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**Do you know if  
your teenager  
is in an abusive  
relationship?**

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Home Office

## Introduction

Abuse, rape and sexual assault can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender or personal situation. It can happen to young women and young men in heterosexual or same sex relationships.

While we may think that our teenagers could never be affected, the truth is that abuse, rape and sexual assault can occur in teenage relationships.

NSPCC found that nearly 75 % of the girls they surveyed had reported some sort of emotional partner violence and 33 % of girls and 16 % of boys had experienced some form of sexual violence from a boyfriend or girlfriend<sup>1</sup>.

But even more worrying are teenagers' attitudes towards these issues. A study among 16-20 year old boys and girls<sup>2</sup> found that:

- 22% of respondents thought it was **either** acceptable or were unsure if it was acceptable or not for a boy to expect to have sex with a girl if he has spent a lot of time and money on her; and
- 21% of respondents **either** thought it was acceptable, or were unsure if it was acceptable, for a boy to expect to have sex with a girl if he thinks she has had sex with numerous people already.

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1 NSPCC, September 2009 Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships.

2 ICM, November 2006 UK poll of 16 – 20 year olds

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However we do have an opportunity to influence the opinions of teenagers.

This leaflet will help you find out more about abuse in teenage relationships and understand the pressures to have sex which some teenagers may experience. It will also give you examples of the signs to look out for, as well as practical advice on how to talk to your teenagers, or the teenagers in your care, about these issues.

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## What you need to know

Being pressurised or forced to have sex before they are ready is a very serious form of abuse

that teenagers may experience in relationships with their boyfriends, girlfriends or from members of their social group. It can occur alongside other forms of abusive behaviours including physical abuse, emotional abuse and psychological abuse such as threats, isolation from friends and family, and controlling all aspects of their life. Coercive and controlling behaviour could also escalate into violence.

Abuse in teenage relationships is often hidden, because teenagers typically:

- have little experience of relationships and therefore think that what they are experiencing is normal;
- are under pressure from their peers to do what they think everyone else is doing;
- have 'romantic' views of love; and
- have shorter term relationships which may not be taken as seriously by adults in comparison to their own 'adult' relationships.

Many teenagers may also not describe what they have experienced as abuse, rape or sexual assault because they often associate these words and phrases with a violent attack by a stranger and not something they believe could happen within their own relationships. In reality, the majority of rape and sexual assault happens where two people know each other; they could be friends, boyfriend or girlfriend, family members, or know each other from school, college or work. The situation may be compounded for teenagers if they attend the same school or continue to be within the same social environment as their abuser.

A consequence of this limited understanding is that it prevents many teenagers from seeking the help and support that they need.

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## Reality and the law

We also know that teenagers can be very confused about what rape and sexual assault actually are because their own personal definition, formulated by what they have seen on TV, read in magazines or what their friends have told them is far removed from the legal definitions.

The legal definitions are:

- **Rape** is when a man forces his penis into the vagina, anus or mouth of another person **when that person doesn't want him to do so**: the law calls this 'without consent'. The most important thing for a teenager to remember is that being pressurised or forced to have sex when you don't want to is a crime.
- **Sexual Assault** is a crime that can be committed by both men and women against men or women. Sexual assault can include: unwanted touching; forcing people to watch other people having sex; 'sexting' - texting sexual images; forcing involvement in watching or making pornography; or sexual bullying.
- **Consent** is someone giving their permission, or agreeing to something, after they have thought carefully about whether or not they want it. The law also says that to consent to sex a person must be over 16, be able to make informed decisions and have the **capacity** to choose.

Furthermore there are serious legal consequences:

- Rape could potentially lead to a prison sentence;
- Sexual assault could lead to a community order, fine or prison sentence; and
- Both rape and sexual assault could lead to the perpetrator's details being put on the Sex Offenders Register.

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## What can you do?

Some of the following may seem like typical teenage behaviours but if you notice your teenager displaying a range of them on a regular basis it could be because they are experiencing abuse in their relationships. The warning signs could include:

- isolation – no longer spending time with a usual circle of friends;
- being withdrawn or quieter than usual;
- being angry or irritable when asked how things are;
- sudden unexplained personality changes, mood swings and seeming insecure;
- making excuses for a boyfriend or girlfriend;
- physical signs of injury, such as unexplained scratches or bruises;
- truancy, falling grades;
- drug and/or alcohol dependency; and
- self harm or suicidal thoughts.

Your teenager may also give you clues that abuse is happening in their relationships through the attitudes that they display. Some teenagers often believe that:

- they have the right to control their 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 partners; and
- men and women aren't equal and women should be treated differently.

Teenagers who are experiencing abuse and sexual pressure can often view it as something to put up with, or will normalise the issue, telling themselves that 'it's just the way things are – everyone else is doing it', 'it's not that bad' or 'it's ok – it's just messing around'.

There is also a powerful element of peer pressure, which may encourage teenagers to think that they would prefer to be in a relationship where they are forced to do something they don't want to do rather than in no relationship at all. In addition, teenagers may feel that the emotional and social consequences of avoiding sexual pressure mean it's often easier to comply.

