

Starting a Conversation With Your Child About Abuse

It can be scary to suspect that your teen might be in an abusive relationship. As a parent, your instinct is to help your child in whatever way you can. This need to help can drive you to quickly react, but sometimes what feels like the right plan of action could stop the conversation before it begins. Here are some tips to keep in mind when trying to help a child who is experiencing abuse.

Listen and Give Support

When talking to your teen, be supportive and non-accusatory. If they do open up, it's important to be a good listener. Your child may feel ashamed of what's happening in their relationship. Many teens fear that their parents may overreact, blame them or be disappointed. Others worry that parents won't believe them or understand. If they do come to you to talk, let it be on their terms, and meet them with understanding, not judgment.

Accept What Your Child is Telling You

Believe that they are being truthful. Showing skepticism could make your teen hesitant to tell you when things are wrong and drive them closer to their abuser. Offer your unconditional support and make sure that they know that you believe that they are giving an accurate account of what is happening.

Show Concern

Let your teen know that you are concerned for their safety by saying things like: "You don't deserve to be treated like this;" "You deserve to be in a relationship where you are treated with respect" and "This is not your fault."

Talk About the Behaviors, Not the Person

When talking about the abuse, speak about the behaviors you don't like, not the person. For example, instead of saying, "She is controlling" you could say, "I don't like that she texts you to see where you are." Remember that there still may be love in the relationship — respect your child's feelings. Also, talking badly about your son or daughter's partner could discourage your teen from asking for your help in the future.

Avoid Ultimatums

Resist the urge to give an ultimatum (for example, “If you don’t break up with them right away, you’re grounded/you won’t be allowed to date anyone in the future.”) You want your child to truly be ready to walk away from the relationship. If you force the decision, they may be tempted to return to their abusive partner because of unresolved feelings. Also, leaving is the most dangerous time for victims. Trust that the teen knows their situation better than you do and will leave when they’re ready.

Be Prepared

Educate yourself on dating abuse. Help your child identify the unhealthy behaviors and patterns in their relationship. Discuss what makes a relationship healthy. With your teen, identify relationships around you (within your family, friend group or community) that are healthy and discuss what makes those relationships good for both partners.

Decide on Next Steps Together

When you’re talking to your teen about a plan of action, know that the decision has to come from *them*. Ask what ‘next steps’ they would like to take. If they’re uncomfortable discussing this with you, help them find additional support. Suggest that they reach out to a peer advocate through loveisrespect’s phone line, online chat and text messaging service where teens can talk with peer advocates 24/7. To call, dial 1-866-331-9474, to chat, see the homepage of loveisrespect.org or text “loveis” to 22522