



# GBV CONVERSATION GUIDE

## FOR ADULTS SUPPORTING

### YOUNG ADULTS 19 TO 24

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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 young adults 19-24 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 financial 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.

Young adults are often juggling a lot at once. They are navigating relationships, finances, and new responsibilities. That's why it's so important for adults like you to listen without judgment and talk openly to prevent harm, challenge unhealthy ideas, and ensure young adults know where to turn if they or someone they know needs support.

You don't need to be an expert or have all the answers, either. Sometimes, what helps the most is simply being someone who listens, believes in them, and shows up.

## CONTENT WARNING

This guide discusses GBV, including topics like abuse, harassment, and harm that can happen in person or online. These topics may be difficult, especially if they connect to your own lived experience.

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](#)



## CONFIDENTIALITY

Youth aged 19-24 are legal adults. That means they have full control over their privacy and rights when it comes to healthcare, mental health, and personal relationships. Trust matters, and confidentiality is a big part of that. Depending on your role or setting (for example, in healthcare, post-secondary institutions, or in the workplace), you may need to take action if there's an immediate safety risk.

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, support services, and trusted 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."*

Reaching out for guidance is a responsible step. There are resources available at the end of this guide to help you and the youth you're supporting.



# PREPARING YOURSELF BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Before you address these topics with the young adults in your life, take some time 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 young adults.
- 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

- Young adults may ask direct or challenging questions about consent, relationships, substances, money, online safety, or power dynamics at work or with roommates. That's 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 have 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.
- Avoid judging, lecturing, or acting like you know their experience better than they do.
- Speak in a clear and respectful way as equals using adult-to-adult language.
- 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 financial harm. 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 doxing (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, sexual and gender diverse people, and individuals who also experience systemic barriers such as racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, housing insecurity, or immigration.

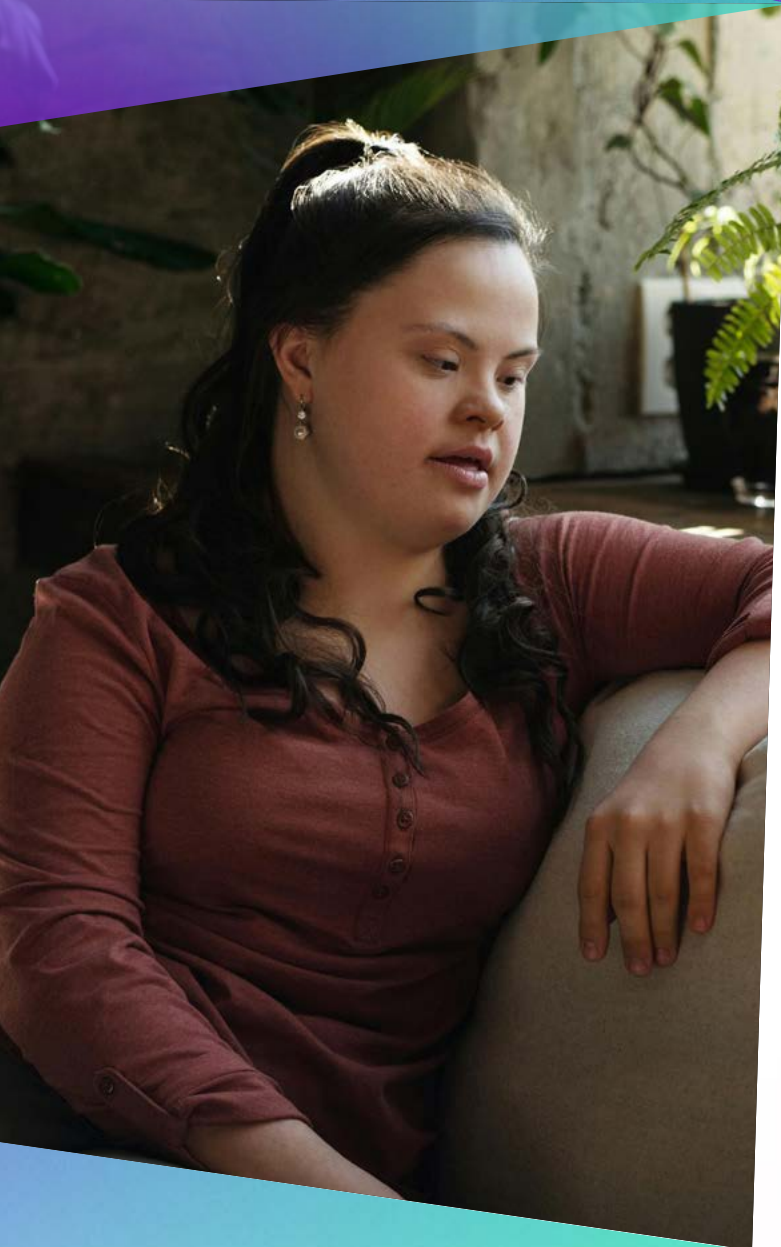
GBV is not experienced the same way by everyone, and systemic barriers often make it more difficult to find safety or support.

