

Parenting for Prevention

A WISE approach to supporting young people





WISE leads the Upper Valley to end gender-based violence through survivor-centered advocacy, prevention, education and mobilization for social change.

Our Vision is a world of freedom, justice, equality and dignity where all can thrive.

We can end violence. Domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking exist because of cultural values, customs, and traditions that promote inequality. By understanding, acknowledging, and changing these conditions, we can eliminate gender-based violence. The Prevention and Education Program (PEP) teaches expectations for healthy relationships and strategies for safety. We work to engage people of all ages to become active in the movement to end violence across the Upper Valley.

We work with parents, caregivers, and anyone who has young people in their lives to foster happy and healthy relationships. We provide professional development and consultation for education professionals in accordance with state standards. We train and collaborate with law enforcement, prosecutors, investigators, healthcare providers, social service agencies, and other institutions to respond in ways that reflect best practices and research on the impacts of violence. We work with institutions and employers to create safe and healthy work environments through training, materials development, and consultation.

WISE materials are available throughout the community for victims and survivors to access in safe ways and for everyone to learn more about ending violence. Call or email and request materials for your business or organization.

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Gender stereotypes

If you walked into a classroom with WISE educators, chances are you would observe many conversations about gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are all the big and little assumptions and expectations we have about what boys and girls are “supposed” to be like. In fifth grade, WISE educators encourage students to define their own values when they feel pressured to conform to gender stereotypes. Sixth graders build a critical lens of what media is selling us, noticing how advertising often reinforces gender stereotypes. In seventh grade, students discuss how gender stereotypes may encourage harmful behaviors between friends and dating partners. Eighth graders reflect on how gender stereotypes inform and limit our relationships. High school students make the connection to how gendered pressures and expectations lead to gender-based violence.

We spend a LOT of time talking about the impact of gender stereotypes and encouraging students to imagine the world without them. Research shows that there is a direct correlation between strong adherence to traditional gender norms and high rates of gender-based violence. Eliminating them makes the world a safer and more joyful place for all of us.

Gender stereotypes are the social expectations for men to behave one way, women to behave another way, and for all people to fit into one of those boxes. We hear things like men are leaders and women are supporters; men are strong and women are delicate; men are stoic and women are emotional. Stereotypes about women often focus on their looks or sex appeal. We tend to think about things happening to women, while we envision men being the ones to take action.

This is called **objectification**: turning people into things. Instead of doing things with people, we do things to objects. Ultimately, these stereotypes make it seem normal or natural for some (men) to have power and take action, while others (women and people who are transgender) to have less power.

Gender-based violence is used as a way to keep people in their stereotypical roles and keep the power imbalance in place. Gender-based violence is used to maintain power inequality between men and women; it is used against men and boys who do not fit the expectations of manliness; it is used within struggles for dominance; it is used against women and girls to keep them in a secondary position; it is used against people who are trans and gender non-conforming for challenging expectations around gender; and it is used against people who are LGBTQ for not fitting the social norms about sexuality.

Once you start to notice gender stereotypes, you begin to see them everywhere: slogans on clothing, in music, movies, and our favorite tv shows, and in casual everyday conversations. This means that there are countless opportunities for us to influence our culture every day. By challenging gender stereotypes, we can dramatically reduce gender-based violence.

Some things we all can do:

- Encourage young people to try new things. Let them experiment with things they love like sports, toys, and clothes, and question assumptions about who can and cannot participate in various activities based on gender.
- Let children dress and play in the ways they find most comfortable and practical.
- Eliminate gendered insults from your language and call out others when they use them.

- Notice and point out stereotypes you observe in media and advertising.
- Help young people define what they value in themselves and others.
- Watch *The Sexy Lie*, a TedTalk by Caroline Heldman.

Dating violence

In a study of teens who had been in an abusive dating relationship, less than one-third (32%) had confided in a parent about their abusive relationship.¹ The same study found that the reason the conversations were not happening, or that the conversations were unproductive, was because both teens and their parents reported feeling “extremely uncomfortable talking to each other about the most serious aspects of dating abuse.” You can make these conversations comfortable by making them more frequent! When conversations between caregivers and teens are on-going, informal, and include time spent talking about the good things in their relationships, it makes it easier to talk about the harder stuff.

