

A PARENT'S GUIDE  
TO TEEN DATING VIOLENCE:

10

QUESTIONS

TO START

THE CONVERSATION

**LIZ CLAIBORNE**  
WOMEN'S WORK

don't just say   
negative things, say  
something helpful. Tanya, age 14

i wish my parents would  
talk to me instead  
of going to my brother  
or another family  
member to ask  
about my life. Donnetta, age 14

parents need to be  
open and honest  
and at all times  
communicate! Anika, age 18

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## dear parent or guardian:

*A mother in El Paso asks her 17-year-old daughter if she has ever seen signs of dating violence among her friends and is surprised to hear, "Sure, I know some people who've experienced it."*

*A dad in Seattle asks his son if he knows any guys who are abusive to their girlfriends. His son answers, "Well, I don't know if it's abuse, but some guys have talked about slapping a girl when they get into a fight."*

*Could violence be a part of your teen's social life or dating relationships? The answer may surprise you. While we might think that relationship violence is something that could never affect the lives of our children, the truth is that nearly a third of girls surveyed said they know at least one student at school who has been physically abused by a person they were dating.<sup>1</sup> The good news is that there is a lot we, as parents, can do to step in and help. All it takes is a little time, focus and a commitment to reach out, listen and talk to our teens.*

*No one is better positioned to make a difference in the lives of young people than parents. Your concerns about your child staying clear of abuse, being respectful of others and finding healthy relationships need to be discussed. Your values are the ones that matter most.*

*This handbook can help parents talk with their teenage sons and daughters about the violence that can occur within a relationship and the confusion and pain it causes. The questions in this handbook provide a framework for one, two or ten conversations and can offer important information and insights into dating abuse. These talks can spark a discussion about preventing abuse and give you a chance to share your beliefs about healthy, non-violent relationships with your child. More importantly, these questions can lead to a conversation about what is happening in your teen's relationships and how you can help.*

*Want to reach out to your teen about relationship abuse? All you have to do is ask.*

### **Paul R. Charron**

Paul R. Charron is the chairman and CEO of Liz Claiborne Inc. This handbook is part of the company's 10-year effort to draw attention to the issue of relationship violence.

### **Dominic Cappello**

Dominic Cappello is the author of "Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Violence."

### **Rosalind Wiseman**

Rosalind Wiseman is co-founder of The Empower Program, a non-profit organization that empowers youth to stop the culture of violence.

<sup>1</sup> "Social Control, Verbal Abuse and Violence Among Teenagers: Teen and Parent Opinion" survey, commissioned by The Empower Program, sponsored by Liz Claiborne Inc. and conducted by Knowledge Networks.

## what is relationship abuse?

Dating violence or relationship abuse is a pattern of violent behavior that someone uses against a girlfriend or boyfriend.

Abuse can cause injury and even death, but it doesn't have to be physical. It can take many forms, including threats, emotional abuse, insults, isolation from friends and family, name-calling and controlling what someone wears or with whom they socialize. It can also include sexual abuse. It can happen to anyone, at any age, no matter what their race, religion, level of education or economic background. It can happen in couples that are married, living together or just dating, and it can happen in heterosexual or same-sex relationships.



*The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that more than 90% of all relationship abuse victims are female and most abusers are male. For that reason, this handbook uses “she” when referring to victims and “he” when referring to abusers. Whether the victim is male or female, violence of any kind is unacceptable in relationships.*

## before you begin

Before you talk with your teenager, it is critical that you think about your own experiences with relationships. What kind of behavior and ethics have you role-modeled? What actions are you proud of, and what do you wish you could change? Realistically assess the situation before you take the next step of helping your child.

There is a good probability that your child is already dating — perhaps dating someone more seriously than you realize. Eighty-nine percent of teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18 say they have been in dating relationships.<sup>2</sup> And while it may seem like innocent “puppy love” to you, relationships between teenagers can seem incredibly intense and all-consuming to them. In fact, because they have few previous relationships to compare with, teens may be even more vulnerable to an unhealthy, violent relationship than adults.

