

## How to Recognize Unhealthy Relationships

You can play an important role in helping your students recognize abuse and get the help they need. Not sure if one of your students is in trouble? If you know the signs to look for, you might be able to recognize an abusive relationship before it becomes dangerous. To start, listen to your instincts - you probably wouldn't be worried without good reason.

### Warning Signs and Red Flags

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- ▄ Problems with school attendance, particularly if this is a new problem
- ▄ Lack of interest in former extracurricular activities
- ▄ Stops seeing friends and becomes more isolated
- ▄ Sudden request to change schedule
- ▄ Change in appearance
- ▄ They are depressed or anxious, or you notice changes in their personality
- ▄ Unexplained changes in behavior, grades or quality of schoolwork
- ▄ Little social contact with anyone but their partner
- ▄ They have unexplained marks or injuries, or the explanations they offer don't make sense
- ▄ Apologizes for their partner's behavior and makes excuses for their partner's inappropriate behavior
- ▄ Partner acts extremely possessive or jealous of others who pay attention to them
- ▄ New disciplinary problems at school, such as bullying other students or acting out
- ▄ When they are together, their boyfriend/girlfriend calls them names, belittles or puts them down in front of others
- ▄ Partner checking up on them constantly, calling and texting them
- ▄ Partner checks cell phones, emails or social networks without permission
- ▄ They are constantly worried about making their partner angry
- ▄ They casually mention his or her violent behavior or explosive temper, but laugh it off as a joke
- ▄ Partner exhibits extreme jealousy or insecurity
- ▄ You see their partner lose their temper, striking or breaking objects

If one of your students is being abused, it can be difficult to know what to do. You may fear for their safety. Don't let your discomfort with the topic blind you to possible warning signs of relationship abuse or stop you from reaching out and offering support.

# Have the Conversation

## How to prepare:

Look through the resources on [reachoutwny.org](http://reachoutwny.org) and learn as much as you can about relationship abuse, red flags and warning signs. Consider reaching out for additional resources or guidance from trained advocates. Document every incident or red flag. It can help you and your student see a pattern.

Find a quiet and private space, and allow enough time to listen. Don't just pull them aside in the hall. Use a paper or assignment as an excuse to meet with them. Close the door. Keep it low key. Don't push it if your student is not ready to talk. Try again another time.

## What to do/say:

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- Privacy and confidentiality are key. Let them know that whatever you talk about will stay between the two of you.
- Be supportive and listen without judgment. Try not to speak negatively about the abusive partner. This may put the victim on the defense, because they have already been manipulated to believe that the abuse is their fault. Alternatively, they may feel embarrassed or ashamed that they "allowed" the abuse to happen.
- Start the conversation with questions like "How are things going?," "Have you seen any kind of abusive behavior with your friends or peers?," "What does that look like?," "Why do you think one person would abuse the other?" and "What makes a relationship healthy?"
- Talk about behaviors or red flags you've seen. "I'm concerned that he seems to control where you are allowed to go and who you talk to." Ask them if they've noticed the same and how that behavior makes them feel. Point out that what's happening isn't "normal."
- Listen and believe them. Say things like, "I'm sorry this is happening to you," "I know it's complicated," and "You don't deserve this." Make it clear that you don't blame them and that you respect their choices. Be careful not to minimize their situation due to age, inexperience or the length of their relationship.
- What you see or hear may make you frustrated and upset. If this happens try to stay calm. Remind them that he or she deserves a healthy, violence-free relationship and that they didn't cause this, abuse is NEVER appropriate and NEVER their fault.
- Listen, but acknowledge that you are not an expert. Empower them with the tools to act when they're ready.
- Be patient. On average, it takes someone seven times to leave the relationship for good. Continue offering support in any way you can. Believing and supporting them can be a major factor in helping them stay safe or helping your student find their own way to end the unhealthy relationship when they're ready.

## What NOT to do/say:

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- Don't try to control the situation. Threatening to report the abusive behavior might shut your student down. That might be your school's policy, so be honest and upfront with them about that. Help your student understand administrators are just as concerned for their safety as you are. Point them to resources that can be confidential.
- Do not try to fix this by going to the student's partner or friends. That can inflame the situation. You want to build their trust.
- Don't blame or judge—with your words OR your body language. Don't make your student feel like they brought this on. They already get "blame" in their current unhealthy relationship. They did not cause this. It's not their fault.
- Don't make demands or offer advice. Never start a sentence with "You should" or "You shouldn't." Keep in mind that relationship abuse is all about power and control. Any attempt to swoop in and make demands could backfire and make them shut down.
- Don't wait for them to come to you.
- Don't try to fix this by yourself. There are people who are trained and see this every day. Find resources and people who can help not just the victim, but you too.

## Need More Support? | Reach Out

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If your student isn't ready to openly communicate with you about his or her relationship, let them know there are free, confidential services and trained individuals available to answer questions and help avoid unhealthy relationships. Pass on the information below, but let them know you are always available to talk.

***If at any time you feel that you or your student are in immediate danger, call 911.***

These websites and hotlines are available 24/7 to help victims and survivors of domestic violence. Call for free, confidential information from trained advocates:

Family Justice Center of Erie County  
716-558-SAFE (7233)  
[www.fjcSAFE.org](http://www.fjcSAFE.org)

National Domestic Violence Hotline  
800-799-SAFE (7233)  
800-787-3224 TTY  
[www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)



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