

TOUGH TALK

What boys need to know
about relationship abuse



WHY a booklet just for boys?

Violence in relationships can be a difficult topic for anyone to talk about, especially men. Because it has traditionally been considered a “women’s issue,” many men feel as if they have no positive, proactive way to help stop it.

But men play a crucial role in guiding the boys in their lives into manhood and into positive relationships as they grow older – teaching them about respect, showing them how to deal with conflict, and setting examples of how to build healthy relationships.

Boys see and hear countless messages all around them telling them to “be strong,” “act tough,” and “be a man.” How will they know what it really means to “be a man” in a relationship if they don’t have positive role models?

When I was growing up, no one talked about these issues – particularly not men. Today, that has changed. – Across the country, more and more men – in business, in sports, from all walks of life – are speaking up and saying that violence is not part of being a man.

Whether you realize it or not, young people want you to talk to them. Our research indicates that almost half of boys and girls surveyed say that they want to know more about relationship abuse – what it means and how to stop it. In this same survey, 31% of teens aged 13–17 reported they or a friend experienced dating violence.

So, if you’re a father, coach, teacher, uncle, older brother or mentor, it is time to talk “man to man” about relationship abuse with the boys in your life. This booklet will provide you with practical ways to start the conversation today – and make a difference in all of our lives tomorrow.

WHAT is relationship abuse?

Dating violence or relationship abuse is a pattern of power and control that one person uses against another. It can include violent behaviors such as hitting, punching and slapping, but it doesn’t have to be physical. It can involve verbal or emotional abuse, such as threats, insults, isolation from friends and family, and controlling what someone wears or with whom they socialize. It can also include sexual abuse, which can range from unwanted sexual contact all the way to rape. **It can happen to anyone, at any age, no matter what race, religion, level of education or economic background.**

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that more than 85% of all relationship abuse victims are female and most abusers are male. Because of this, victims are referred to as *she* and abusers are referred to as *he*. This handbook is designed to help men talk with boys about relationships. Whether the victim is male or female or the relationship is heterosexual or same-sex, violence of any kind in relationships is unacceptable.

When to Reach Out

Considering that nearly 90% of teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18 say they have been in dating relationships* it is important to start teaching them about relationship abuse early. Even if a boy is not dating yet, he will be soon, and his values and behaviors are being shaped right now.

Before You Bring It Up

Before you start a conversation about abuse, examine your own values and behaviors. Think back to when you started dating. What were your first relationships like? What problems came up? How did you resolve conflict in the relationship?

Think about what a healthy relationship is to you. How do you deal with conflict in your own relationships today? Kids learn more about ways to treat others from watching you than from anything you might say.

Remember that you don’t have to be perfect to be a role model. You just have to be willing to be honest about your own experiences if you want the boy you talk with to be honest about his own.

* Children Now/Kaiser Permanente poll, December 1995

Where Should You Have the Talk?

If you want him to talk openly with you, bring it up when the two of you are alone. You could be waiting with him for his ride home from basketball practice...making dinner...talking before class starts. The main thing is that you have privacy, and enough time to discuss whatever issues might come up.

What Should You Expect Him To Say?

Remember, this isn't meant to be a fishing expedition or an accusation – it's just a conversation. Consider if a success if you gain a greater understanding of where he is emotionally and what his thoughts are on the topic, and if he learns the same about you.

TALKING man to man

The questions below, which are intended as guidelines, should give you a sense of how he feels about dating and if he has fixed ideas about gender roles. **Try to avoid critical or judgmental comments, and don't make it a lecture.** Listen to what he says. And then talk to him about what you hear.

Begin by asking general questions.

"How are things at school?"

"How are your friends doing?"

Sometimes it's easier to talk about what other people are doing than what he is doing himself.

"Are many of your friends dating?"

"Are they very serious?"

"Do your friends mostly hang out in groups or alone?"

"What do you think of their relationships?"

"Do boys and girls generally have the same ideas or expectations about what going out means?"

YOU MAY BE SURPRISED AT WHAT HE THINKS IS "NORMAL" BEHAVIOR.

If you know he is seeing someone, ask him about it.

"How are things going?"

"What do you like doing together?"

"What do you like best about the relationship?"

"Do you usually see eye to eye?"

"Do you ever argue?"

"How do you work it out when you disagree?"

Once you both are comfortable, go ahead and bring up the subject of abuse, but don't be surprised if it takes more than one conversation to get this far.

"Do you understand what relationship abuse is?"

"Have you ever seen any kind of abuse between two people who care about each other?"

"What about abuse that may not have been physical?"

If he says he hasn't seen abuse in relationships, give him some examples from current events, movies or by recreating situations that you or he may have witnessed.

Has he seen a guy saying things that put his girlfriend down or embarrass her? What about yelling at her or telling her what to do or what to wear? Making all the decisions in the relationship? Pushing a girl, yanking her by the arm, slapping her? Threatening her? Always acting jealous or checking up on her? Pressuring her to have sex?

Does he consider these behaviors abusive? You may be surprised at what he thinks is “normal” behavior. Now is your chance to tell him what you think is right.

TELL HIM WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS

“Why do you think someone would abuse a person they were going out with?”

Most young people might not know why their friends could become violent in a relationship – except that they were “mad.” Discuss the kinds of pressure society puts on guys: real men don’t cry, they better be tough, know how to fight, be the breadwinner, play sports even when they are hurt, always be in control – especially in their relationships. Point out that often boys learn it’s okay to be happy or angry, but not to feel sad, needy, weak, confused, scared or powerless. **Help him to understand that many of the movies he and his friends watch and the music they listen to send messages that say to be a man they must be strong – but that being strong does not mean dominating your partner.**

Tell him what you think it means to be a man. If you feel comfortable, share any stories you may have about dealing with men in your life – friends or family members – who have had problems with controlling behaviors or violence in their relationships.

