GBV CONVERSATION GUIDE

FOR ADULTS SUPPORTING TEENS 14 TO 18

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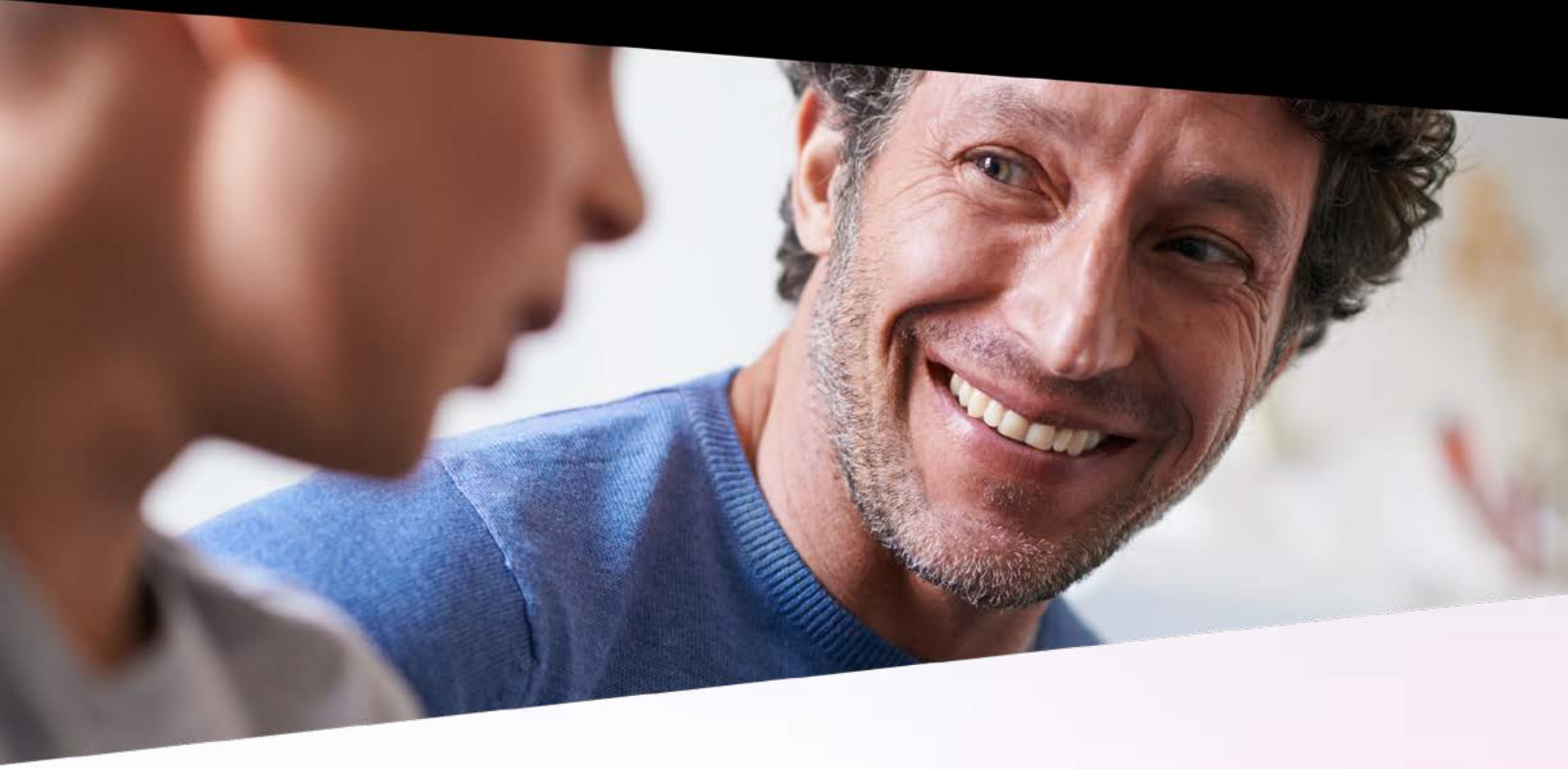

INTRODUCTION

This guide was created to help parents, caregivers, educators, coaches, mentors, and other influential adults in having meaningful conversations with teens aged 14-18 about gender-based violence, healthy relationships, consent, boundaries, and safety.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is any form of harm against a person based on their gender, gender expression, or perceived gender. It's not just physical or sexual violence, it can also include emotional and economic abuse, coercion, threats, or neglect.