When it comes to GBV, everyone has rights and responsibilities. Young people have the right to safety, dignity, and autonomy, and trusted adults have a responsibility to uphold and protect those rights.



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

Yasmin A., Youth Leader



## WHERE TO BEGIN

The strongest conversations don't usually feel planned. With young adults, these talks work best when they feel relaxed, optional, and connected to real life. Trust, timing, and respect can help them open up.

### Look for entry points to open a conversation

- Work, internships, or first jobs.
- School or training programs.
- Roommates or housing problems.
- Dating, relationships, or breakups.
- Social media, dating apps, or online interactions.
- News stories, podcasts, TV shows, or pop culture.

### Ways to bring it up

- “Starting a new job can bring up a lot. How are things going with your coworkers or supervisor?”
- “Living with people isn't always easy. Has anything been making you uncomfortable at home?”
- “I heard something on a podcast today about relationships. Curious what your take is.”

### Create a safe space

- Choose low-pressure activities that you can do as equals (walking, driving, doing a hobby together).
- Remember that independence looks different for everyone. Some young adults live at home, some may live on their own, and others may be dealing with housing insecurity.
- 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.

## DURING A CONVERSATION

To create an ongoing, open line of communication that helps young adults feel empowered to make informed decisions, keep these things in mind.

### Be transparent

At the beginning of the conversation, 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 young adults feel heard, encourage critical thinking, and reduce the feeling of being tested or judged. These types of questions create space for young adults to share what they really think and feel.

- "When you hear the word *consent*, what comes to mind for you?"
- "Have you noticed situations, whether in dating, friendships, or at work, where the power didn't feel balanced? How did people navigate it?"
- "What do healthy, respectful relationships look like in your life right now, they could romantic, friendships, or at work?"

### Practice active listening

Active listening means listening to understand instead of listening to respond. Showing empathy can help young adults 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 young adult says they don't want to talk about it

You can't make someone talk about GBV if they don't want to. It's important that you respect their decision and allow space for them to change their mind.

- "I understand, it is a hard topic to talk about."
- "I'm here if you change your mind."
- "Let's check in about this later."

## **If a young adult discloses they have been subjected to GBV**

If a young adult discloses they have been subjected to GBV, try to stay calm and listen without interrupting. Believe what they're telling you and avoid questioning their story or jumping immediately to solutions. Reassure them that what happened is not their fault. Respect their autonomy by honouring their choices and pace. It is important to avoid pressuring them to report, leave a relationship, or take any steps before they're ready. Share available support options and ask what they feel would be most helpful next. When appropriate, continue to check in and offer ongoing support over time.



## **Five ways you can support a young adult who discloses GBV**

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

→ Young adults may be living independently, navigating intimate relationships, or managing school/work obligations. Offer choices that respect their autonomy and adulthood.

**Example: “Would you like to talk about options, or would you prefer I just listen right now?”**

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

→ This age group often feels pressure to cope “on their own,” especially if they are away from family or juggling work and studies. Reinforce that their reactions are valid and that support is available.

**Example: “Anyone in your situation would feel shaken. What you’re feeling is valid.”**

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

→ Avoid assumptions about their relationships, including partners they may live with, former partners, coworkers, or roommates.

**Example: “Thank you for trusting me with this. I believe you.”**

### **4. Follow up**

→ Young adults may have fewer built-in supports and might be balancing significant responsibilities. Follow up in a way that honours their independence.

**Example: “I’m checking in. No pressure to respond, but I want you to know I’m here.”**

### **5. Prioritize their safety**

→ Ask about their immediate safety in a non-leading, non-judgmental way, especially if they live with a partner or spend long hours in shared spaces.

**Example: “Are you safe where you’re staying tonight?”**

If not, help them identify safe contacts or community supports.

## If a young adult 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 their actions still 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:

- “I appreciate you being direct about this. Taking responsibility is an important first step.”
- “I’ll be transparent about any steps I’m required to take, and we can talk through what that means.”
- “Accountability isn’t just about apologizing. It’s about changing behaviours and making choices that prevent future harm.”
- “Let’s look at what repair could look like, if it’s safe and appropriate, and what personal changes you can commit to moving forward.”

