

School Mental Health Communities of Practice

Micro-Skills to Support K-12 Students Involved with Relationship and Dating Violence

Signs and Symptoms of Relationship and Dating Violence:

<i>Signs and Symptoms of Someone Engaging in Relationship and Dating Violence</i>		
Is excessively jealous	Is very controlling	Owens or uses weapons
Refuses to let partner end the relationship	Is too serious about the relationship too quickly	Attempts to isolate partner from friends and family
Has a history of fighting, hurting animals, or bragging about mistreating other people	Blames partner for bad treatment by telling partner all of the ways partner provoked the behavior	Creates fear in partner by reacting negatively to seemingly innocent actions or things that have been said
Pressures partner into sexual activity that the partner is not comfortable with	Insulting or putting down people who the partner loves and cares about	Believes strongly in stereotypical gender roles for males and females
Constantly checking in with partner or making partner check in	Often giving partner orders about what to do or telling partner what to wear	Tries to make all of the decisions for partner (against partner's wishes)
Has had a lot of bad prior relationships	Blames all problems on current or previous partners	Does not take responsibility for own actions
Has an explosive temper (e.g., "blows up" a lot)	May threaten suicide if partner wants to leave	Uses humiliation, guilt trips, and embarrassment
<i>Signs and Symptoms that Someone is in a Violent Relationship/Dating Situation</i>		
Is often humiliated or embarrassed by partner	Is constantly put down by partner	Is overly sensitive and hypercritical about self
May refuse to communicate with loved ones	Is often ignored or excluded by partner	Engages in provocative behavior with opposite sex
Endures mean, hurtful, and sarcastic comments from partner	Endures extreme and unpredictable moodiness from partner	Has mean jokes made or is constantly being made fun of by partner
Has partner who is dominating and controlling	Has partner who often withdraws affection	Has partner who often uses guilt trips
Has partner who makes everything your fault	Has partner who isolates you from friends and family	Has partner who uses money as a way to control you

Action Steps (Micro-Skills) When You Recognize the Signs and Symptoms:

- **Educate students about how to recognize signs and symptoms in themselves and how to ask for help when they are involved with relationship and dating violence:** It is important for students to understand the signs and symptoms associated with relationship and dating violence so that they can accurately identify these concerns when they experience them. It is also important for students who experience relationship and dating violence to know how to reach out for help.
 - Use universal education approaches (e.g., Tier 1) to educate groups of students about the general signs and symptoms associated with relationship and dating violence. These general approaches, which should be developmentally appropriate to the age/grade of the students, can occur in a general education class setting (typically facilitated by a teacher or co-facilitated by a teacher and school-based mental health professional) or in specialized social-emotional-learning sessions (typically facilitated by a school-based mental health professional). Students should be given general information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
 - Use targeted education approaches (e.g., Tier 2) to educate students at risk of being involved with relationship and dating violence. Typically, this would entail small group sessions led by a school-based mental health professional and would include more detailed information about signs and symptoms, along with specific coping strategies that students could use to prevent and/or reduce concerns. Students should be given specific information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
 - Use individualized education approaches (e.g., Tier 3) to educate students who are known to be involved with relationship and dating violence. Typically, this would occur through individual counseling sessions provided by a school-based mental health professional and would include student-specific information about signs and symptoms, along with student-specific strategies to mitigate those concerns. Students should be given information about additional sources of help (e.g., crisis lines, community-based providers) in case they need support at a time that their school-based mental health professional is not available. Teachers and school-based mental health professionals should regularly consult about how to best support students involved with relationship and dating violence.
- **Use micro-skills daily in the class and school settings to support students who are involved in relationship and dating violence:** Students who are involved in relationship and dating violence can benefit from being in a supportive class and school environment in which adults serve as role models of healthy relationships with students and other adults.