Unfortunately, GBV is prevalent. It can happen in relationships or friendships and take place at schools, in workplaces, within communities, and in digital spaces.

Teens are already going through a lot for the first time. They are navigating relationships, identity, and social pressures while learning to build confidence, boundaries and coping skills. That's why it's important for adults like you to have these important conversations with the teens in your life.

These conversations don't have to be formal or happen just once. And you don't need to have all the answers at your fingertips. The important thing is that you are giving an open, supportive space to have the conversation.

CONTENT WARNING

This guide discusses topics related to GBV, including abuse, harassment, and harm that can happen in person or online. These topics may be difficult for some people, including adults with their own lived experiences.

Take care of yourself as you use this guide and step away if you need to. **Support is available should you need it, while you are encouraged to look for support in your local area, here are some national supports you can access:**

- Support services for those affected by gender-based violence
- Mental health supports

MANDATORY REPORTING

Trust matters, and confidentiality is a big part of that. Depending on your role (e.g., teacher, youth worker, coach, etc.), you may have legal or organizational responsibilities to report certain disclosures, especially if a young person is at risk of harm.

Young adults have the right to understand how confidentiality works in your specific role or context.

Mandatory Reporting: If you are in a role with mandatory reporting obligations, be clear about your responsibilities **before** the conversation begins. If a disclosure meets the threshold for reporting, explain this clearly and calmly, and involve them in the next steps as much as possible.

You can say: *"I need to report this to keep _____ safe. I can still support you through what happens next."*

Non-Mandatory Reporting: If you are not a mandated reporter, for example, a parent, caregiver, mentor, or trusted adult, it's still important to know where to turn. If a disclosure raises concerns about safety, you can seek guidance from your local crisis lines, youth support services, and professionals, such as counsellors or social workers.

You can say: "*This is bigger than I can handle alone. Getting support is part of taking responsibility.*"

PREPARING YOURSELF BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Before talking with teens about GBV and related topics, take a moment to reflect and prepare.

CONSIDER YOUR OWN THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

- Consider how your own experiences, culture, upbringing, gender identity, or assumptions may shape how you view and understand relationships, consent, and violence.
- Remember that power dynamics can influence conversations with teens.
- Recognize that GBV can happen to anyone, but some young people may experience it differently because of factors like gender, gender-identity, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, immigration status, or where they live.
- Be open to learning together. These conversations work best when you're exploring a topic together and not treating it as a lesson. It is okay not to know all the answers.

PREPARE FOR QUESTIONS AND PERSONAL DISCUSSIONS

- Teens may ask direct, awkward, or challenging questions. This is normal.
- Sometimes, a conversation may lead to them sharing something personal about themselves or someone they know.
  - If this happens, don't try to take control. Listen, support, provide information, and help them explore options and resources at their own pace. Anything they share with you should be confidential unless they're at immediate risk of harm.
  - Don't try to fix everything in the moment. Let them move at their own pace and make their own choices.

You don't need to have all the answers. Your role is to listen, support, and help connect them to appropriate help if needed.

CREATE AN OPEN AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

- Let them know you are here to support them and that they're in control of how much or how little they want to share.
- Speak in a clear and respectful way as equals using adult-to-adult language.
- Allow for pauses, uncertainty and/or mixed feelings.
- Notice how you show up – examine your own thoughts, assumptions, feelings, and role in a situation and how they might influence your reactions or behaviour, and be willing to question it.

Try to avoid:

- Brushing off their feelings or experiences.
- Asking "why" questions that sound blaming.
- Interrupting or rushing to give advice.
- Making assumptions about their experiences.

STARTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

WHAT IS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

Gender-based violence (GBV) is any form of harm against a person based on someone's gender, gender expression, or perceived gender. GBV includes any action that causes physical, emotional, sexual, or economic violence. It is often tied to inequality and discrimination supported by harmful stereotypes, abuse of power, and unjust systems.

There are different types of GBV:

- **Physical:** hitting, restraining someone, breaking someone's belongings, threats of physical harm, etc.
- **Emotional and psychological:** humiliation, controlling behaviours, manipulation, intimidation, etc.
- **Sexual:** unwanted sexual comments (in person or online), jokes, unwanted touching, sexual coercion or assault, sharing or threatening to share sexual or intimate images or videos, etc.
- **Economic:** controlling money, theft, limiting access to spending or finances, stopping someone from going to their shifts at work, etc.
- **Tech-facilitated GBV:** online harassment, image-based abuse, tracking, and doxxing (exposing or sharing someone's private information online without their consent), etc.

