



Healthy Starts, Healthy Hearts: Understanding and Addressing Adolescent Relationship Abuse



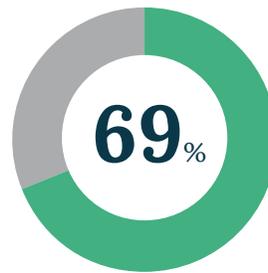
What is Adolescent Relationship Abuse?

ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP ABUSE (ARA) IS A PATTERN OF BEHAVIORS USED TO GAIN POWER AND CONTROL IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS.

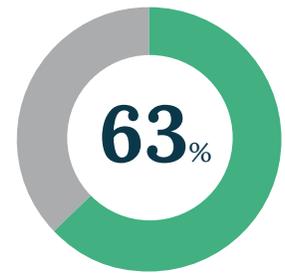
It may involve psychological, emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse and/or stalking. It happens in-person or digitally, and it can happen to younger or older adolescents.

Youth may both perpetrate and experience abuse.

AMONG 12-18 YEAR-OLDS IN A CURRENT OR PAST YEAR RELATIONSHIP



reported lifetime victimization¹



reported lifetime perpetration¹

In 2019, **8%** of high schoolers **experienced physical dating abuse** and **8%** **experienced sexual dating abuse.**²



77%

of 6th-8th graders in a dating relationship reported verbal/emotional abuse at least once in their lifetime.³



of adolescents ages 12-17 report experiencing digital forms of relationship abuse. Cyber or digital dating abuse is strongly correlated with in-person dating abuse.⁴

Young people who experience adolescent relationship abuse are more likely to report depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation.^{5, 6, 7}

To develop and maintain healthy relationships, adolescents need support from a range of systems, including their schools, health providers, and communities. These supports can partner to prevent, identify, and respond to adolescent relationship abuse.

Proactive approaches include universal education and screening.

Providers should talk to all youth about healthy and unhealthy relationships.

A universal approach is an important part of creating a culture shift related to healthy relationships. Health centers may use a universal education approach, formal screening tools, or a combination.

- A **UNIVERSAL EDUCATION** approach ensures that all youth receive education about healthy and unhealthy relationships, regardless of whether they disclose abuse.⁸ The **CUES (Confidentiality, Universal Education and Empowerment, Support) Approach** is associated with increased awareness of relationship abuse resources and a greater likelihood of disclosing unhealthy relationships to healthcare providers.⁹
- Some health centers may formally **SCREEN** young people for adolescent relationship abuse. Many comprehensive screening tools include questions about relationship safety, including the **SSHADESS assessment**, **Bright Futures**, and the **Whole Child Assessment**.
- When patients present with “clinical red flags” (e.g. non-specific complaints, frequent requests for STI testing, depression, disordered eating), providers should consider **FURTHER ASSESSMENT** for relationship abuse, in addition to providing education about relationship abuse and information about support resources.¹⁰



For additional information about how providers can talk with young people about relationship abuse, check out our webinars on [Addressing Adolescent Relationship Abuse in School-Based Health Care](#) and [Understanding and Addressing Digital Dating Abuse](#).

Listen to adolescents. Respond with compassion and understanding. Provide options and support youth in making decisions that feel right for them.



Health centers should have processes in place for **responding to adolescents' disclosures of relationship abuse**.

Consider the following questions in developing a process for responding to disclosure.

- Are there any immediate safety needs?
- Are there any primary care needs related to the abuse?
- Would the young person like a referral to additional supports (i.e. health center behavioral health; community-based relationship abuse supports; supports within the school system)?
- Are there any **mandated reporting requirements related to adolescent relationship abuse** in your state?

Providers should give positive reinforcement when a young person reports healthy relationship qualities (e.g. setting and respecting boundaries, encouraging independence, and communicating respectfully).

In all conversations with adolescents about adolescent relationship abuse, consider the following tips from youth:

- Discuss healthy relationships too! Help young people identify "green flags."
- Understand that youth may use a variety of terms to describe their romantic relationships. Ensure your understanding of those terms and what they mean to the individual adolescents with whom you work.
- Validate their feelings and experiences. Recognize that relationship abuse may be cyclical: abusive behavior may be followed by affection. While acknowledging a young person's feeling that the relationship is not all bad, all the time, encourage them to reflect on whether the relationship is safe and supportive.
- Consider your relationship with the patient: young people may receive feedback better from providers with whom they have a trusting relationship.
- Consider using media (e.g. movies, television shows, literature, music, etc.) as a common ground to facilitate discussion.



For more details on these strategies for talking with adolescents about relationship abuse, see our webinar on [Utilizing Media to Talk about Unhealthy Relationships with Young People](#).

When developing and implementing interventions to prevent relationship abuse, adolescents need youth-led learning with supportive communities that elevate their knowledge, beliefs, and confidence to foster healthy relationships.

EVIDENCE-BASED PREVENTION PROGRAMS can mitigate current abuse and prevent future abuse. Schools, health centers, community organizations, and youth can work together to implement prevention programs, including the evidence-based programs listed below. These programs are designed for a range of ages and settings.



Collaboration among youth, families, health centers, schools, and community partners is essential for addressing adolescent relationship abuse. Strong partnerships involve commitment to shared goals, clear roles and responsibilities, and mutual trust and respect.

- Think big! Options for partnerships among schools, health centers, and community agencies include referrals for services, prevention education, consultation on screening and intervention processes, collaboration on safety planning, and awareness campaigns.
- This [resource from the National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) identifies community-based domestic violence organizations.
- Be sure that all partners understand relevant policies, including those related to mandated reporting and involving parents and guardians.
- Youth-led initiatives through student councils, health center youth advisory councils, and community groups help achieve school and community-wide culture change related to adolescent relationship abuse. Lessons learned from Break the Cycle's [Let's Be Real](#) program may be helpful for adults who want to partner with youth to promote healthy relationships.



Our Health Centers and Schools: Uniting for Young People's Success and Hallways to Health toolkits include additional strategies for developing and maintaining strong partnerships.

Learn More About Adolescent Relationship Abuse

love is respect
That's Not Cool
Futures Without Violence

Since 1995, the School-Based Health Alliance (SBHA), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, has supported and advocated for high-quality healthcare in schools for the nation's most vulnerable children. Working at the intersection of healthcare and education, SBHA is recognized as a leader in the field and a source for information on best practices by philanthropic, federal, state, and local partners and policymakers.

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