Though it may be uncomfortable for you to recognize that your child is in a romantic or sexual relationship, adults must understand and accept

the realities of teen relationships and sexuality in order to make a real impact on the issue of teen dating violence. Don't let your discomfort with the topic blind you to possible warning signs of relationship abuse or stop you from reaching out and communicating with your child.

<sup>2</sup>Children Now/Kaiser Permanente poll, December 1995

## a note to parents with sons

Relationship violence is often perceived as a “girls’ issue,” and many parents understand the importance of talking with their daughters about learning how to stay safe. But every violent relationship has a victim and an abuser — and the vast majority of the time the abuser is male. According to Jackson Katz, founder of Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) and an expert in relationship abuse prevention, it is critical that we talk with our sons about healthy relationships just as we talk with our daughters.



“When it comes to abuse in teen relationships, frequently we react after the fact,” says Katz. “But if we’re going to prevent the abuse before it starts, we need to be more honest about who’s doing it. While young women are capable of acting cruelly or even using violence, the vast majority of abuse in teen relationships is perpetrated by young men. It is not anti-male to say this. It is simply acknowledging reality. Those of us who are in a position to influence young men — including educators, friends and teammates — need to speak up when we see signs that guys we know might be using controlling behaviors with their girlfriends or engaging in any sort of emotional or physical mistreatment. Parents of teenage sons have an especially critical role to play in providing their sons with models of respectful, non-abusive manhood. If they have any reason to suspect that their son might be mistreating his girlfriend or other young women, parents have a special responsibility to address this with him immediately. The conversation might be awkward, but it is imperative that he gets help to deal with his problems as quickly as possible.”

## getting started

Finding the right moment to talk about abuse can seem like a daunting task. We asked Rosalind Wiseman, co-founder of The Empower Program which teaches young people about youth violence prevention, for some key tips on dealing with this delicate, but important conversation.



### Q: WHAT'S A GOOD SETTING TO HAVE THIS CONVERSATION?

First off, never tell your teen you want to talk in front of other people, except maybe your child's other parent or guardian. Take your child out to a coffee shop or for a drive, away from siblings and distractions for both of you. Avoid going to a place where either one of you may run into someone you know. I promise you that you will get answers if you set up a comfortable environment and listen respectfully.

### Q: WHAT SHOULD I HOPE TO GET OUT OF THE CONVERSATION?

There are two goals. The first is having a productive conversation. This means that through the process of your conversation, you want to support your child and confirm that you are a good resource and a non-judgmental listener. The second is giving your child realistic strategies for confronting the problem effectively. You will never accomplish the second goal without the first.

### Q: ARE THERE ANY OTHER NUTS AND BOLTS TIPS ON HAVING THE ACTUAL CONVERSATION?

There are a few things you can keep in mind. Share your own experiences, especially the ones where you made mistakes and learned from them. Describe situations when you were your teen's age. As a general rule, it is better to avoid talking about what you have recently experienced because you need to maintain boundaries — they need a parent figure now, not a friend. Sometimes your child just wants someone who will listen, not someone to jump in and solve all their problems for them. The hard reality is that you can't always fix things for your kids, you can only try to give them the skills and support that set the foundation for doing it themselves.

### Q: HOW CAN I TELL IF MY TEEN MIGHT WANT TO TALK TO ME?

Remember that anytime your teenager wants to talk to you, drop everything and pay attention. Sometimes it is not obvious when he or she

wants to talk. Watch for signs, such as if your teen hangs around where you are but doesn't necessarily say anything, or if your teen says he or she doesn't feel well but there doesn't seem to be anything physically wrong. Notice if your teen tries to get you alone, away from others — for example, if he or she volunteers to drive somewhere with you in the car. If your teen wants to talk to you but also couches it as “no big deal,” don't believe it. Just by bringing it up, he or she is already telling you that it is a big deal.

*i use e-mail  
to get talks going  
with my son.  
i actually get a  
good response.* Joe, father of two

It all begins with a simple question...

### question 1: how are things going?

Starting to talk about abuse can feel awkward at first. Make your first question a general one, rather than one related specifically to dating violence. Jumping directly into such a difficult topic might put your teen on the spot.

