



# Teenage relationship abuse

A parent's and carer's guide to violence and abuse in teenage relationships



## Introduction

Do you know if your teenager is in an abusive relationship? The answer may surprise you. While we may think that our children could never be affected, the truth is that abuse occurs surprisingly frequently in teenage relationships.

Nearly 75% of girls have reported some sort of emotional partner violence.\*

But even more worrying are teenagers' attitudes towards the problem – young people are surprisingly tolerant of violence in relationships. One in five young men and one in ten young women think that abuse or violence against women is acceptable.

But we do have an opportunity to influence teenagers if their views are still relatively unentrenched.

Abuse in relationships can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender or family situations. It can happen to boys as well as teenagers in same sex relationships.

This leaflet will help you find out more about teenage relationship abuse, will tell you the tell-tale signs to look out for, and will give you advice on how to talk to your children or children you are responsible for about the issue.

\* NSPCC Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships. Sept 09

## What you need to know

### What is teenage relationship abuse

Abuse in teenage relationships is a pattern of abusive behaviour that someone uses against a partner. Abuse doesn't have to be physical: it can take many forms, including threats, emotional abuse, insults, isolation from friends and family, and controlling what someone wears or who they socialise with. It can also include sex before they are ready and rape.

Evidence shows that coercive and controlling behaviour is more likely to escalate into violence and then to become a pattern.

Teenage relationship abuse often is hidden, because teenagers typically:

- have little experience of relationships;
- can be under pressure from their peers to act cool; and
- have 'romantic' views of love.

### Likely consequences of teenage relationship abuse

- violence can have long-term effects on your teenager's mental and physical health.
- it may lead to depression, drug and alcohol problems, obesity and sexually risk-taking behaviour.
- sexual abuse can lead to early or unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

## What can you do?

### Look out for warning signs

The following warning signs might alert you to abuse in your teenager's relationship:

- isolation – no longer spending time with a usual circle of friends.
- constantly checking a mobile phone, and getting upset when asked to turn it off.
- being withdrawn or quieter than usual.
- being angry or irritable when asked how things are.
- changing their appearance, clothes, make up or style.
- making excuses for a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- physical signs of injury, such as unexplained scratches or bruises.
- truancy, falling grades.
- self harm.

Be aware of your teenager's partner using controlling tactics on them. This can happen over time, and your teenager may not be able to recognise the possessive behaviour as unhealthy. Communication technologies are an important component of teenage relationships. A significant minority of teens say their partners use mobile phones or the internet to control, humiliate and threaten them.



Your teenager may also give you clues that abuse is happening in their relationship through the attitudes that they display.

## Some teenagers might believe that:

- they have the right to control their female partners as they see fit;
- masculinity is displayed through physical aggressiveness;
- they have a right to demand intimacy;
- they will lose respect if they are attentive and supportive towards their girlfriends;
- it makes them feel in control; and
- men and women aren't equal and women should be treated differently.

## Those who are abused might believe that:

- they are responsible for the violence and abuse;
- their boyfriend's jealousy, possessiveness and even physical abuse are 'romantic';
- abuse is normal – because their friends are also being abused;
- there is no one to ask for help; and
- they would prefer to have a boyfriend who hits them than no boyfriend at all.



## Talk to your teenagers

Teenagers who are experiencing relationship abuse can view it as something to put up with, or will normalise the issue, telling themselves that 'it's just the way things are'. There is also a powerful element of peer pressure, which encourages girls to think that they'd prefer to have a boyfriend who hits them than no boyfriend at all.

Teenagers also have a lack of understanding of the consequences of relationship abuse, and will tell themselves 'it's not that bad' or 'it's ok – it's just messing around'.

Teenagers will rarely voluntarily confide in anyone about abuse – least of all their parents – as they are likely to feel ashamed, guilty and scared. So talking to them is crucial. But it's a difficult conversation to have, and finding the right moment to have it can seem like a daunting task.

Have a chat with your kids to work out what they think constitutes a healthy relationship.

This sort of conversation can spark a discussion about preventing abuse and can give you a chance to talk to your teenagers about healthy, non-violent relationships.

Ensure that your teenager understands that they are never to blame if someone tries to make them do things (either sexually or emotionally) that they don't want to do.

If your kids don't feel comfortable talking to you, let them know that there are other people they can talk to.

## Talking to boys

Boys are often told that in order to be a man they must be powerful, strong and in control. In relationships, this control can manifest itself as either psychological or emotional – as abuse threats, possessiveness, jealousy and physical violence.

Most boys who abuse their partner are in denial about their actions and don't consider themselves abusers. Boys are often shocked by the consequences of their behaviour on their partners, and don't actually want to become violent and controlling men.

Awareness is crucial to stopping this pattern.