The two biggest warning signs of an abusive relationship are **jealousy** and **put downs**. These behaviors can start showing up early in the relationship. Jealousy in particular can sometimes feel good at first, like the person just REALLY cares about the relationship. It can be masked as love (let’s just spend all of our time together) or a lack of trust (I don’t trust them with you, or I don’t trust you with them). Jealousy is used to isolate someone from their friends, family, or other support systems.

Put downs and insults may be subtle at first. They may only come out during arguments, or are minimized as “just jokes.” No matter what is happening in a relationship, there is no healthy reason to name call or make someone feel bad about themselves.

¹ Liz Claiborne Inc. Teen Relationship Abuse Survey (Conducted March 2006)

Abusive behaviors trickle in slowly, which can make it look like one-off incidents and harder to identify a pattern of abuse. Having an open dialogue with your teen about their relationships is important for their development of safe and healthy relationships. You want to be someone who they can go to with questions.

If you are worried, be careful not to make them feel like you are judging who they choose to date. This may make your teen feel defensive and think that you are not a safe person to talk about things. Explain the behaviors that are concerning, be curious about what your teen thinks of the relationship, and model healthy ways to be in relationships. Share with them times when you have faced challenges in your own experience. Failures and mistakes can be just as valuable to discuss.

If you are worried that your teen may be unkind or careless with whom they are dating, express your concerns about the behaviors that are controlling, insulting, or dismissive. Reinforce your values and encourage your teen to be a kind and respectful dating partner. Remind young people that it is okay not to be in a relationship if it does not work for them!

Some Conversation Starters:

- What do you like about your crush? What are the great parts of your relationship?
- How does it make you feel when person does X?
- What are the things you worry about in your relationship? How do you talk about your concerns with your partner?
- Do you ever notice that there are expectations or assumptions about your relationship that you

never agreed to? Where did they come from? How do you bring those up with your partner?

- What do your friends/peers think about your relationship? What are the trends at school about dating? How do you feel about those?

Navigating the world online: communities

The internet and social media have become a huge part of our dating relationships, friendships, and daily lives. Teenagers stay connected with their friends and family, find validating communities of peers, and access useful information online. Adults can help teenagers navigate the online world by having conversations and brainstorming strategies for supporting young people in developing skills for safe and healthy technology use.

There are communities online. The internet can be a place where young people find community and support that they may not be able to access in person. When our physical communities are not set up to offer the support necessary for healthy and fulfilling relationships, young people will turn to the internet to access resources. LGBTQIA youth often use the internet to explore their identity, find information, and connect to on- and offline communities and services. If your teen is interested in engaging online in this way, you can help them identify safe and trustworthy websites.

Technology plays a huge role in teen relationships.

It is common for teens to be in near constant communication with each other online, which means they are likely having important and challenging conversations online as well. There are both benefits and disadvantages to this, and the teens in your life can probably name them. You can be curious with your teen about their experiences communicating online.

Some things we all can do:

- Talk to your teen about what is a reasonable

expectation for communicating via text. Many of us check in with friends and families throughout the day. It is an easy way to update schedule changes, or to let someone know you are thinking of them. There is a difference between a healthy amount of communication, and an extreme expectation to be constantly available and responsive. Technology should enhance our lives, not complicate them. When we feel overwhelmed by the number of texts we need to respond to, or anxious about watching every snapchat story, it may be time to reevaluate our technology and social media use.

- Model healthy relationships with technology. Talk about conversations you choose to have in person versus over text or email. How does texting change the conversation? Are there times you try to turn off your phone? Share your own struggles with technology and social media. Perhaps you feel pressure to live up to expectations set by social media, or maybe you posted something or sent a text that you regretted.
- Encourage your kids to not use technology as an “easy out” for hard or challenging conversations (note: technology may be the safest option when trying to end an abusive relationship). Encourage them to talk to a teacher after class about their grade, instead of sending an email. Recommend that they confront a friend about their hurt feelings the next time they are together, rather than over text. Suggest they ask the person they like out on a date at the end of the school day. As adults, they will need to have many of these conversations in person, practicing while they are young will make it easier.

