and shift power back to those affected by relationship abuse. In 2007, The Hotline established love is respect, an initiative that engages, educates, and empowers youth in a safe, inclusive space where they can access information in an environment designed specifically for them. We encourage you to visit [loveisrespect.org](#) to learn more.

