Thunder Bay District Health Unit

Youth Dating Violence: Toolkit for Parents

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YOUTH DATING VIOLENCE IS A SERIOUS HEALTH ISSUE

Parenting teens can sometimes feel like navigating uncharted waters. This is especially true as they begin exploring dating relationships. The adolescent years are critical for developing a sense of identity and learning to build healthy relationships. All this happens while going through major physical, mental, emotional, and social changes. Unfortunately, experiencing dating violence during this time can have serious and lasting effects. Studies show that youth who've experienced dating violence are more likely to perpetrate or experience intimate partner violence (IPV) as adults. They also struggle with more depression, mental health problems, and substance misuse in later life.

Talking to your teens about healthy & unhealthy relationships can reduce their risk of experiencing or perpetrating IPV in the future.

Youth dating violence (YDV) can have a big impact. So, it's essential to know how common it is in Canada. Parents and caregivers can learn to spot the signs early and teach healthy relationship skills and behaviours. Opening up lines of communication with your teens about what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like is key. It will help them understand boundaries, respect, and empathy, setting them up for safer and healthier connections in the future.

These conversations might be challenging, but they're so important. We hope this toolkit will help.

4 in 10

youth over age 15 report experiencing dating violence

43%

of *all* incidents of dating violence involve youth 15-24

10x

girls experience YDV 10 times more often than boys

TYPES OF YOUTH DATING VIOLENCE

Understanding the many types of youth dating violence (YDV) is key. It helps us recognize and address unhealthy behaviours in relationships. Some actions, like using technology for sexual abuse, might not be obvious. Still, these categories help us grasp the different ways dating violence can happen. It's common for more than one type of dating violence to occur in an unhealthy or abusive relationship. Coercive control uses patterns of control or abuse to cause fear. This is especially harmful.

Relationships are on a continuum from healthy to unhealthy to abusive.

Physical

use or threat of physical force, such as hitting, kicking, or attacking with a weapon

Sexual

Limits a person's sexual agency. This includes unwanted sexual contact, forced sex, or restricting birth control.

Emotional/Psychological

manipulation, and controlling behaviours, such as insulting, threatening, isolating, & stalking.

Cyber

Uses technology for abuse. This includes monitoring social media, online threats, harassment, and sexting coercion.

IMPACTS & RISKS OF YDV

- Depressive symptoms
- Suicidality
- Increased anxiety
- Trauma symptoms
- Problematic substance use
- STIs & unwanted pregnancy
- Injury
- Emotional disregulation
- Ongoing violence or IPV
- Lower academic outcomes

Dating violence is a human rights issue.

10 SIGNS OF AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

1. **INTENSITY**
   Expressing extreme emotions and overwhelming behaviour.
2. **MANIPULATION**
   Attempting to control another's decisions, actions, or emotions.
3. **SABOTAGE**
   Deliberately damaging someone's reputation or success.
4. **VOLITILITY**
   Unpredictable reactions causing fear, confusion, or intimidation.
5. **DEFLECTING RESPONSIBILITY**
   Repeatedly justifying unhealthy behaviour.
6. **POSSESSIVENESS**
   Attempting to control another's social circle and activities.
7. **GUILTING**
   Making someone feel responsible for their actions or happiness.
8. **BELITTLING**
   Intentionally causing someone to feel bad about themselves.
9. **ISOLATION**
   Isolating someone from friends, family, or others.
10. **BETRAYAL**
    Being disloyal or intentionally dishonest.

SIGNS OF VICTIMIZATION:

- **Changes in appearance or behaviour**, like wearing baggier clothes or withdrawing from friends.
- **Passive or withdrawn behaviour**, frequent bruising, or signs of self-harm.
- **Unbalanced relationships** with constant checking in, excuses for partner's behaviour, or extreme jealousy.
- **Belittling or name-calling** by the partner, losing friendships, or isolation from peers.
- **School-related changes** such as missing classes, anxiety about partner's presence, or struggling academically.

Identifying youth dating violence victimization isn't always easy but there are signs.

YOUTH DATING VIOLENCE HAS NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON PERPETRATORS

Intervening early is essential if your child is behaving in unhealthy or violent ways in their relationships. Here's what you need to know:

- Perpetrators of dating violence use power and aggression to harm or control others. But, they need healthy relationship solutions too.
- If aggressive behaviours aren't fixed, youth may resort to violence to reach their goals. This can lead to a lifetime of bad relationships and future violence.
- People who commit YDV face higher risks of crime, behaviour issues, and academic challenges.
- Perpetrators face big impacts on mental and physical health. These include depression, suicidality, substance abuse, and risky sex.