Explain to your son that abuse of any type is never acceptable and can lead to violence, which is against the law. If you have any reason to suspect that he might be mistreating his partner, you must try to address this so that he gets help to deal with his problems. Boys can be victims too and it is important to make sure they do not feel alienated and this issue is not ignored.

## Talking to girls

Talk to your teenager about her relationship and help her to understand what healthy relationships involve.

Explain to her that controlling or abusive behaviour is never acceptable. Tell her abuse tends to escalate over time and is rarely a one off and that what starts as emotional abuse can often develop into physical violence.

Make it clear to your teenager that she is never to blame for the abuse. Do not judge her or tell her what to do, talk through her choices and support her to make her own decisions.



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## Share the warning signs of violence and abuse with your teenager

Ask your teenager if their partner:

- shows extreme jealousy, anger;
- displays controlling behaviour;
- monitors calls and emails;
- believes in rigid sex roles;
- blames others for their problems or feelings;
- is verbally abusive; and/or
- uses threatening behaviour.

If the answer is yes to any of these, make your teenager aware that these behaviours can all lead to something more serious.



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## Chloe's story

When Alex and Chloe began dating, I knew she was over the moon. Alex was good looking, funny and popular and all her friends were jealous.

For the first few months, it seemed like nothing could go wrong, they were inseparable. Chloe was happy. But I noticed that she was spending less time with her friends and us, as she was spending all her free time with Alex. She stopped doing things she liked. What worried me was that I noticed that Alex always wanted to know what she was doing, who she was texting and where she was going. She became withdrawn. When I asked her whether she was having trouble with Alex, she denied that anything was wrong. She did hint however that it was easier that way, as Alex would start his endless questioning. Plus it was better to have a boyfriend than not.

I took this as a sign that something was wrong and decided to have a chat with Chloe. Picking the right time was tricky as she was always brushing me off. However when she became even more secretive and irritable and I could tell she has been crying, I needed I had to get to the bottom of it.

It wasn't an easy conversation, we both felt a bit unsure what to say, but looking back it was the only way. Chloe finally admitted that Alex not only wanted to control everything she did, he constantly put her down and even has started to put pressure on her to do things she wasn't too comfortable with. I explained that this is not what relationships are about, and although there has been no violence, behaviour like Alex's can often lead to that. Chloe admitted she was confused, she thought Alex really cared and that's why he was so jealous of everyone else. She wasn't happy with it.

I did manage to persuade her that excessive jealousy and controlling behaviour are not signs of affection at all. Love involves respect and trust; it doesn't mean constantly worrying about what the other person will do and whether they will become angry.

I'm pleased to say that Chloe understood what healthy relationships should be like and is now back to her bright and confident self now her relationship with Alex has ended. I can't tell you how relieved I am knowing that we managed to talk before things got a lot worse.

## Helpful information for parents and teenagers

### Get support

There are many organisations that will provide help. Some are for parents, providing advice on how to talk to teenagers and how best to approach the subject, while others are set up to deal with specific issues such as sexual and domestic violence.

You can find more information by visiting [www.direct.gov.uk/spotteenabuse](http://www.direct.gov.uk/spotteenabuse). You can direct your teenagers to [www.direct.gov.uk/thisisabuse](http://www.direct.gov.uk/thisisabuse), a website dedicated to the issue of teenage relationship abuse for teenagers.

### Useful contacts

**Family Lives** – a national charity that works for and with families T: 0808 800 2222 – [www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)

**Victim Support** – a national charity that can help you and your child if they have been a victim of abuse or violence.

T: 0845 30 30 900 – [www.victimsupport.org](http://www.victimsupport.org)

**Refuge** – a charity that offers help and support to victims of domestic violence. [www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)

**Women's Aid** – the national charity that co-ordinates and supports an England-wide network of over 340 local domestic and sexual violence organisations working to end domestic abuse against women and children. [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

**Domestic Violence Helpline**

T: 0800 2000 247. Freephone 24 hour, run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge.

**Rape Crisis** – offers a range of specialist services for women and girls who have been raped or experienced another form of sexual violence – whether as adults, teenagers or children.

T: 0808 802 9999 – [www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)

**Respect Phonenumber** – helpline for anyone looking for help with their violent/abusive behaviours, call freephone 0808 802 4040, email [info@respectphonenumber.org.uk](mailto:info@respectphonenumber.org.uk), visit [www.respectphonenumber.org.uk](http://www.respectphonenumber.org.uk)

**Men's Advice Line** – helpline for male victims of domestic violence, call freephone 0808 801 0327, email [info@mensadvice.org.uk](mailto:info@mensadvice.org.uk), visit [www.mensadvice.org.uk](http://www.mensadvice.org.uk)

**NSPCC Helpline** – 24/7 free advice and support for adults concerned about the safety and welfare of children and young people T: 0808 800 5000 – Text: 88858 – Visit: [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)

**ChildLine** – Young people can contact ChildLine for free and confidential advice.

T: 0800 1111 – [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

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