Depending on your teen's mood that day, you might hear anything from “okay” to “bad” to a much longer venting of everything that's going wrong.

It's possible that your child will stonewall you, act sullen, refuse to get into a conversation, or even try to start an argument. Says Rosalind Wiseman, “Teenagers are expert button pushers. If this does happen, take a deep breath; remember the goal of the conversation. For example, if you hear, ‘Why do you care all of a sudden? Don't think you can be



parent for a day and I will spill my guts, 'cause that is never happening.' Remember, underneath the provocative tone, your child is telling you something. Beyond the problems he or she may be having with friends, your child wants you around more. Before you go any further, it is critical to acknowledge these feelings. So instead of feeling guilty and/or angry, ask 'Why would you say something like that? I really want to know! Then listen."

## question 2: what are your friends' dating relationships like?

What's the difference between "going together" and "being committed"? How long do your teen's peers stay together? Do they make any kind of commitment to each other? Do kids talk to each other about their feelings for their boyfriends and girlfriends? Are there certain things boys want that girls don't? Are there things girls want in these relationships that boys don't want?



These questions can give you valuable insights into how your teen views relationships. If your child thinks that after a week, two people are committed for



the rest of high school, then you may have some explaining to do about timing and how long it normally takes for people to become intimate emotionally. You may find that your teen has some very set notions about the roles of males and females. A boy may have the mistaken impression that guys are always in control while females are supposed to follow along. You may be happy to hear your teen

thinks mutual respect is a key part of any relationship. You will only find out by asking questions.



- Nearly one quarter of the 14–17 year-olds surveyed know at least one student who has been the victim of dating violence, while 11 percent know multiple victims of dating violence. Thirty percent of these teens have actually witnessed such an event.
- Eighty-one percent of the parents surveyed either believe teen dating violence is not an issue or admit they don't know if it is an issue.
- A majority of parents (54 percent) admit they have not spoken to their child about dating violence.

"Social Control, Verbal Abuse and Violence Among Teenagers: Teen and Parent Opinion" survey, commissioned by The Empower Program, sponsored by Liz Claiborne Inc. and conducted by Knowledge Networks.

### question 3: have you ever seen any kind of abusive behavior between two people who are going out?

You may have to give some examples to get your teen to open up. The examples are your chance to define "abusive behaviors" or "violence" and compare your definition to your teenager's. You may be surprised how your views differ. Here's one sample situation:

*A boy sees his girlfriend talking to another guy, so he pulls her by the arm and yanks her away.*

Would you call this violent? What does your son think about such behavior? Would you be surprised if your daughter said it was "just what guys do" and "no big deal"?

Again, this question can lead to a longer discussion about what each of you feels is an abusive behavior or a threat of violence.

Also, look at the warning signs on the following page from the perspective of a potential abuser. Does your son always make the decisions in his relationship, from what movie the couple will see to when they will go out? Does he have outdated ideas about gender roles that diminish women's power and inflate men's? Have you heard him insult, criticize or even threaten his girlfriend during an argument? No one wants to label their son an "abuser," but don't look the other way if you see red flags. Reach out to help him now, when he needs your support and guidance most.



### WARNING SIGNS

It's not always easy to recognize if a teen is in a violent relationship. Surprisingly, abusers are often charming in public, especially to parents — so pay more attention to how he treats your daughter and less to how polite he may be to you.

Here are some other signs to look for:

11. She apologizes for his behavior and makes excuses for him.
12. She loses interest in activities that she used to enjoy.
13. She stops seeing friends and family members and becomes more and more isolated.
14. When your daughter and her boyfriend are together, he calls her names and puts her down in front of other people.
15. He acts extremely jealous of others who pay attention to her, especially other guys.
16. He thinks or tells your daughter that you (her parents) don't like him.
17. He controls her behavior, checking up on her constantly, calling and paging her, demanding to know who she has been with.
18. She casually mentions his violent behavior, but laughs it off as a joke.
19. You see him violently lose his temper, striking or breaking objects.
10. She often has unexplained injuries, or the explanations she offers don't make sense.