SIGNS OF TDV PERPETRATION

Navigating our teens' dating relationships can be overwhelming. This is especially true if we notice concerning behaviours. Remember, your child isn't "bad," but they do need your guidance and support. Here are some signs to watch for:

- Controlling how a partner spends time or behaves
- Restricting a partner's contact with friends and family
- Criticizing and demeaning behaviour
- Controlling how a partner dresses or behaves
- Unwanted touching or pressure into sexual activity
- Extreme jealousy or insecurity
- Explosive temper or mood swings
- Threatening behaviour towards a partner

If you notice signs of YDV, addressing them early and offering support is essential.

HOW TO SUPPORT

Youth often fear confrontations from parents and caregivers when disclosing dating violence. This fear can stop them from seeking help. We want to protect our children. But, it's important to respond in a supportive way. This way, they will keep sharing and stay connected to trusted adults. Here's how.

1. **Listen without judgment:** Listen carefully without judging or questioning their actions. Acknowledge their courage in speaking up.
2. **Avoid blaming:** Don't suggest mutual responsibility. Ensure the victim doesn't feel blamed.
3. **Respect their choices:** Avoid derogatory terms for the abuser. Encourage your child to discuss options and develop plans together. Respectfully listen and help them assess their choices.
4. **Be clear about confidentiality limits:** Tell your child about situations where you must report harm, danger, or crime due to legal duties.
5. **Keep it discreet:** Refrain from interacting with the abuser.
6. **Make the conversation normal:** Tell your child that YDV is a known issue. There are supports and resources available.
7. **Find appropriate supports and referrals:** Connect them with relevant resources and support systems. For more information, visit healthyyouthrelationships.ca

Those who perpetrate, those who are victimized, and those who witness YDV, all need support

TRUE OR FALSE?

The best way to intervene with youth experiencing dating violence is to tell them to break up with their partner.

FALSE. While this might feel like the right thing to do, it often results in increased attachment to the relationship and isolation. Instead, work on building trust and openness so they feel comfortable sharing, and you are able to discuss the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

PREVENTION STARTS EARLY

Youth dating violence perpetration is often part of a larger pattern of aggression that can start early and persist over a lifetime. But there's hope! Here's how you can make a difference:

1. **Model constructive behaviour.** Demonstrate peaceful and respectful communication. Parents and caregivers should teach children these behaviours by example. Seeing violence between caregivers increases the risk of children using or accepting violence in their own relationships.
2. **Educate on healthy relationships and consent.** Talk to your child about good relationships. Discuss consent, boundaries, and their rights over their own body. Ensure they understand that violent behaviour is never okay and that they have control over their decisions and actions. These conversations should start early and continue as they grow.
3. **Intervene early and reinforce healthy peer interactions.** Address harmful beliefs and behaviours before they escalate. Identify signs of aggression and stop negative behaviours like bullying by teaching healthy conflict resolution.
4. **Provide a safe space for communication:** Create a supportive environment for your child to discuss relationships and sexuality. Let them know they can come to you with any concerns, emphasizing their safety as your priority.
Educate them about safe sex practices and the risks of sexual behaviour.

Teaching empathy, the ability to understand & be sensitive to others' feelings, is essential to preventing YDV & future intimate partner violence

Teaching youth about consent can prevent victimization & perpetration

CONSENT MUST BE

MUTUAL Agreed upon by all partners
SPECIFIC it is clear what activity a person is consenting to
ONGOING retractable and confirmed every step of the way
VOLUNTARY it is given freely, not under pressure
ENTHUSIASTIC there is a desire and excitement
SOBER not under the influence of alcohol or drugs

10 SIGNS OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

1. **COMFORTABLE PACE**
   The relationship moves at a speed that feels enjoyable for each person.
2. **HONESTY**
   Partner's can be truthful and candid without fearing another's response
3. **RESPECT**
   Partner's respect each other's beliefs and love each other for who they are.
4. **KINDNESS**
   Partners are caring, empathetic, and supportive.
5. **HEALTHY CONFLICT**
   Openly and respectfully discussing issues and disagreements.
6. **TRUST**
   Confidence that partner's won't harm one another or the relationship.
7. **INDENPENDENCE**
   Having space for partner's to be themselves outside of the relationship.
8. **EQUALITY**
   The relationship feels balanced with equal effort from both partners.
9. **TAKING RESPONSIBILITY**
   Owning actions and words and apologizing when needed
10. **FUN**
    Enjoying spending time together and bringing out the best in one other.

Youth experiencing dating violence are more likely to seek help from their friends than from adults.

TEACHING YOUTH HOW TO SUPPORT THEIR PEERS

- Discuss with your child why dating violence is unhealthy and never okay for their friends to experience or use.
- Encourage your child to support friends in unhealthy relationships. They should do so while keeping safe and knowing they can ask for your help or advice.
- Explain the challenges in helping friends in abusive relationships. It is important they don't force decisions or seek help without permission, unless there's immediate danger.
- Teach your child to support friends. They should be warm, non-judgmental, and suggest seeking help from adults.

To learn more visit

HealthyYouthRelationships.ca

Youth Violence Prevention Project

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