

## How to Recognize Unhealthy Relationships

You can play an important role in helping your child recognize abuse and get the help they need.

Not sure if he or she 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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- ▮ They are depressed or anxious, or you notice changes in their personality
- ▮ Stops seeing friends and family members and becomes more isolated
- ▮ Change in appearance
- ▮ Apologizes for their partner's behavior and makes excuses for them
- ▮ Loss of interest in activities that she or he used to enjoy
- ▮ Partner controls your child's behavior, checking up on them constantly, calling and texting them, demanding to know who they have been with
- ▮ Partner checks cell phones, emails or social networks without permission
- ▮ When they are together, their boyfriend/girlfriend calls them names, belittles or puts them down in front of others
- ▮ Partner acts extremely possessive or jealous of others who pay attention to your teen, especially guys or girls they perceive as competition
- ▮ Partner thinks or tells your teen that you (parents) or friends don't like them
- ▮ They are constantly worried about making their partner angry
- ▮ They have unexplained marks or injuries, or the explanations they offer don't make sense
- ▮ 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
- ▮ Partner abuses other people or animals

If someone you love is being abused, it can be so difficult to know what to do. Your instinct may be to save them, but it is not that easy. 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.

# Have the Conversation

## How to prepare:

Look through the resources on [reachoutwny.org](https://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 child see a pattern. Find a private space where you can talk, away from siblings or anyone else who might overhear your conversation. Keep it low key. Don't push it if your child 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.
- Start the conversation with questions like "How are things going?", "What are your friends' relationships like?", "Have you seen any kind of abusive behavior with your friends or peers?", "Why do you think one person would abuse the other?" and "Why might a person stay in an abusive relationship?"
- Talk about behaviors or red flags you've seen. Tell them you have noticed certain things that concern you. Ask them if they've noticed the same and how that behavior makes them feel. Point out that what's happening isn't "normal." Everyone deserves a healthy and safe relationship.
- Listen and believe them. Say things like, "I'm sorry this is happening to you," "I know it's complicated," "You don't deserve this," and "This doesn't change how I feel about you." Make it clear that you don't blame your teen and that you respect his or her choices. Be careful not to minimize your child's 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. If you give them an ultimatum like "you can't see him/her anymore," that closes the door of communication.
- 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.
- Focus on your child, not their partner. Even if they stay with their partner, it's important they still feel comfortable talking to you about it.
- 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 a relationship for good.

## What NOT to do/say:

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- Don't try to control the situation. As a parent, your instinct is to jump in and protect your child. You can easily see the solution and you want to just fix it. Remember you can't "rescue" them.
- Don't blame or judge—with your words OR your body language. Don't make your teen feel like they brought this on. They already get "blame" in their current unhealthy relationship. Your daughter or son 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 of your child could backfire and make them shut down.
- Don't confront their abuser.
- 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 son or daughter isn't ready to openly communicate with you about their relationship, let him or her know there are free, confidential services and trained individuals available to answer their questions. 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 child are in immediate danger, call 911.***

Advocates are available to support you and your child at any point along the way. 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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