### question 4: why do you think someone would abuse someone they were dating?

Boys repeatedly hear social messages that tell them that in order to be a man, they must be powerful, strong and in control. In relationships, this control can occur as psychological or emotional abuse, threats, possessiveness and jealousy, intimidation and isolation, and actual violence. All too often, this behavior is excused.

This discussion may bring up some uncomfortable disagreements or questions about what you as a parent really believe. What examples is he learning in your house and in your interactions? Be honest and open about your thoughts, questions and answers. Share any experiences you've had in dealing with abusers or abusive behaviors.

## question 5: why might a person stay in an abusive relationship?

There are many reasons why teens might stay in abusive relationships.

- In high school, status and self-esteem are often intricately linked to a teen's relationship. Leaving a relationship, even if there is violence, may make your teen feel like she is losing an integral part of her identity. She may feel that it's better to be in an abusive relationship than in no relationship at all, fearing that she will have no friends or that she will lose her social support system if she breaks up with the abuser.
- She may be in love and want the violence to end, but not the relationship altogether.
- Teens are naturally self-focused. In an abusive relationship, a teen can feel like no one understands the abuser but her. It's "the two of them against the world."
- She might fear punishment — that if you find out, you won't let the couple date any longer. Teens resist authority and naturally crave independence.
- She may not have other, healthy relationships to compare this to, and she may also see abusive behavior modeled at home. She might think this is just what "being in love" is like.
- She might live in a family in which things like this "do not happen," and she feels she has to "handle it herself" or risk bringing shame to the family. She may worry that you will be disappointed in her.

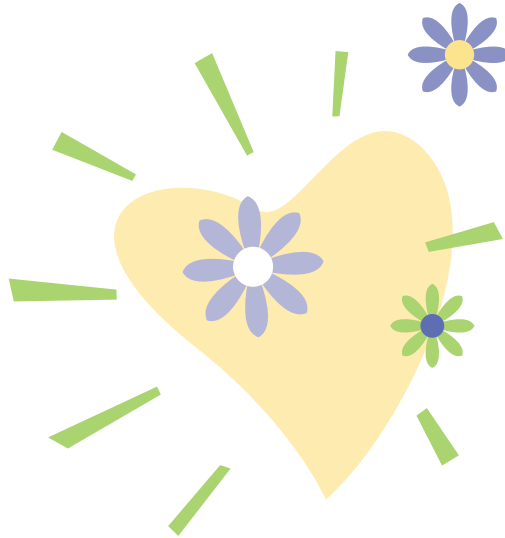
*my daughter says  
insightful things that  
prove she listens.*

Gloria, mother of three

## question 6: what makes a relationship healthy?

Any couple will have arguments. What matters most is that fights remain fair and don't escalate out of control. A healthy relationship is one in which there is mutual respect and open communication of feelings.

The partners have a commitment to making the relationship work, and at the same time they respect each other's individuality and personal boundaries. A healthy relationship is one in which you would not hurt the other person emotionally, physically or sexually. This is an opportunity to talk to your teen about the healthy relationships you've had, including friendships, and what made them good relationships.



## question 7: what can you do if you have a friend who is threatened — or a friend who is abusive?

Ask your child: What should you do if a friend has unexplained bruises? If someone's boyfriend seems rough and uncaring, should you say or do anything? Below are some ways for your teen to respond.

### TALKING TO TEENS WHO ARE ABUSED

Talking to a friend dealing with relationship violence can make an enormous difference to her. She is probably feeling very isolated and alone.

When talking to a friend who might be abused, there are several key things your teen should keep in mind:

Listen to what she has to say, and don't be judgmental. Let her know you are there for her whenever she needs to talk, and that you are worried about her. Let her know that you won't tell anyone she doesn't want you to about her situation — and then keep your word (unless you fear for her physical safety). Be specific about why you are concerned — "I felt bad when I saw him insult you in front of all of us.



He doesn't have the right to treat you that way. What did you think about it?" Let her know about behavior you have seen and how it made you feel. Help her locate information and resources on abuse. Find someone knowledgeable about abuse that she can talk to, and volunteer to go with her.

