



NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families



Tips for Talking with Youth about Dating Violence and Building their Capacity to Form Healthy Relationships

Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month 2024

Adolescents in the child welfare system and those who have been exposed to domestic violence at home are at increased risk of experiencing dating violence as well as intersecting forms of violence, such as sexual assault and sexual exploitation ([Katz, et al., 2023](#); [Carlson, et al., 2019](#); [Franchino-Olsen, 2019](#); [Katz, Courtney, & Sapiro, 2017](#)). It is crucial for professionals who work with these youth, including child welfare workers, foster parents, and domestic violence advocates, to be aware of this increased risk and take steps to prevent and respond to teen dating violence among the youth they serve. To do so, it is important to know *how* to talk to young people about dating violence and understand their perspectives. Here are some tips for engaging with youth:

1

Withhold judgment. Try not to impose your beliefs and assumptions onto youth or draw conclusions about their relationships based on partial information or statistics. Approach each youth and their situation as unique, requiring an individualized assessment. Pay attention to “warning signs” that could be indicators of an unhealthy relationship, but don’t jump to conclusions until you’ve gathered all the information.

2

Listen to youth and validate their feelings and experiences. Youth are often treated like their voice and perspectives don’t matter; this is especially true for youth in the child welfare system. Professionals are quick to dismiss youth perspectives when they do not align with adult beliefs about what is best for children. This is not helpful! Youth need to feel heard. It is okay to have concerns for a youth’s safety and well-being, and to express these concerns to the youth, but do so in a nonjudgmental way that demonstrates respect and willingness to hear the youth out.

3

Try to understand their perspective. In addition to feeling unheard, many young people in care express feeling misunderstood. Try to look at things from their perspective. If you have concerns, ask clarifying questions but avoid interjecting your beliefs and values. Consider what the youth is getting from a particular relationship that they are lacking in other aspects of their life.

4

Be open to learning. Many times, youth have expressed that a barrier to reaching out for help even from a trusted adult is fear of being judged or of the adult “thinking they know everything.” This in turn makes youth feel that they are not being heard or taken seriously. You don’t need to have all the answers. In fact, youth are okay with you admitting you don’t know everything, as long as you’re open-minded and supportive. What they need most is to know that they are not alone – the two of you will learn from one another and figure things out together. This gives an extra layer towards building trust in your relationship.



5

Trust needs to be earned. It does not come automatically. You need to demonstrate that you are a trustworthy and dependable adult. Youth in the child welfare system, in particular, often have few people they can rely on. Honesty, transparency, and keeping your word are important. This includes communicating upfront about what is confidential and what you need to report. It also means following up on the things you say you’re going to do and being consistent over time. Don’t expect a youth to disclose sensitive information immediately and in one conversation. Building trust takes time and requires ongoing conversations. If there is a serious safety concern that emerges, keep the youth informed about what actions you are required to take, what they can expect to happen, and what decisions are made. As much as possible, include them in decision making and safety planning.

6

Focus on empowerment and skill building. Youth don't need to have their relationships scrutinized and criticized. They need to develop the skills and agency to effectively manage relationships for themselves. This also means having space to explore and make mistakes. Instead of focusing on what you see as problematic with their current relationship, ask about what they want in a relationship. What does a good relationship look like in their opinion? What qualities are they looking for in a partner? This can become a starting place to talk about healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics, and have youth reflect on how their current relationship compares to what they ideally want in a relationship. Work with youth on how to set boundaries in their relationship and communicate with their partner about what they want and need. Also keep in mind that building these skills is important for all youth, whether they are currently dating or not; effective prevention requires instilling youth with the knowledge and skills they need in advance to engage in healthy relationships.

7

Ask youth how you can best support them. Too often, youth express that no one ever consults them about what they want and need. Youth are the experts on their own lives. They have ideas and opinions, and they deserve to have a say in things that affect them. The best way you can support youth is to ask them what you can do to help and work together to find mutually agreeable solutions that enhance their safety, happiness, and well-being.

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The National Center to Advance Peace for Children, Youth, and Families (NCAP) is a coalition led by Caminar Latino and includes Ujima: National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, and Futures Without Violence.



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