Those who are abused often blame themselves for what has happened to them or they believe they will be the one that gets into trouble. It is important that teenagers realise that no matter what the circumstances are that the abuse, rape or sexual assault occurred in, it is not their fault and they will not be blamed.



## Talk to your teenagers

Teenagers will rarely voluntarily confide in anyone about the abuse they may be experiencing, least of all with their parents or carers. Many girls fear the social stigma associated with victims of rape and sexual assault and 'what type of girl' they are perceived to be, worrying that they might be labelled as 'damaged goods' by their friends or by potential future boyfriends or girlfriends. Many boys may fear they will not be believed or that others will judge them if they say they have been a victim of rape or sexual assault.

So talking is crucial. But it's a difficult conversation to have, and finding the right moment to have it can seem like a daunting task. To start with, you could have a chat with your teenager to find out what they think constitutes a healthy relationship. This sort of conversation might spark a discussion about preventing abuse or how to deal with any pressures they might be facing and can give you a chance to talk to them about healthy relationships.

Explain that in their relationships, they have the right to think carefully about whether they want to have sex or do anything sexual. They should be confident that it is their decision and not one that they have been pressured into by their partner or social group.

Also explain that being forced to have sex or doing anything sexual when they don't want to is a crime and they have the right

to tell someone and that you are there to support them.

Make it clear to your teenager that they are never to blame for the abuse, rape or sexual assault they may have experienced. Do not judge them or tell them what to do, talk through their choices and support them to make their own decisions.

If your teenagers don't feel comfortable talking to you, let them know that there are other people they can talk to. It doesn't have to be someone in authority; it could be another relative, a friend or anyone they feel close to. There are also a number of organisations who can help and further details are given at the back of this leaflet.

Having this kind of conversation with boys in particular brings its own difficulties. 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 abuse, threats, possessiveness, jealousy and physical violence.

Boys who abuse their girlfriends, or boyfriends, may be in denial about their actions and don't consider themselves abusers. Boys are often shocked by the consequences of their behaviour on their girlfriend or boyfriend and don't realise that their behaviour is actually a crime.



Awareness of the impact and consequences of their behaviour is crucial to stopping it escalating into something worse.

Explain to your son that abuse of any type is never acceptable and may lead to violence which is against the law. Explain that forcing or pressuring someone to have sex when they don't want to is a crime.

Boys can be victims of rape and sexual abuse too. They may fear that they will not be believed if they say that they have been sexually abused or raped. It is important to make sure they do not feel alienated and that they are supported and know who they can speak to about these issues.

### Get support

There are many organisations that will provide help. Some are for parents and carers, 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 rape and sexual assault.

You can find more information by visiting [www.direct.gov.uk/spotteenabuse](http://www.direct.gov.uk/spotteenabuse)

You can also direct your teenagers to [www.direct.gov.uk/thisisabuse](http://www.direct.gov.uk/thisisabuse) an advice and information website dedicated to the issue of sexual pressure, rape and sexual assault experienced by 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)

### MOSAC

A national free helpline providing advice, support and information for non-abusing parents and carers whose children have been sexually abused.

T: 0800 980 1958

[www.mosac.org.uk](http://www.mosac.org.uk)

### 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)

### The Survivors Trust

140 agencies throughout the UK and Ireland that work with both female and male victims or survivors of rape, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse.

[www.thesurvivorstrust.org](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org)

### **Broken Rainbow**

Offers support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people experiencing domestic violence.

T: 0300 999 5428

[www.broken-rainbow.org.uk](http://www.broken-rainbow.org.uk)

### **Survivors UK**

Offers support, counselling and local groups for male survivors of any kind of sexual violence or rape, plus training for professionals.

T: 0845 122 1201

[www.survivorsuk.org.uk](http://www.survivorsuk.org.uk)

### **Refuge**

Refuge is the national charity which provides a wide range of specialist domestic violence services to women and children experiencing domestic violence. Refuge provides safe, emergency accommodation through a growing network of refuges throughout the country and runs the Freephone 24-Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline in partnership with Women's Aid.

[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**

Freephone 24 hour, run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge.

T. 0808 2000 247.

### **The Hideout**

The Hideout is Women's Aid's website for young people where they can get help, advice and information about domestic abuse and sexual violence. There is also a message board for young people to talk about their experiences and get support.  
[www.thehideout.org.uk](http://www.thehideout.org.uk)

### **Respect pheline**

Helpline for anyone looking for help with their violent/abusive behaviours.  
T: freephone 0808 802 4040  
[info@respectpheline.org.uk](mailto:info@respectpheline.org.uk)  
[www.respectpheline.org.uk](http://www.respectpheline.org.uk)

### **Men's Advice Line**

Helpline for male victims of domestic violence.  
T: freephone 0808 801 0327  
[info@mensadvice.org.uk](mailto:info@mensadvice.org.uk)  
[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  
[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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