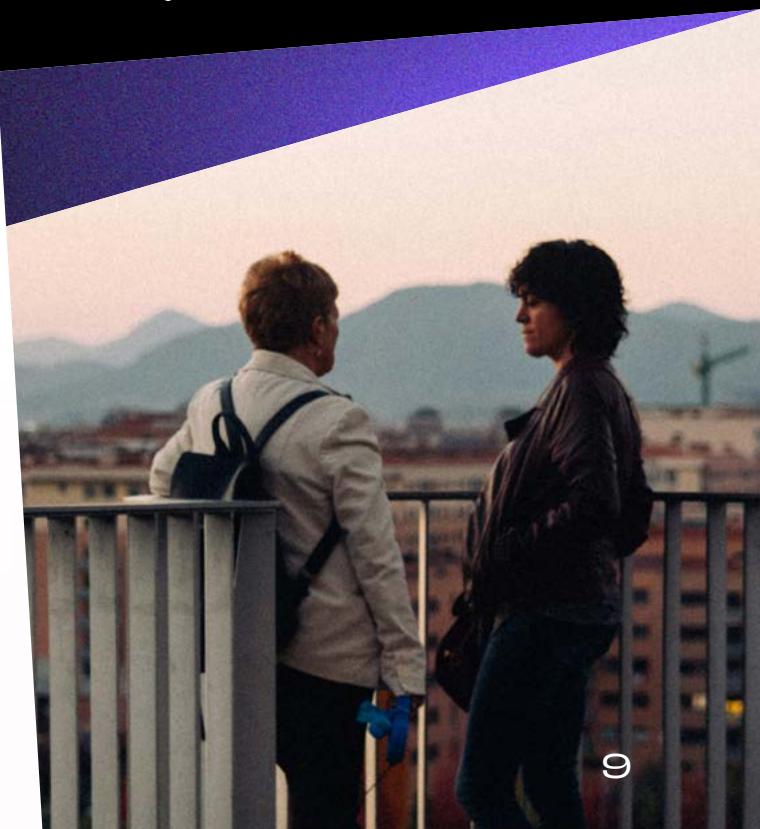
## WRAPPING UP THE CONVERSATION

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

- Tell them you appreciate the conversation. Remind them you are always open to listening.
- 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's fault.
- You are not alone. Help is available when you need it.



# HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS, CONSENT & BOUNDARIES

Young people often learn about relationships through peers, social media, and lived experiences. 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, or acceptable. Boundaries aren't just about respecting physical contact – they can also include emotional boundaries, time boundaries (like how you choose to spend your time), digital boundaries, and sexual boundaries. These limits can look different for everyone.

It is important to talk with young people about boundaries because learning to identify and express them builds confidence, self-respect, and safety. When young adults 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 young adults 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.



# CONSENT

Just as the young adult you're talking to should know they have the right to set boundaries and say no, it's important they recognize the responsibility to respect other people's boundaries. 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 saying yes, saying no, or changing your mind at any point. Past experiences or being in a relationship don't automatically grant consent. Everyone has the right to adjust their boundaries whenever they need to, with anyone.

One way to help young adults 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 mentioned \_\_\_ wasn't respecting your decisions, how are you feeling about it?"
- "What makes it easier, or harder, to talk about consent or boundaries with someone you're interested in?"
- "What kinds of non-verbal signs help you tell whether someone feels comfortable or uncomfortable in a situation?"

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'm not into \_\_\_\_."
- "Stop. Let's take a break."

### Giving consent:

- "Yes, I'm good with that."
- "I'm ok with this, but I don't want to \_\_\_\_."
- "I want to keep going."

# CHALLENGING HARMFUL ATTITUDES

You can help in responding to victim-blaming directly and helping young adults 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 that has been 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 victims and survivors. 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:

- ➔ “Why do you think people jump to asking what the victim did instead of asking what the person who caused harm did?”
- ➔ “What assumptions do you think people make when they blame victims?”
- ➔ “If the roles were reversed and you were being blamed, how would that affect your willingness to talk about what happened?”

## How to respond to victim-blaming

You play a key role in countering victim-blaming by offering clear and more supportive ways to respond. Here are eight ways to 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 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 YOUNG ADULTS CAN DO IF 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**. Young adults 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:

- ➔ "Did you hear about \_\_\_? How do 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?"
- ➔ "Let's talk about how to support or intervene while still staying safe."



# SAFETY

## BEING SAFE ONLINE

Many young adults experience harm through by 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 young adults to do:**

1. **Recognize the signs of GBV:** Help young adults 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 them to trust their instincts. If something happens online that feels uncomfortable or wrong, they should seek support.
3. **Use your privacy settings:** Help young adults understand 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 them to be cautious about who they accept as friends and to be cautious of strangers or accounts that show inappropriate behaviour.
5. **Protect personal information:** Encourage young adults to avoid sharing personal information like their full name, address, phone number, or school name publicly online.
6. **Report and block when needed:** Remind young adults they can report abusive or harmful behaviour to a trusted adult and use reporting and blocking tools on platforms.
7. **Seek support:** Reinforce that they 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 them 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 adult is looking for support for themselves or for a friend, it's important they know that help is always available. Sometimes, young people 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 young people.** 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
- ↓ 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 institutions
- ↓ 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 at times, 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 young people 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](https://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](#)