WHY DOES GBV HAPPEN?

At the core of GBV is power and control. While GBV can affect anyone, including men and boys, it disproportionately affects women, sexually and gender diverse people, and individuals who also experience systemic barriers such as racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, housing insecurity, or immigration.

GBV is not experienced the same way by everyone, and systemic barriers often make it more difficult to find safety or support.

Because GBV is rooted in power and control, prevention and response must also be rooted in rights, accountability, and shared responsibility. Young people have the right to safety and respect, and adults have a responsibility to uphold those rights and act when concerns arise.

"Open discussions about GBV create a safe space for survivors to seek support from peers and professionals."

Yasmin A., Youth Leader

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT GBV WITH YOUTH?

Talking openly with teens about gender-based violence, consent, boundaries, healthy relationships, and online safety helps normalize these conversations before a crisis happens. When adults create space to discuss these topics regularly, young people are more likely to recognize unhealthy behaviours, understand their rights, and reach out for support if something happens to them or someone they know.

WHERE TO BEGIN

The strongest conversations don't usually feel planned. They don't need to be formal and don't have to happen all at once. With teens, these talks work best when they feel relaxed, optional, and connected to real life. This may be during a car ride, while going on a walk, or in response to something that happened.

Look for entry points to open a conversation

- Something that happened at school or during an activity.
- A post, message, or situation online.
- A TV show, movie, song, or news story.
- A comment they make about a relationship or peers.
- News in their friend group about dating, relationships, or breakups.

Ways to bring it up

- "That video seemed pretty intense — what did you think of it?"
- "In that show, the character kept checking their partner's phone. Is that something you see in real life?"
- "I might be reading too much into it, but earlier you seemed uncomfortable. Want to tell me what was going on?"

Create a safe space

- Avoid making the conversation feel like they're being assessed, corrected, or supervised.
- Let them decide how much they want to share and respect their boundaries if they don't feel like talking.
- Keep lines of communication open. For example: "I want you to know you can always talk to me if something feels off or uncomfortable."

DURING A CONVERSATION

To help a teen feel safe opening up, try keeping these things in mind:

Be transparent

Clearly explain your role and any limits to confidentiality in plain language. For example:

"I want you to know that this conversation is private, and you get to decide what you share. The only time I would need to involve someone else is if there was an immediate risk to your safety or someone else's."

Ask open-ended questions

Open-ended questions invite reflection and conversation rather than a simple "yes" or "no". They help teens feel heard, encourage critical thinking, and reduce the feeling of being tested or judged. These types of questions create space for teens to share what they really think and feel.

- "I saw ___ online today. What do you think about it?"
- "What does respect look like to you?"
- "What would you do if a friend told you about something that happened to them that made them feel uncomfortable?"

Practice active listening

Active listening means listening to understand instead of listening to respond. Showing empathy can help teens feel respected, understood, and in control of what they choose to share.

- Give them your full attention. Put away or silence your phone, turn off notifications, and step away from the screens or distractions when possible.
- Check that you've understood correctly and reflect what you hear by repeating back the key points in your own words.
- Validate their feelings, even if you don't agree with every choice.
- Allow for pauses and avoid jumping to solutions or advice.

Be reassuring

Throughout the conversation, they may open up about their own experiences. It's important to reassure them to make them feel comfortable as you talk.

- "I believe you."
- "I can see why that would feel complicated."
- "Thank you for telling me."

HOW TO RESPOND TO DIFFERENT SITUATIONS

If the teen says they don't want to talk about it

Teens may not always be ready to talk about these topics. They may change the subject, say "I already know", become quiet, or seem uncomfortable. It's important that you respect this boundary and revisit it another time.

- "I understand, it is a hard topic to talk about."
- "I'm here when you're ready to talk."
- "Let's come back to this later."

If a teen discloses they have been subjected to GBV

If a teen discloses that they have been subjected to GBV, it's important to try to stay calm and listen without interrupting. Believe them, avoid questioning their story, and resist the urge to rush toward solutions. Let them know that what happened is not their fault and be transparent about your role and any legal duty to report—if the teen is under 16 or at risk of harm, explain this clearly and gently before taking any action. Discuss possible options together, and where there is no immediate safety risk or mandatory reporting requirement, support the teen in exploring next steps at their own pace.