Navigating the world online: dating, technology, and abuse

Technology is an undeniable component of dating relationships. Teens use online platforms to flirt and experiment with relationships. Practicing romantic relationships online can feel safer than in the real world. Social media helps them feel connected to their partners and lets them show how much they care. Fortunately, research shows that the majority of these experiences are positive.² Sometimes what teens see and experience online can be harmful. Without carefully processing these situations, abusive behaviors can become normalized which makes it easier for abuse to exist.

Devices can be used to abuse and harass others.

The most common abusive behavior reported is accessing a partner's social media account without permission or behind their backs.³ Teens may feel like they have to give their passwords in order to prove their commitment to the relationship. Controlling partners may use social media as ways to start fights about posts they do not like or people they think are too flirty. If your teen breaks up with someone who was abusive, they may still be targeted online. Social media is used to spread rumors, name call, post harmful pictures, and provoke the other partner. This makes it difficult for teens to move on from a breakup, and may be a reason that they stay in the abusive relationship.

² Lenhart, A., Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2015). Teens, technology and romantic relationships: From flirting to breaking up, social media and mobile phones are woven into teens' romantic lives.

³ Zweig, J. M., Dank, M., Yahner, J., & Lachman, P. (2013). The rate of cyber dating abuse among teens and how it relates to other forms of teen dating violence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Your teen needs to know that you have their back.

When talking with young people, it can be helpful to focus on the behavior rather than the use of technology itself. Even if you do not feel like they made the best decisions, you can show support by helping them process what happened without feeling shame or responsibility for the abuse. Abuse is never their fault.

Some things we all can do:

- Encourage honest and ongoing communication instead of limiting access to the online world. Taking away devices may have unintended consequences. Teens will likely find a way to access their online lives with or without permission. Once they have gone behind your back they may be less likely to ask for your help when they need it. Abusers may use teens' natural desire to be connected to further exploit or control them. Try to come up with a solution collaboratively.
- Ask your teens what platform they like the best. Be open and curious about what they like about the platform they are using. Social media platforms are always changing. Have conversations about social media that are not dismissive, judgmental, or punishing.
- Ask them about how they engage with their friends online. There is a digital etiquette that young people consider appropriate for different social media platforms.
- Consider creating screen-free times or places. Decide together what times are appropriate for using technology. Have a conversation about the value of detaching from devices.
- Reassure your teen that it is okay to disengage

with people who are hurtful to them. One benefit of online platforms is the ability to block and limit interactions with people.

- Connect with your teen about their online lives, while letting them make mistakes. This can be an opportunity to develop trust and communication around privacy and responsibility. You and your family can decide the best way to create the space that allows your teen to have privacy in exploring relationships with guidance and support from adults.
- Call us to learn more! Our Youth Advocate is available to talk with you about any of these issues.

Navigating the world online: sexting and nudes

Sexting is “sending sexually suggestive or explicit texts, photos, or video messages via computer or mobile devices,”⁴ or as young people call it, “sending nudes.” Both teenagers and adults have been known to participate in sending and receiving naked pictures. Despite our own behavior, adult instincts are often to warn young people about all of the terrible potential consequences of sending naked pictures in hopes of discouraging them from participating. However, in a study of 18 year olds, 77% said “the [sexual] picture they sent caused no problems for them.”⁵

When the message that teenagers receive from adults does not match their lived experiences, they are less likely to listen. It is understandable to have concerns about your teen sending or receiving sexual pictures, just as you might if they were experimenting with any sexual behavior. Smart phones and social media are not going away, so our best bet is to provide young people information and support for navigating their devices. Share your specific concerns and provide information for safe and respectful sexual interactions – just as you would if you were talking about any sexual activity.

Some things to consider when talking about sexting:

- **Consent matters.** Emphasize that we all have a responsibility to make sure no one feels pressure to send pictures or see pictures that makes them feel uncomfortable. Make sure your teen knows

4 Champion, A.R., & Pedersen, C.L. (2015). Investigating differences between sexters and non sexters on attitudes, subjective norms, and risky sexual behaviours. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 24(3), 205-214.

5 Rosin, H. (2014). Why kids sext. *Atlantic*, 314(4), 64-77.

that it is not okay to try to convince someone to do anything that they do not want to do. If they are asked for a nude, ask them if they feel like their response is respected.