- Educate students about what healthy relationships look like, how to be respectful to others, and how to keep themselves and others safe in relationships. Whenever the opportunity arises during regular educational experiences (e.g., discussing characters in a story, learning about character education qualities), reinforce healthy relationship qualities.
- Provide positive reinforcement and encouragement when you observe students engaging in positive relationship behaviors. One of the most effective ways to change negative behavior is by acknowledging and reinforcing the alternative, positive behavior that you want students to engage in.
- Role model healthy relationship qualities for your students. Pay particular attention to how you behave both with students and with other adults in your building, and model positive qualities so students have a role model to emulate.
- Listen (without distraction) to students as they discuss their relationships. Reinforce positive qualities that they discuss, and pay particular attention to signs that they may be involved in abusive situations.
- Provide emotional support to your students and help them to build their self-esteem as they explore healthy relationship skills. Students may need to practice relationship skills over a period of time before those skills become natural parts of how they relate to others.
- Create an open, non-judgmental environment by encouraging students to ask questions about relationships. Avoid criticism, judgment, or jumping to conclusions about the topics they discuss. Rather, support them by gently encouraging healthy relationship behaviors.
- **Support students who disclose relationship and dating violence to you:** Students need trusted adults at school who will listen to them and take action to protect them should they disclose relationship and dating violence.
 - If students come to you about unhealthy or abusive relationships, make the school's confidentiality and reporting requirements extremely clear to ensure everyone's safety and protection. If you are not already familiar with your school/district policies, please familiarize yourself with them as soon as possible. You may need to involve others (e.g., administrators, law enforcement, parents) to ensure students' safety. Student safety is the most important factor and you are a vital part of ensuring that safety.
 - Listen without interrupting and thank students for trusting you with this information. Disclosing abusive behaviors may be very difficult, and they may be confused about how they feel, unsure what to do about the situation, and may even change their mind while talking to you. Remember that students who come to you for help view you as a trusted adult.
 - Avoid judgment, as relationship and dating abuse can happen to anyone, no matter their age, race, gender identity, cultural background, religion, or socioeconomic status. Also, remember not to assume the gender-identity or



sexuality of the person demonstrating abusive behaviors.

- Watch how students interact with you and respect their body language. Listen to what they say and how they say it. Understand that students may be very sensitive to your reaction and body language as they are disclosing the abuse.
- Listen to them and talk about their choices without offering your personal opinion of the situation. Empower students to make the best decision for their well-being and safety (even if the decision they ultimately choose is not the one you would want them to make).
- Be realistic when talking, as students may have a false picture of romantic relationships. You can explain that abuse is not love, and talk with them about the ways they should treat and respect others, along with how others should treat and respect them. Educate them about healthy relationships qualities.
- Avoid asking unnecessary questions that could make them shut down or feel like they are being interrogated, even if your questions are well-meaning. For example, questions like “*why didn’t you...*” or “*why don’t you...*” can sound accusing, blaming, and confrontational to students.
- Do not confront the person committing the abuse, even if that person is also a student of yours. A confrontation could increase the risk of that person lashing out or doing more harm to the student who made the report to you (and it may also put you in danger). Rather, follow your school/district’s confidentiality and reporting policies to ensure everyone’s safety.
- If the student experiencing abuse chooses to stay with the abusive partner (due to fear, shame, guilt, low self-esteem, lack of financial independence, children, or another reason), continue to be supportive. You do not have to agree with the student’s choice in order to provide that student with support.
- What students disclose to you should be treated as confidential (in accordance with your school/district policies). Do not gossip about it, even in places where you think other students cannot hear you. Word could get back to the student perpetuating the abuse, which could put the reporting student in a more dangerous place than before. Only share the information with people who are in a position to help (in accordance with your school/district policies).
- Provide students with information about resources available to help them, such as meeting with a school counselor, talking with their family or friends for support, creating a safety plan, and visiting online resources like *Break the Cycle* (<https://www.breakthecycle.org/>) or the *National Teen Dating Abuse Hotline* (<https://www.loveisrespect.org/>).
- **Advocate for students to visit a mental health professional, if needed:** If symptoms become overwhelming, it may be important for students to visit a mental health professional to help alleviate their symptoms and identify coping strategies that work for them. School professionals can share referral information with students and their families about options for mental health treatment at school or in the local community.