Five ways you can support a teen who discloses GBV

1. **Let them stay in control where possible**

- Teens often feel powerless after experiencing violence. Support their sense of agency by offering simple, age-appropriate choices.
  Example: "Would you like to keep talking here, or move somewhere more private?"

2. **Check in on their emotional impacts**

- Teens may struggle with overwhelming feelings, worry they'll get in trouble, or fear not being believed. Normalize their reactions without pushing them to share more than they want to.
  Example: "It's completely understandable to feel scared, confused, or upset."

3. **Use gender- and trauma-affirming language**

- Reflect their own words back to them and avoid assumptions about their relationships, identity, or what happened.
  Example: "Thank you for telling me. I hear you."

4. **Follow up**

- Teens often see the same peers or environments where harm occurred (school, social media, extracurriculars). A gentle check-in helps them feel supported and not forgotten.
  Example: "I'm thinking of you today. Let me know if you need anything."

5. **Prioritize their safety**

- Ask simple, non-intrusive questions to understand whether they feel safe at home, school, or online.
  Example: "Do you feel safe walking home today?"
  If not, ensure they are connected to appropriate supports immediately.

If a teen discloses that they have caused harm

Sometimes a young person may share that they crossed a boundary, pressured someone, shared something they shouldn't have, or acted in a way that caused harm. These moments can be difficult. They may feel defensive, ashamed, confused, or afraid of getting in trouble.

Your role is not to shame or label them, but to support accountability, safety, and learning.

- Stay calm and avoid reacting with anger or panic.
- Be clear that causing harm does not automatically make them a "bad person", but be clear their actions matter.
- Help them reflect on impact, not just intent.
- Reinforce that accountability means taking responsibility and making changes, not just saying sorry.
- Be transparent about any legal or reporting responsibilities you have.
- Support the next steps that prioritize the safety and well-being of the person who is harmed.

Accountability is a process. It may involve reflection, repair when appropriate and safe, and a sustained change in behaviour. Holding young people responsible while maintaining connection helps prevent future harm and supports real growth.

Ways to respond:

- "Thank you for being honest with me. It takes courage to talk about this."
- "I want to understand what happened so we can figure out how to make things right."
- "I'm going to be honest with you about any steps I have to take, because your safety and the other person's safety matter."
- "We can work together on what needs to happen next."

WRAPPING UP THE CONVERSATION

These conversations don't have to happen just once. Leaving an open door allows you to have ongoing communication and support them as new things come up.

- Tell them you appreciate the conversation.
- Remind them you are always available to listen.
- Let them know these conversations don't have to be a one-time thing.
- Share additional learning and support resources, including the **It's Not Just** modules.
- If you didn't know the answer to something, find out and follow up – and commit to learning more together.

Key messages to reinforce:

- Everyone deserves to feel safe and respected.
- Consent and boundaries matter – every single time.
- It's never the survivor or victim's fault.
- You are not alone. Help is available when you need it.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP, CONSENT & BOUNDARIES

Teens are often learning about relationships through peers, social media, and their lived experience. You play an important role in helping them recognize what healthy relationships look like, and what warning signs to watch for. The points below can guide conversations and give you shared language to explore respect, consent, and boundaries.

What makes a relationship healthy?

- Respect
- Communication
- Trust
- Consent
- Support and care
- Boundaries
- Equality

What does an unhealthy relationship look like?

- Jealousy and possessiveness
- Manipulation
- Monitoring and control
- Isolation from friends or family
- Non-consensual behaviour
- Verbal or emotional abuse
- Threats or coercion
- Technology-enabled control or harassment

BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are the personal limits we set around what feels safe, comfortable, and acceptable. They're not only about physical space — they can also be emotional, digital, time related (like how you choose to spend your time), or sexual. Each person's boundaries can look different, depending on what they need to feel respected and secure.

It is important to talk with young people about boundaries because learning to identify and express them builds confidence, self-respect, and safety. When teens understand that they have the right to set limits, and that those limits should be respected, they are better equipped to recognize unhealthy behaviour and seek support if something feels wrong.

Building confidence around boundaries means helping teens practice what it looks and sounds like in everyday situations. This includes:

- Saying "I'm not comfortable with that."
- Changing their mind without feeling guilty.
- Asking for space or time alone.
- Deciding not to share passwords, photos, or personal information.
- Respecting someone else's "no" without pressure or persuasion.

You can support this by reinforcing that:

- Boundaries are healthy, not rude.
- Discomfort is a signal worth paying attention to.
- Tips for teens to set boundaries (the 3 Cs):
  - Clear: State limits in simple language.
  - Concrete: Make boundaries specific.
  - Consistent: Apply boundaries in all relationships in your life.

