

CAR CONVERSATIONS

Guide for Caregivers and Parents
of Youth (6th to 9th Grade)



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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Many families across the state want to have conversations about sexual and domestic violence but don't quite know where to start. This guide will help you have those conversations while traveling to and from school.

This guide can be used to help you navigate difficult conversations about relationships, harassment, consent, and much more. We hope this acts as a starting point for many more safe conversations to come. Having these conversations can be difficult: especially if you, like so many others, were not given education about sexual and domestic violence. With this guide, you'll be able to talk with your youth about these topics in a way that helps build a healthy and respectful relationship with you and your youth.

This guide was developed by Shelby Vice and colleagues at VALOR. Families for Safe Dates, Expect Respect and Second Step curricula have evidence on these topics which were used to help create this guide.



WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for parents and caregivers who are hoping to start or continue conversations with their youth (grades 6–9) about relationships, healthy boundaries, trusted adults, consent, and other topics that help to prevent sexual violence from happening. It can be difficult to always know what to say when talking to youth about these topics. This guide is designed to make it easier for you to start these conversations and help support you in your effort to create safe and restorative environments for your family to talk about these topics.



Whether you're responding to a question from your youth at afternoon pick-up or strategically planning these conversations, starting these conversations should include the following elements:

Check-in with yourself

Conversations about consent and relationships can bring up feelings that may cause people to feel activated or uncomfortable. Make sure you are in a place physically and emotionally to have these conversations and are able to be patient and open with your youth. It can be difficult to stay level-headed when the fear of harm to your youth may bring up feelings of anxiety or urgency for your youth to understand. These are all normal feelings. The important piece is to prepare ahead of time and make sure you're feeling ready to talk about them when the time comes up, so you can handle them.

Create Agreements

Consider making family agreements to create a safe place for your youth to share. Be clear with what you need from your youth to have safe conversations such as no headphones in, letting each person speak without interruption, etc., and make sure your youth tells you what they need. For example, some youth may find it easier to ask uncomfortable questions when they don't have to look at their parents face to face. Allowing honesty and clear boundaries is important for creating safe environments.

Ask Questions

These kinds of conversations can come up organically if something happened at school or soccer practice, or you can be proactive in starting them. With either of these situations, it's always a good idea to start with the question, "what do you know about...?". Figuring out what information your youth already has about a certain topic can help guide you through the conversation. Try to stay away from judgemental questions and instead encourage your youth to talk and ask questions. Encourage curiosity and learning together. It's also important to remember that you don't have to have all of the answers. Oftentimes, people are afraid of addressing certain topics because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing but learning together with your youth, admitting when you don't know something, and finding the answer together can serve as a positive example about learning and trust for them.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

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Ask your youth what they already know about gender identity or gender stereotypes and how they feel about it.

Discuss how your family or culture has historically expressed their anger and where you can all grow as a family.

Ask your youth how they can ask for consent in different situations.

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Gender

When it comes to gender, youth may have questions about gender stereotypes, gender identity, etc. If you're unsure about how to approach this topic, educate yourself on the definitions and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) youth. A good start to your conversation around gender is asking your youth what they already know about gender identity or gender stereotypes and how they feel about it. Don't feel like you need to memorize and know everything about gender. This is an example of something you can look at together. For example, if your youth asks you "What does it mean to be transgender" in the car and you don't know the answer, you can always say, "That's a great question. I am not sure and don't want to give you the wrong answer. Do you want to look it up together when we get home?" and then go to a resource like The Trevor Project or GLAAD.

Anger Management

When it comes to expressing emotions, anger can be one of the most difficult to express healthily. If your youth is struggling with how they express anger, have them first recognize how they express their anger, practice calming their bodies down, and brainstorm how they can respond healthily. This is a good time to discuss how your family or culture has historically expressed their anger and where you can all grow as a family.

Consent

Talking about consent is not just about sexual interactions but it also applies to everyday non-sexual interactions like hugging, tagging someone on social media, or borrowing something from a friend. Consent needs to be clear, coherent, willing, and ongoing. Whether it's sexual activity, hugging, or sharing information, consent is always needed. Ask your youth how they can ask for consent in different situations and talk about how they can set boundaries, what they do when boundaries are crossed, and whom they can talk to if their boundaries have been violated.

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Safety


To start this conversation, try asking your youth to talk about who makes them feel safe. Instead of talking about "stranger danger", focus more on talking about strange behavior such as asking youth to keep secrets from their parents or touching without consent. Part of building a healthy community for your youth is focusing on who makes them feel safe instead of whom you want them to feel safe around. They might not always be the same people and it's important to respect their feelings.

