

How to Help: When a Student is Being Abused

Create a trusting and empowered classroom:

As you enter into teaching this challenging and important topic, proceed with each lesson with the knowledge that you may be changing someone's life. Even if you never have a student disclose abuse to you, by implementing the Take a Stand for Healthy Relationships curriculum, you may be giving an individual the information and confidence to make a change in their life, or to help a loved one. Challenge yourself to be present with your students during each lesson, and invite your students to think deeply and show kindness to themselves and their peers.

Explain the limitations of your confidentiality:

A student in your classroom may disclose their own abuse or that of someone they know. In order to protect yourself and the safety of that student, before each lesson, be sure to explain the limitations of your confidentiality. Additionally, if a student begins to disclose any abuse, pause the conversation to remind them that in cases of abuse or suspected abuse of a minor, you are required by law to report the incident to Child Protective Services or law enforcement. [Read more about these requirements here.](#)

Listen more than you speak:

It is often hard to know what to say when a student shares sensitive information, but in the case of the disclosure, the rule is less is more. After reminding students of your limited confidentiality, allow the student to dictate the tone and pace of the conversation. If the student is being abused, it is likely that they feel very little control over their lives, and this brave conversation could be the first step in regaining their power. If this is one of the first times the student has spoken to anyone about their situation, they may be processing the situation while talking with you, so be patient, open, non-judgmental, and ready for what might be a disjointed and/or complicated conversation.

Withhold judgement:

One in 3 adolescents experience emotional, sexual, or physical abuse at the hands of a romantic partner. Abuse can take place in any type of relationship, regardless of age, sex, race, gender, orientation, or socioeconomic status. From the outside, it may seem incomprehensible that someone would become a victim of abuse, but abusers are great manipulators who are skilled at the use of power and control. Because of this, listen to your student with an open mind, free of judgement. Take a look at the [power and control wheel](#) for more information, or [read more here.](#)

Empower student to make own decisions:

It may take numerous tries for someone to successfully break free from their abuser. Because of this, a student may disclose that they are being abused by their partner and then remain in that relationship, despite acknowledging that the relationship is destructive. They are probably getting advice and input from numerous people, they may care deeply for their abuser, and/or their abuser may be making it very hard for them to break up with them or leave. As a trusted adult, you have the opportunity to be someone who influences their decisions.

NEVER approach the abuser about the situation, even if you have a good relationship with them:

It may be that you actually know the person who is abusing your student. Maybe the abuser is, or has been, your pupil. Despite the relationship you may have with that person, never approach them about the disclosed abuse unless you witness that abuse first hand and can intervene, or have express permission from the person being abused. Regardless of what you think you know about the abuser, approaching them may put the victim, or you, in further danger. It may be that the abusive student becomes angry and lashes out at you, resulting in further necessary intervention. More typically, they may become more abusive to their victim as a result of your actions.

TAKE A STAND FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Keep confidentiality as much as possible:

Obviously, you cannot maintain your student's confidentiality in cases where mandatory reporting comes into play, but do not share the information with anyone who doesn't absolutely NEED to know. It is easy for sensitive information to spread in a school, so refrain from discussing the situation with other teachers, or in situations where the information could be overheard by students or faculty. Careful handling of sensitive information helps maintain the confidentiality and safety of your student.

Support the student's decisions, no matter what:

The student who decides to tell a trusted adult about abuse they have experienced is making a brave decision, and while you may want more steps to follow the conversation, be prepared to see no change. A student may want to have a conversation with a counselor or call the [teen dating abuse hotline](#), but they also might want to go about their life. Either way, pressuring them to make a decision isn't productive, and may push them away from the only source of support they feel they have. Alternatively, share your concerns with the student, and let them know that you will support them whatever they decide.

Provide Resources:

While it must be a victim's choice to break up with or leave an abusive partner, it doesn't mean that you have to remain silent. As an adult, you have knowledge and access to resources that your student may not have. Even if they do not use the resources right away, they may remember them in six months or a year when they are ready to break up with them. Visit our [resources](#) page for more information.

Take care of yourself:

As a teacher, you probably already put your students' well being ahead of your own. That tendency may be heightened if a student discloses abuse. It is important to remind yourself that you can only help your student when you are at your best, so be sure to take care of yourself. Remember that you cannot save anyone. You can be a listening ear, provide a stable place to land, and provide direction and resources, but you cannot save your student. If you need to take a step back from the situation or establish healthy boundaries with your student, do so. Explain to your student that you are not an expert in teen dating abuse, and offer resources for them to speak to a counselor or social worker instead. Practice self-care each day, and be sure to take time and process what you are thinking and feeling.

Provide Resources:

Work to connect your student to resources that can help them through this period of life. Your local domestic violence program or state coalition ([found here](#)) is an excellent resource for help, as are the resources below. Sometimes the best help you can provide is to say, "I believe you," or "I am here for you," or "It's not your fault." Refrain from judgment and be supportive of your student.

You can always call the National Teen Dating Hotline, www.loveisrespect.org, at 866-331-9474 or text "loveis" to 22522 (message and data rates apply). Trained, experienced advocates are available 24/7/365. You do not have to be the one experiencing abuse or in crisis to receive help and access more information.

The following additional resources may also help:

- Loveisrespect: www.loveisrespect.org
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: www.ndvh.org
- Break the Cycle: www.breakthecycle.org
- Teen Dating Violence Month www.teendvmonth.org/
- Safe 2 Tell safe2tell.org/



You can access additional [resources](#) and [organizations](#) here.