#### TALKING TO TEENS WHO ABUSE

If you hear a friend joking about "slapping a girlfriend around," what would you do? What if you saw your friend hit his girlfriend?

Most guys who hurt their girlfriends don't consider themselves "abusers." Many are in denial about the severity of their actions. As their friends, it's hard for you to believe it too. But reaching out and talking to a friend you think is being violent in his relationship is truly an act of friendship, though it may seem like the hardest thing you can do.

When talking to a friend who is being abusive, here are some tips your teen can keep in mind:

Be specific about what you saw and how it made you feel. Let your friend know you won't stand by and let the behavior continue. Make sure he realizes that his actions have consequences and he could get into serious trouble — from getting expelled from school to going to jail. Urge him to get help, from a counselor, coach or any trusted adult, and offer to go with him if he wants support. Let him know that you care about him, and that you know he has it in him to change.

*i had a friend who  
died from her  
boyfriend beating  
her so much.* Genese, age 15

## question 8: what kind of messages about dating abuse and relationships do we see in the media?



Ask your kids if they have seen or heard images they find upsetting or that glamorize abuse within relationships. Some might say they see such images but that it's "not a big deal." This is where your values come in. If you think seeing women demeaned in popular media — whether it's a music video, a soap opera or a billboard advertisement — is unhealthy for young people, now is the time to share your values. And this is also a time when your values can inform your family rules about what media is okay to watch or listen to, as well as the kinds of rating systems you will use when letting your kids watch movies, rent videos or buy CDs.

Listen to your child's music and talk about the messages you hear. What posters hang on your teen's walls? Are they heroes whose values you agree with? If not, talk about your feelings with your teen, and find out why negative messages are resonating with him or her. If you feel the messages are unhealthy or potentially destructive, talk about it with your child and explain your views. Listen to what your child has to say. It may tell you a lot about the pressures and social dynamics your teen is facing every day.

Now that you have gotten this far in the discussion and questions, it is time to directly ask your teen about his or her relationships.

## question 9: if your son or daughter is dating someone, ask "how is your relationship going?"

If your teen is not dating someone, ask "When you think about going out with someone, what are some behaviors that would be okay and what are some that you would have a problem with?"



This is your opportunity to discuss your expectations or ideas about dating and relationship abuse. Be prepared for the possibility that there is indeed violence in your son's or daughter's relationship. How will you respond? If your daughter tells you that her boyfriend is hitting her or insulting her, your parental protection instincts are probably going to kick into high gear. Chances are your first thought might be to go out and beat up her boyfriend yourself. Or, you may feel guilty, blaming yourself for not seeing the problem sooner or for not raising your daughter to be strong and immune to such dangers. Before you take any action,

stop. Take a breath and remember who this is really about — not you, but your teen.

Start by letting your daughter know that you love her. Tell her, "I'm so glad you are telling me this. Thank you for trusting me. You can talk to me about it anytime." Expect your daughter to go back and forth in her thoughts towards her boyfriend — ending any relationship takes time, and it can be even harder when abuse is involved. While it may feel frustrating and scary, it is not a good idea to forbid your daughter from seeing her boyfriend. This won't make her safe – it will just make her stop confiding in you about the problem. She is the one who is going to have to separate herself from this relationship, not you. Ask her, "What can we do to help you?" She might not have the answer, but she needs to feel in control. Find a counselor who specializes in teen dating violence and continue to support her by being loving, open and non-judgmental. Contact a domestic violence agency or call the **National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE)** for advice on how to handle your daughter's particular situation.

If your son confides in you that he has become violent in his relationship, you need to support him as well. Just as with a daughter, let him know that you love him, and that you don't think he is a terrible person. Nevertheless, be firm in letting him know that his behavior has to change.



Offer to help him by locating community resources that can provide counseling. Ask him questions and listen to him about how he thinks things got to this point in his relationship. Be prepared to look honestly at your own actions and the behaviors you have modeled in your home, and take responsibility if you have instilled in your son ideas about men and women that may have influenced his abusive behavior. Let him know that he can come and talk to you about this anytime without fear of punishment. Helping your son now is one of the most important things you as a parent will ever do for him.