MAN. TO BE A

“Why do you think someone would keep going out with a person who was abusing them?”

Boys (and society in general) often look to the victim in a violent relationship and ask, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” There are lots of reasons a person might not leave right away. Leaving any relationship is a process, and it can be even harder in a relationship where there is abuse. **Violence usually doesn’t come out of the blue – it follows a history of verbal and emotional abuse that has chipped away at the victim’s self-esteem.** Once she doesn’t feel good about herself, she may be more likely to believe someone else who tells her that she doesn’t have value. Remember, she probably doesn’t have many relationships to compare this one to. Maybe she thinks this is what “being in love” is like.

There are other reasons that make it hard to leave: she really cares for the other person, and wants the violence to end, but not the relationship. She may think that she can change him, or believes him when he promises to stop. He may have threatened to hurt her or himself if she leaves. She might be very scared of him, or feel peer pressure to stay together. There’s a lot of shame in this society around admitting you are being abused. It takes a lot of courage to leave an abusive relationship.

When you bring up relationship violence, you never know what might come out. What if you learn he is abusive in his own relationship?

Be prepared to talk about what he reveals. You may find out that he — or a friend of his — is in an abusive relationship. Don't look the other way. You might be upset or disappointed, but now is the time he needs your help the most.

If you believe he is being abusive, ask him how he thinks things got to this point. Let him know that you love and support him, and that you believe he can change. Offer to go with him to a counselor or other support services. See the resources list at the back of this book for places that can help. Make sure he knows he can talk to you about this at any time, without fear of punishment.

If he believes a friend is being abusive or abused, let him know it is not okay and offer to go with him to a counselor or other support services to learn what else he can do.

What if he discloses that he is being abused?

While most victims of relationship abuse are female, boys can be emotionally or physically abused as well. This can be extremely tough for them, because there is even more shame associated with being an abused male, and support services may be harder to find. Boys can be abused by their girlfriends, and they can also be abused by another boy if they are in a same-sex relationship. Either way, let them know that the abuse is not their fault, and they have nothing to feel ashamed of. See the resources list or call a local domestic violence agency or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE for referrals to places that can help.

**WHILE EACH
SITUATION IS UNIQUE,
IT IS IMPORTANT
NOT TO LOSE SIGHT
OF THE VICTIM.
CONSULT YOUR LOCAL
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
AGENCY FOR
RECOMMENDATIONS
ON HOW TO HELP.**

What if he doesn't want to talk to you at all?

If he doesn't want to talk to you about relationship abuse, that doesn't mean he hasn't listened to what you've said or won't want to talk about it at another time.

You can also see if he would be more comfortable talking with someone else. It could be a coach, an uncle, a family friend or an older brother. It could also be a woman. The most important thing is that he talks to a responsible adult he can trust.

Opening the lines of communication by talking more often and openly about other aspects of his life may make it easier to bring up this topic. Ask him about school, his friends, his interests. Once you have a history of communicating with each other, he may open up to you about relationship abuse in the future.

WHEN THE CONVERSATION IS OVER – KEEP TALKING.

Teaching boys about healthy relationships is not a one-time event. Bring it up again, and make sure he knows it's always okay to come to you if he's got something on his mind. **It's an honor and a responsibility when a boy looks to you as a role model and trusts you enough to ask you for advice.** Make sure you let him know — through your words and through your actions — what it really means to “be a man.”

RESOURCES

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

Other organizations that can help include:

Break the Cycle
P.O. Box 64996
Los Angeles, CA 90064
1-888-988-TEEN
Phone: 310-286-3366
Fax: 310-286-3386
www.break-the-cycle.org

Family Violence Prevention Fund
383 Rhode Island Street, Suite #304
San Francisco, CA 94103-5133
Phone: 415-252-8900
Fax: 415-252-8991
www.endabuse.org

Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community
University of Minnesota, School of Social Work
290 Peters Hall
1404 Gortner Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108-6142
1-877-NIDVAAC (643-8222)
Phone: 612-624-5357
Fax: 612-624-9201
www.dvinststitute.org

Men Can Stop Rape
P.O. Box 57144
Washington, DC 20037
Phone: 202-265-6530
Fax: 202-265-4362
Email: info@mencanstoprape.org
www.mencanstoprape.org

Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP)
Northeastern University's
Center for the Study of Sport in Society
360 Huntington Avenue, Suite 161 CP
Boston, MA 02115-5000
Phone: 617-373-4025
Fax: 617-373-4966 / 2092
www.sportinsociety.org/mvp

National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence
P.O. Box 672, Triborough Station
New York, NY 10035
Phone: 646-672-1404 or 1-800-342-9908
Fax: 646-672-0360 or 1-800-216-2404
www.dvalianza.org

SafePlace
P.O. Box 19454
Austin, TX 78760
Phone: 512-267-SAFE (512-267-7233)
Fax: 512-385-0662
Email: nationalsafeplace@ymcabouisville.org
www.austin-safeplace.org

Sports Leadership Institute
Levermore Hall, Room 303
Adelphi University
Garden City, NY 11530
Phone: 516-877-4323
Email: sportsleadership@adelphi.edu
www.adelphi.edu/communityservices/sli/

The Empower Program
4420 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 250
Washington, DC 20008
Phone: 202-686-1908
Fax: 202-686-1951
www.empowered.org

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All of the handbooks in this series, including copies
of this handbook, can be ordered by calling 1-800-449-STOP (7867).
Handbooks can also be downloaded from our website at

www.loveisnotabuse.com

Love Is Not Abuse

Liz Claiborne Inc.
1441 Broadway
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**FAMILY VIOLENCE
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