

## Strategies and Tips for Parents on Talking to Your Teen About Dating Safety

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Dating violence is a serious concern for today's teens and parents. According to the National Youth Violence Prevention Center, about 20% of teens have experienced abuse in a dating relationship. Parents often underestimate their influence on teens when it comes to dating and sex. But parents play a vital role in helping teens recognize the red flags of an unhealthy relationship and ending an abusive relationship. When you talk frequently and openly with your teens, they are more likely to turn to you in a time of crisis. The following tips and strategies can help you open the lines of communication with your teen about dating violence and safety.

### How to Break the Ice:

- *Start the conversation!* If you do not bring up the topic, your teen may not either. Practice what you want to say and look for opportunities to “seize the moment”. Use examples from TV shows, music videos or movies as a springboard for your discussion.

Be open-minded and work together to decide on appropriate dating behaviors and rules, but remember that you are the parent, responsible for setting boundaries.

- *Assess your own values* about dating behavior before talking with your teen. Be mindful that your beliefs may be different from your teen's. Try and be respectful of your teen's values, otherwise he/she may shut you out. Be open-minded and work together to decide on appropriate dating behaviors and rules, but remember that you are the parent, responsible for setting boundaries.
- *Be completely available* during the conversation, by focusing only on your teen and the topic. Make eye contact with your teen. Show that you are listening by nodding your head and saying things like “yes.” Be sure that you are in an environment where your teen will feel comfortable to talk! If you need to stop the conversation, promise to continue it later and follow through.
- *Do your own research on teen dating violence* to get the facts before talking to you teen. Start with the list of helpful resources at the end of this tip sheet.



### How to Communicate Effectively:

- *Keep it low key.* Do not push if your teen is not ready to talk.

Try again another time.

- *Do not lose your temper.* Often times, teens and adults have very different views on curfews, appropriate dating activities, etc. Your job is to take the lead and create appropriate boundaries. Take a “time out” if you feel yourself getting angry or upset.

- *Ask questions* that allow your teen to share his or her thoughts on dating. For instance, you could ask, “Where do your classmates go on dates? How do your friends ask each other out?” Listen to everything your teen has to say and do not interrupt. The lan-

guage and definition of dating has changed with each generation. By asking your teen about the current trends, expectations, and habits, you are gaining insight into their perspective. Ask about their friends and their friends’ relationships. Asking these types of questions shows you care about your teen’s thoughts and feelings. It may also help you gauge appropriate dating behaviors for their age or peer group.

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- *Understand your teen’s questions* and answer honestly.
- *Be open-minded* and curious, rather than judgmental, when your teen asks questions or shows emotions. Remember that your teen will interpret your body language (such as eye rolling and head nodding) when you are talking.
- *Create a supportive environment* by making sure your teen feels that you are there to listen, not to lecture or criticize.

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- *Talk to your teen at his/her level.* Remember what it felt like to be a teen and use examples he or she can relate to from TV, movies, or your own experiences. Try to find similarities between your teen’s experiences and your own. Be open to discussing your

own relationships with your teen, including how you define healthy and unhealthy relationships. Define for your teenager the different types of abuse, including emotional and verbal abuse.

- *Do not set a double standard;* hold your sons and daughters to the same dating rules.

## What to Say:

- *Explain to your teen how to stand up for him or her self,* and make sure he or she knows what being forceful or pushy is like.
- *Teach your teen how important it is to control anger.* Model for your teen how to take a “time out” or walk

For more information on healthy relationships and marriages, visit [www.twoofus.org](http://www.twoofus.org).

away from a heated situation.

- *Communicate your own values* clearly and sensitively. Let your teen know what your rules and expectations are for dating and what the consequences will be if your teen does not follow them.
- *Stress that hitting, pushing or feeling scared is never acceptable.* Tell your teen that he/she never deserves to be treated like that, and should never scare or hurt a dating partner. Feeling safe in a relationship is crucial.
- *Tell your teen to listen to his/her inner voice* and to trust his/her own judgment about unsafe situations.
- *Tell your teen that he or she should never be forced to do something sexual* that feels uncomfortable, and should never inflict such a circumstance on a dating partner.

