

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DATING VIOLENCE WITH YOUR STUDENTS: A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL STAFF

Teen dating violence is a silent epidemic. In one study, the majority of teen dating violence victims told no one about their victimization—fewer than 22% told a peer, and only 5% told an adult. The reasons that teens are reluctant to reach out to adults vary considerably. They may fear no one will believe them or that they will be blamed for the abuse. Many fear retaliation from the perpetrator. The cycle of abuse fuels these feelings of shame and vulnerability and further isolates victims from support and services.

Educators can work to end this harmful cycle by reaching out to students who may be struggling in an abusive relationship. When educators respond to incidents of dating violence they convey to students that school is a safe place where violence is not tolerated and human dignity is valued.

Dating violence, like any form of family violence, is complex. Starting a conversation will not “end” or “fix” the problem for the student. But, a talk with you could empower him or her to speak openly about the problem and seek the help they need.

Talking to teens about dating violence is a skill that any educator can master. What follows is a 5 step process to help you speak effectively with students about dating violence: How to approach a student who may be at risk, directly state your concern, and respond to what they tell you.

Read each step carefully and picture yourself doing and saying each procedure. You may want to team up with a colleague or a friend to help you role play around different scenarios. As you practice, these procedures will become more familiar and you will be more effective.

STEP 1: Set the Stage—Put the student at ease by creating a safe environment.

A safe space can go a long way towards making a student feel comfortable to talk about an abusive relationship. Confidentiality and kindness are the cornerstones of a safe environment.

1. **Convey Confidentiality**—This is a sensitive conversation that should take place between you and the student. It is neither necessary nor desirable for other students to present—even best friends and *especially* the alleged perpetrator—as this could compromise victim privacy and safety.

2. **Kindness**—Invite honest conversation using a friendly, calm tone when you speak. Smile, offer the student a seat.

STEP 2: Inquire—Direct, kind language conveys compassion and gravity.

Speak directly and warmly. Let the student know that you take both his wellness and the issue of dating violence seriously. Doing this conveys the trust that will be necessary to foster an honest, constructive dialogue. An effective inquiry is kind, direct, brief, and has 3 parts:

1. **A specific and succinct description of what you saw.** Note time and place: “*David, yesterday when you were leaving class I noticed that Leticia grabbed you by the arm.*”

2. A connection of that act and the definition of abuse: *“When one person in a relationship hurts their partner or tries to make them feel afraid, it’s called abuse, and it’s never ok.”*

3. A statement of your concern followed by an invitation for further discussion: *I’m concerned for your safety. Would you like to talk about it?”*

STEP 3: Listen.

The fear that no one will listen keeps many teen victims of violence from reaching out to adults. So, at this point, active listening is absolutely critical to achieving your goal. Active listening comprises the following:

- a. **Eye contact**—Nothing says undivided attention like consistent eye contact.
- b. **Silence**—Allow the student to speak, do not interrupt. If you wish to convey understanding or sympathy do so with non-verbal cues (such as slight nod of the head or a smile).

STEP 4: Respond—Validate and Convey Empathy

Once the student has finished speaking, it is important that you validate what they say and convey your empathy. This must happen whether or not the student discloses abuse.

If the student does not disclose:

“Thank you. Your safety is important to me. If you feel unsafe, I’m here for you.”

Resist the urge to push or pry, if there is abuse, the student must choose when and how to talk about it. Your job is to validate, convey empathy, and keep the door open.

If the student does disclose:

Validate: Let the student know you believe them (even if you don’t). *“I believe you.”*

Convey empathy: Let the student know you care about them
“The abuse you have suffered is not your fault” “You are not alone”

STEP 5: Refer—Direct the student towards school and community resources

Utilize your list of statewide resources for victims of dating violence and abuse. Know your school’s policy for reporting dating violence. Let them know that there is help available if they decide they want it.

Taken from "A Guide To Preventing Bullying, Teen Dating Violence, and Sexual Violence in Rhode Island Schools" developed by the Rhode Island Department of Education, in accordance with the Lindsay Ann Burke Act of 2007. Found at www.ride.ri.gov