Warning Signs of Abuse

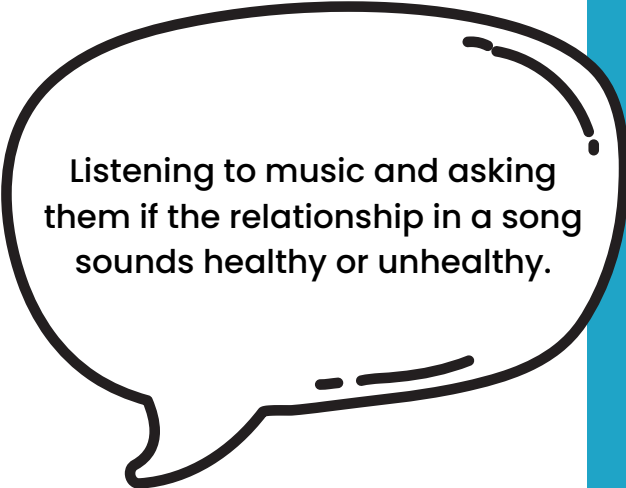
Identifying abusive behavior can be difficult to talk about for anyone, but especially for caregivers and their youth. In this age group, many youth are still learning boundaries and figuring out what feels safe to them. Start with asking them what they think abusive behavior looks like and then continue identifying signs of abuse. One way to start this conversation may be by listening to music and asking them if the relationship in a song sounds healthy or unhealthy. You can continue to learn together and play that game often or even create a healthy vs. unhealthy playlist for the car rides.

Healthy Relationships


Healthy relationships should include communication, respect, support, consent, honesty, and trust. Part of having these conversations with your youth is working to create a healthy parent/caregiver and youth relationship. Being honest with youth about relationships and how they can practice healthy communication and build trust in their friendships, family, and dating relationships is essential in decreasing risk factors for unhealthy or abusive relationships. A great way to reinforce healthy relationship characteristics is by modeling them with your youth and reminding them that healthy relationships apply to all relationships, not just romantic ones.



Ask them to talk about who makes them feel safe.



Listening to music and asking them if the relationship in a song sounds healthy or unhealthy.



Healthy relationships should include communication, respect, support, consent, honesty, and trust.

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Bystander Intervention

These conversations tend to happen organically when one youth has either been bullied or gotten in trouble for causing harm to another youth at school.

Encourage your youth to be an upstander, which is someone who sees harm being done and intervenes or speaks up to stop the violence. When it comes to being an upstander, there are many ways to intervene if they see something that is causing someone else harm. They can go tell a teacher, confront the youth causing them harm, try to support the student that was harmed, etc. The most important thing is that they don't put themselves or anyone else in more danger by intervening.

Sexual Harassment

Asking your youth about the different forms of sexual harassment such as visual, physical, or verbal harassment can help them recognize harassment on campus or in their community. Schools should have policies protecting them from these things on campus and taking a look at the student handbook together can help them understand what they can do on campus if something happens.

Cultural Considerations

Every family is different and every culture has important aspects that make them unique; however, you could talk with your youth about common things that your family or community does that may be causing harm. Challenge your family to discuss what they like about their culture and things that they would like to challenge or areas where your family could grow when it comes to making each other feel safer. This could also be a great time to teach your youth about empathy by reminding them that, just like no one else will know exactly what their home life and culture are like, they may not understand or relate to everyone they meet. The important thing is to have empathy and care for people, even if they are different from you.

Encourage your youth to be an upstander or someone who sees harm being done and intervenes or speaks up to stop the violence.

Taking a look at the student handbook together can help them understand what they can do on campus if something happens.

Talk with your youth about common things that your family or community does that may be causing harm.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION



When you hear something surprising or concerning, make sure you proceed with caution. It's important to acknowledge what feelings come up for you, whether that's fear, anger, sadness, or your own memory or trauma that may have gotten activated, but it is also important to make sure you don't let those feelings take over and cause your youth to feel unsafe or judged. These conversations can be tricky so here are some important things to remember before responding:

STOP

Take a moment to process what your youth is saying. If they tell you something that's surprising, try to stay calm. Practice some of the calming exercises found later in this guide. If you're hearing something shocking, ask questions instead of immediately going to a lecture. If someone causes harm to your youth, it can be hard not to respond in fear. On the other hand, if your youth is the one who caused harm, it can be hard not to respond in anger. Take a moment to STOP and ask questions like, "what happened?", or "How do you feel about that?", "What do you need from me", or "what do you want to do about this?". Focus more on keeping their confidence instead of asking questions like, "Can I share this with Dad (or other support people)".



SAFETY FIRST

Be prepared for these conversations by thinking of safety plans or plans of action if your youth ever mentions that they are having issues with violence at school, harassment, or thoughts of harming themselves. There are many resources online for safety planning such as [SuicideisPreventable.org](https://www.suicideispreventable.org). Ask them where they feel safe at school or where they feel safe at home. Include them in this process as an option for your response. Having a plan can also help you to feel calmer and more prepared for instances when your youth may be experiencing or causing harm.