- **Anything sexual comes with risks.** There are some risks that are unique to sending and receiving nude photos. Anything we send via text, email, or social media can be easily shared with others. Pictures that are sent as a result of social pressure are more likely to be shared with others.⁶ We do not know whether the person who receives the nude will keep it private. We do not always know who is on the other side of the phone, who else is in the room with the person we are texting, or what might happen to the photo once it is out in the world.
- **Consequences are different for girls.** Girls and boys send sexual texts at similar rates, but for different reasons and with different results. Women and girls typically report that they experience negative outcomes at a higher rate than men and boys do.⁷ Boys are nearly 4 times more likely to pressure girls to send nude photos than the reverse.⁸ A 2018 study found that less than 8% of girls share explicit pictures because they want to; the rest did so because of a desire to please, acquiesce to, or avoid conflict with a boy.⁹ There is limited research on how teens who are LGBTQ experience sexting within their relationships. They may experience the additional threat of being outed as an additional form of pressure.

6 Ibid.

7 Dir, A.L., & Cyders, M.A. (2015). Risks, risk factors and outcomes associated with phone and internet sexting among university students in the United States. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44(6), 1675-1684.

8 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. (2017).

9 Northwestern University. (2018).

- **Gender norms are at play.** Our culture grooms girls to believe that their power and worth come from their attractiveness and the approval of men and boys. When girls send nudes, they are often humiliated

and blamed for any negative outcomes from both their peers and adults. Boys rarely face negative consequences for their nudes, and are often praised by their male friends for acquiring so many naked pictures of their female classmates. Of course, teens who are LGBTQ are also sexting and are also at risk for gender roles and stereotypes to be used against them as coercion or pressure. The best way to understand the pressures your teen may be faced with, regardless of their identity, is to ask them. We see this gender bias play out throughout all sexual experiences. It is not the phone, or the social media platform that is causing the harmful experience, it is the culture they live in.

- **Sexting has unique risks.** “Whether a sext qualifies as a relatively safe sexual experimentation or a disaster often depends on who finds out about it.”¹⁰ We often advise young people to ask adults for help when they need support, but in the case of sexting, sometimes adults make it worse. Students who tell teachers that they are being harassed about a nude may find that teachers are mandated reporters which trigger a response. The school may be required to inform the police and both the school and police launch investigations that the students never wanted and have no control over. Often schools are ill-equipped to find ways of implementing adequate support and accountability to stop the behavior, and many say that what happens outside of school is outside their purview,

¹⁰ Rosin, H. (2014). Why kids sext. *Atlantic*, 314(4), 64-77.

regardless of the impact on someone's ability to learn.

Police are restricted in their response to the letter of the law, many of which are written with good intentions to stop child pornography rings, but do not consider the social behavior of teens. In NH and VT, sexually explicit images of people under 18 are considered child pornography. The law does not distinguish between individuals creating images and individuals viewing images. In practice, this can mean that girls who are harassed into providing pictures can receive the same criminal charge and sentence as boys who coerce and distribute images of their classmates.

- **The number one thing you can do is talk with your teenagers.** Students often say that adults do not understand the social expectations and dynamics surrounding their decision to ask for or send pictures, and instead make youth feel shamed, embarrassed or stupid for participating. Your ongoing and proactive conversations about respectful sexual and technological behavior are critical. It is helpful when you understand from your teenager why young people do what they do. Rather than shutting down the conversations and behaviors that make you nervous, you can use it as an opportunity to open up conversations with your teenager. Give your kids the overarching skills and information to navigate relationships and interactions with their peers, while reinforcing that you have their back.

Recommended reading:

Sexting Panic, by Amy Hasinoff
Why Kids Sext, The Atlantic, 2015

Teenagers, Stop Asking for Nude Photos, New

York Times, 2018

Resources for teens (and the adults in their lives):

www.teenvogue.com/story/pressure-to-send-nudes

www.scarleteen.com/article/relationships/i_think_he_might_be_using_me_what_should_i_do

www.scarleteen.com/article/abuse_assault/hes_pressuring_me_how_do_i_tell_him

Check out our Instagram posts, @WISEuv, to see some of the common strategies people who are abusive use to try to get nudes.



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