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- *Explain emotional abuse to your teen.* Many teens criticize each other and put people down. Take the time to help your teen understand that a relationship partner should not be insulting. Remind your teen that healthy dating relationships require responsibility and mutual respect.

- *Encourage group dating* for younger teens and age limits for relationships.
- *Encourage your teen to talk to any adult to discuss a difficult situation.* Do not be offended if that person is not you.
- *Reinforce the fun* in dating!
- *Make it clear that you will always be there for your teen.* Let him/her know that dating can be rough and you are there to give advice about tough decisions.
- *Make an effort to get acquainted with the boyfriend or girlfriend* if your teen is in a dating relationship. Invite them for dinner or on a family outing. This gives your teen's dating partner an opportunity to see you as an authority figure, rather than an abstract concept.
- *Help your teen identify risky dating situations.* For instance, discuss staying in public places on dates and caution your teen about going anywhere with a date who has been drinking or doing drugs.

## Red Flags:

There are certain "Red Flags" that indicate your teen may be experiencing abuse in a relationship. You have to know your teen well to be able to tell which of these signs are regular mood changes and which can actually be linked to an abusive relationship.

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Teachers, friends or extended family members also may notice such signs in your teen. There are behaviors to watch for in both your teen's dating partner and in your teen.

### Your teen's dating partner:

- Insults your teen in front of others
- Controls your teen's money and finances
- Loses his/her temper with your teen or someone else in front of you
- Demands to know where your teen is
- Makes most of the decisions about the relationship
- Must approve your teen's clothing or make-up choices
- Shows signs of extreme jealousy

### Your teen:

- Spends all of his or her time with a dating partner and little time with friends
- Loses interest in or gives up activities that once were important
- Acts afraid of his or her dating partner
- Shows extreme changes in personality and mood
- Is depressed or anxious
- Refuses to discuss his/her relationship
- Criticizes the person he or she is dating
- Has unexplained bruises or injuries
- Apologizes or makes excuses for his/her dating partner's behavior, anger or jealousy

Your teen is more likely to come to you for advice if he or she feels comfortable asking questions and understands that you are not there to judge.

The most important thing to remember when talking to your teen is to respect your teen's opinions; however, **don't be afraid to step in when things don't look or feel right**. Your teen is more likely to come to you for advice if he or she feels comfortable asking questions and understands that

you are not there to judge. Remember to keep an open mind and offer guidance when your teen asks for it. When you need to ask questions to start the conversations, it helps to ask one that requires more than a yes

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or no answer. Modeling healthy dating behavior consistently, whether you are married or single, empowers your teen to make positive choices in his or her relationships.

If you see warning signs of abuse or your teen comes to you for help, use all the resources available to you and your teen to help end the abusive relationship and create healthy relationships in the future. These resources may include a school counselor, school social worker or a private therapist who specializes in adolescents.

**For more information, see these resources:**

Emergency Help - 911

Break the Cycle - [www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org); [www.thesafespace.org](http://www.thesafespace.org)

National Domestic Violence Hotline - 1-800-799-SAFE (7266)

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline - 1-866-331-9474

National Center for Victims of Crime - [www.ncvc.org/victimassistance](http://www.ncvc.org/victimassistance) ; (1-800-394-2255)

Liz Claiborne Inc. Women's Work - [www.loveisnotabuse.org](http://www.loveisnotabuse.org); 1-800-449-STOP (7864)

The Parenting Institute - 212-263-6622

The Family Violence Prevention Fund - [www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org)

*Thanks to Juley Fulcher, Esq., for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. Ms. Fulcher has been working in the domestic violence field for more than fifteen years. She is the Director of Policy Programs of Break the Cycle, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to engage, educate and empower youth to build lives and communities free from domestic and dating violence.*