DANGER ZONE

If your youth discloses that they are in danger of or are currently being harmed, remember to STOP and proceed with caution. Thank them for telling you what's going on and trusting you with that information. Respond with compassion rather than judgment. Try not to ask judgmental questions like the "why's", "what's", and "who's" of what happened that are answers for your own processing and rather ask what they need and how you can support them. If they need resources or ask for some form of action from you, offer whatever support you know of and then educate yourself on what other resources are available. If your youth wishes to report to the school, help them understand what that process will look like. The most important thing is that they feel validated and supported by you. It can be scary when this happens to your youth and it's a huge success that your youth felt safe enough to tell you. Not everyone feels safe or comfortable reporting what happened to them. Try not to tell them what they should do, but remind them that you will support their decisions and that your priority is their safety.





LISTEN AND REASSURE

Listen

The best way to show up for your youth during this time is to provide the space to listen. Be sure to be mindful of your facial expressions and listen without judgment. Practice mindful listening and try not to interject when your youth is talking with you.

Allow them time to listen and process too. If you ask their opinion on something or ask a question, they may not know how they feel yet. Let them sit with it, silence is okay and necessary for processing.

Reassure

During and after these conversations, let your youth know that what they're feeling is valid and reassure them of the agreements you discussed in the beginning. If you don't have all the answers for them, reassure them that you're going to work together to learn. If your youth shares their feelings with you that may be constructive in nature, be sure to acknowledge any harm caused and be honest in your capacity to "do better next time".

Allow time to process

This guide is meant to help start these conversations. You do not have to have all the answers, you just have to work on creating a place where your youths feel like they can have a safe place to ask questions and talk with you honestly. Encourage self-care after these conversations and time to process what you've all talked about. Help remind them that these questions can sometimes be emotional and it's important that they take time to relax their mind and bodies.

PRACTICING SELF-CARE



Practicing Self-Care

These conversations can cause you to become activated or frustrated and taking care of yourself is incredibly important during this process. You practicing self-care is also a great way to show your youth how they can also take care of themselves during this time. Luckily, being in the car, there are a lot of things to see, feel and hear. The following are two self-soothing exercises that you can practice when you're feeling activated or uncomfortable:

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

While you're driving (safely), focus on FIVE things you can see, FOUR things you can TOUCH, THREE things you can HEAR, TWO things you can SMELL, and ONE thing you can TASTE. For example, you may be able to see your youth's face in the rearview mirror. Maybe you can Touch the steering wheel and hear the AC unit in your car. Try to include your youth in this process so you can help teach them how to ground themselves in their environment.

In the Driver's Seat

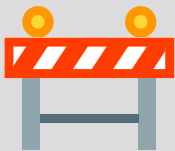
This activity uses breathing and muscle relaxation strategies to help you self-soothe while you're in the driver's seat. Try breathing in deeply for four seconds and while you breathe in, squeeze the driving wheel lightly. On your exhale, count to four again and return your grip on the when to a normal, hold. Repeat the process as many times as you need.

NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Congratulations, you started the conversation! Now, it's time to talk about what you do when roadblocks, detours, and standstills get in the way of the direction you saw the conversation going. It's important to be adaptable and understand that there will always be something in life that may cause the conversation to not always go as planned. Here are a few examples of what that could look like and how to continue forward:

ROADBLOCKS

Roadblocks are moments in a conversation when you're not sure how to move forward. This can look like not knowing the answer to something your youth asks you or you can't agree on a point or topic. Where do you go from there? While unfortunately there is no page in a parenting handbook with all of the answers, this could be an opportunity for growth for both you and your youth. Be honest and let your youth know if you're unsure of the answer. Explain why you may not know or if you were never taught something and find the answer together! If you and your youth can't agree on something, take space to think about it and come back to the topic. You may not always agree but it's important to remember your group agreements with each other so that you are respecting their opinions and needs, as well as your own.



DETOURS

Detours are moments in the conversation when you or your youth gets a little off-track from where you want the conversation to go. If this happens, gently re-direct the conversation back to the topic. This can look like; "We have so many thoughts on this. Let's write those down so we can come back to them and try to finish the conversation we started with". Detours will happen naturally, it's important to not let them lead you down a path that doesn't get you too off topic for the issue you or your youth wanted to discuss.



STANDSTILLS

If you've ever driven down the highway during rush hour, you know that there will be moments during your drive when you're going nowhere fast. That may be the case with some of these conversations. For whatever reason, one or more people may not be in the mood to talk or they may be emotionally or physically drained and that's okay! If you come to a standstill in the conversation, take a moment and ask if they'd like to talk about it later. Try to carve out another time in your day to talk with your youth. This may be before bed, at the dinner table, after homework, etc. These conversations could be a larger part of your family routine. When it comes to preventing violence, studies show us that the more we talk about these issues, the more we can lower the rates of violence in our communities.



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATIONS

When it comes to these conversations, the important thing to remember is to keep having them. It may take a while to get used to talking about things with your youth but it's important to keep trying. Utilize the resources listed below to continue educating yourself and your family on ways to help prevent sexual and teen dating violence.

www.valor.us

www.preventconnect.org

www.nsrvc.org

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