### question 10: where can you go to find help if you or a friend needs it?

Where does your teen look for help? Listen to his or her ideas about resources before suggesting your own. If they don't feel comfortable talking with you, let them know it is okay if they talk with another trusted adult. This could be a relative, friend of the family, clergy member, teacher, school counselor, coach or even the police. A local domestic violence program or the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE) can tell you if there is a program or support group in your community.

#### AFTER THE QUESTIONS — AND ANSWERS

Congratulations! If you have begun to talk about abusive relationships or discuss even a few questions with your teen, you are doing great. Take the time you need to reflect on your child's answers and overall reactions to your questions. How well do the two of you communicate about tough issues? When can you have this discussion again? Are there opportunities as you watch TV or listen to the radio to continue this dialogue?

Remember, communication is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing part of your relationship with your child. Revisit these questions over time, and keep checking in with your teenager. Knowing that you are there for them, to listen, talk to, support and accept them as they navigate the challenging waters of adolescence, can put them way ahead of the game in forming healthy, respectful, non-violent relationships. We hope the questions in this handbook will serve as a guide to begin these important conversations. With a little time, energy, compassion and engaged listening, you can make the most of your role in the life of your son or daughter.



## resources

Now, here's a question for you: Do you feel that you want more information about dating violence? If so, you have resources. There are people in your community who want to help.

If you or your teen knows someone who is in an abusive relationship and needs help, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233) or TTY 1-800-787-3224 for the hearing impaired.

### OTHER ORGANIZATIONS THAT CAN HELP INCLUDE:

#### *The "Can We Talk?" Program*

*National Education Association Health Information Network*  
1201 16th Street, NW  
Suite 521  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-822-7570  
[www.canwetalk.org](http://www.canwetalk.org)

#### *The Empower Program*

1312 8th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001  
202-882-2800  
Fax: 202-234-1901  
[www.empowerprogram.org](http://www.empowerprogram.org)  
email: [empower@empowered.org](mailto:empower@empowered.org)

#### *Family Violence Prevention Fund*

383 Rhode Island Street  
Suite 304  
San Francisco, CA 94103-5133  
415-252-8900  
Fax: 415-252-8991  
[www.fvpf.org](http://www.fvpf.org)  
email: [fund@fvpf.org](mailto:fund@fvpf.org)

#### *Girls Incorporated*

*National Resource Center*  
441 West Michigan Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
317-634-7546

#### *Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women*

*In Touch with Teens Program*  
605 West Olympic Blvd.  
Suite 400  
Los Angeles, CA 90015  
213-955-9090  
TTY: 213-955-9095  
Fax: 213-955-9093  
[www.lacaaw.org](http://www.lacaaw.org)  
email: [info@lacaaw.org](mailto:info@lacaaw.org)

#### *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*

P.O. Box 18749  
Denver, CO 80218  
303-839-1852  
Fax: 303-831-9251  
[www.ncadv.org](http://www.ncadv.org)

#### *Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence and National Resource Center*

6400 Flank Drive  
Suite 1300  
Harrisburg, PA 17112  
1-800-932-4632  
Fax: 717-671-8149  
[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

ALSO, VISIT THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES FOR  
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

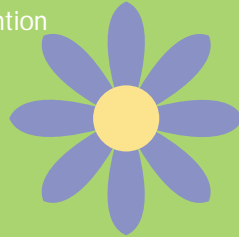
[www.abanet.org/domviol/](http://www.abanet.org/domviol/)  
[www.menovercomingviolence.org](http://www.menovercomingviolence.org)  
[www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)  
[www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)  
[www.usdoj.gov/domesticviolence.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/domesticviolence.htm)  
[www.vday.org](http://www.vday.org)

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*Willa Shalit*, Executive Director, V-Day  
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*Copies of this handbook can be downloaded by visiting  
[www.lovesnotabuse.com](http://www.lovesnotabuse.com). To order an additional handbook  
or other educational materials, call 1-800-449-STOP (7867).*

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