CONSENT

Just as teens have the right to set their own boundaries and say no, they also have the responsibility to respect other people's limits. Consent means everyone is actively, willingly, and continuously agreeing. It can't be assumed or guessed, and it can change at any time.

Consent is more than "no means no." It's about feeling safe to say yes, no, or to change your mind at any point. Being in a relationship or having a past experience together doesn't automatically give consent. Everyone has the right to adjust their boundaries whenever they need to, with anyone.

One way to help teens understand consent is by remembering these five elements.

- Freely given
- Reversible
- Informed
- Enthusiastic
- Specific

> *"Anyone who truly cares for you will respect your boundaries."*
>
> Micah K., Youth Leader

Ways to bring up consent in conversation:

- "I noticed that you were looking through ____'s phone. Let's talk about this."
- "That scene in the show where they didn't really ask first... what did you think about that?"
- "What do you look for to know if someone is genuinely relaxed and into something, versus just going along?"

When discussing how they can respond to situations where somebody else is asking for consent, share some of these examples. Remind them that consent can include limits and be specific to one action, not everything. Consent and boundaries don't need to be long explanations. Short, clear statements are enough.

Denying consent:

- "I'm not sending photos. Please don't ask again."
- "I don't want to be touched like that."
- "I need to go now."

Giving consent:

- "Yes, I'm okay with holding hands."
- "I'm comfortable with this, but I don't want it to go any further."

CHALLENGING HARMFUL ATTITUDES

You can help in both responding to victim-blaming directly and helping teens learn how to respond when they encounter it. Victim-blaming is when the survivor or victim of GBV is held responsible, in whole or in part, for the violence committed against them, instead of the person who caused it.

This blame can come from legal, medical and mental health professionals, from family members, friends and acquaintances, as well as the media.

VICTIM-BLAMING CAN SOUND LIKE:

- "What did you expect going out dressed like that?"
- "Did you fight back?"
- "You shouldn't have gone home with them."
- "Why did you drink so much?"
- "Are you sure you said no?"

Victim-blaming has devastating effects on survivors and victims. These negative responses are a fear that many people have when opening up about violence they have experienced. Victim-blaming can also make it harder for survivors to come forward, creating significant barriers for them to access and receive support and help.

Ways to bring it up:

- "I heard ___ in this video. What message do you think that sends to someone who has been harmed?"
- "How do you think it would feel to read comments like that if you were the person involved?"
- "If a friend told you something happened to them and someone blamed them, how would you respond?"

How to respond to victim-blaming

You can play a key role in countering victim-blaming by offering your teen clear support. Here are eight ways you can help shift the conversation:

1. **Speak up** when you hear comments that blame the victim.
2. **Don't agree with or excuse** harmful behaviours.
3. **Remind survivors** that what happened is not their fault.
4. **Hold people accountable** for their actions.
5. **Offer support and resources** if survivors or victims want them and respect them if they don't.
6. **Be aware** of how victim-blaming can be linked to racism, sexism, homophobia, or other stereotypes.
7. **Be critical of victim-blaming** in media, posts, or headlines.
8. **Shift the focus** from questioning the survivor (like "Why did they stay?") to questioning the person who caused the harm (like "Why did they choose to hurt someone?")

BEING A BYSTANDER

WHAT TEENS CAN DO IF THEY SEE GBV

Bystander intervention is a powerful way to shift norms around GBV and everyone has the ability to make a difference. Even small actions can interrupt harm, show support to someone experiencing it, and signal that disrespectful behaviour is not acceptable.

At the same time, **safety should always come first.** Teens don't need to confront someone directly to have a positive impact and can choose an action that prioritizes their safety.

Here are five strategies they can use depending on the situation:

1. **Distract:** Engage with the person being targeted; ask for directions or bring up something random or unrelated.
2. **Delegate:** Ask for assistance, for example from a bus driver or security guard.
3. **Delay:** After the incident, check in with the person being subjected to GBV.
4. **Direct:** Directly engage with the aggressor only if it is safe for you to do so.
5. **Document:** You can record a video or create a written record of the event. Never post a video clip without the consent of the survivor.

Ways to bring it up:

- "You saw ___ online. How would you keep yourself safe in these spaces."
- "Have you ever been in a situation where you weren't sure whether or how to step in?"
- "If you saw something that made you uncomfortable, what would help you decide what to do?"

SAFETY

BEING SAFE ONLINE

Many teens experience harm through technology-facilitated GBV, which can include receiving hurtful or threatening messages, feeling monitored or controlled, or being pressured to share intimate images.

Here are 8 things you can encourage teens to do:

1. **Recognize the signs of GBV:** Help teens understand that online harm can include threatening or manipulative messages, excessive monitoring, pressure to share photos, or someone crossing digital boundaries.
2. **Trust their feelings:** Encourage teens to trust their instincts. If something happens online that feels uncomfortable, scary, or wrong, they should seek support.
3. **Use your privacy settings:** Teach teens how to use privacy settings (and keep them updated) on social media platforms and online accounts. Encourage them to limit who can see their posts and personal information.
4. **Be selective with friend or follow requests:** Remind teens to only accept friend requests or follow requests from people they know and trust, and to be cautious of strangers or accounts that show inappropriate behaviour.
5. **Protect personal information:** Encourage teens to avoid sharing personal information like their full name, address, phone number, or school name publicly online.
6. **Report and block when needed:** Let teens know they can report abusive or harmful behaviour to a trusted adult and use reporting and blocking tools on platforms.
7. **Seek support:** Reinforce that teens do not have to handle online harassment or GBV alone. Encourage them to reach out to a trusted adult or support service.
8. **Be a good digital citizen:** Encourage teens to treat others online with respect and kindness, avoid spreading rumours or engaging in online drama, and to support peers who may be experiencing technology-facilitated abuse.

SUPPORT

Whether a young person is looking for support for themselves or for a friend, it's important they know that help is available. Sometimes, teens just need someone to talk to and other times, they may need help finding safety in a difficult situation. Your role can make a difference in helping them explore options without judgment, so they feel less alone.

Accessing support isn't always easy for teens. They may hesitate or struggle to reach out for many reasons. These barriers may be internal or external.

- **Internal barriers** can include:
  - Self-blame
  - Fear of not being believed
  - Concerns about confidentiality
  - Fear of getting in "trouble" or causing problems for themselves or others
  - Uncertainty about whether their experience "counts" as GBV
  - Having limited awareness of available supports
- **External barriers** can include:
  - Cultural or family expectations
  - Stigma
  - Immigration or legal concerns
  - Past negative experiences with an institution
  - Systems that feel confusing or hard to access

Often, it's the combination of these barriers that makes it harder for someone to ask for help dealing with GBV. Recognizing that these barriers exist can help you better support someone who is looking for help.

Ways to bring it up:

- "Everyone needs support sometimes. You don't have to handle this on your own."
- "You get to decide what kind of help you want. I'm here to talk through the options with you."
- "If you'd rather talk to someone else, I can help you find the right person."

PLACES TO FIND SUPPORT

Find support services for youth in your area.

CONCLUSION

These conversations aren't easy. Talking about gender-based violence, consent, boundaries, and safety may feel uncomfortable, but avoiding them doesn't make young people safer. Open, honest discussions do.

These conversations are not meant to happen just once. Building trust and understanding takes time. Keeping the door open, checking in, listening without judgement, and staying curious, help teens know they can come to you when it matters most.

By showing up consistently, modelling respect, and creating space for dialogue, you are helping young people build confidence, recognize unhealthy behaviours, and develop the skills they need to form safe, healthy relationships.

For more information and resources, visit Canada.ca/ItsNotJust

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

GBV Myths and Realities (YWCA Canada)

Is Our Relationship Healthy? (YWCA Canada) (PDF)

Rights. Reports. Supports: A quick guide on sexual image-based abuse (YWCA Canada)

Internet Safety Tips by Age: 14-17 (MediaSmarts) (PDF)

Queering Gender-Based Violence Prevention & Response in Canada (Wisdom2Action)

Creating a Safety Plan (British Columbia Ministry of Justice) (PDF)

Accessing Campus Healthcare: A Workbook for Gender-Based Violence Survivors (Possibility Seeds) (PDF)

Trans and Gender Diverse Mental Health, Wellness and Suicide Prevention Toolkit (SPECTRUM) (PDF)

Survivors on Post-Secondary Campuses (Courage to Act)

Upstander Intervention (YWCA Regina)

Brochure: Making appropriate parenting arrangements in family violence cases (Department of Justice Canada) (PDF)

Not Online. Not on Campus. | YWCA Canada

The 5Ds of Bystander Intervention - Right to Be