Supporting Teens Experiencing Digital Dating Violence



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Being a parent of a teen in a dating relationship can be scary, especially if the relationship is unhealthy or abusive. Even suspecting something is wrong can feel frustrating or concerning.

You play a large role in helping your teen build confidence, understand healthy relationships, and stay safe online and offline. You already know how to notice risks and protect your child; these same skills can help when it comes to digital dating abuse.

Remember: *trust works both ways. Show your teen they can trust you by listening, respecting their choices, and not trying to control their relationships.*

Impact & Prevalence of Technology Misuse

Teen digital dating violence often overlaps with other forms of abuse such as psychological abuse, physical abuse, or sexual violence. Like other forms of abuse, it is rooted in patterns of power and control. Technology has become a critical part of our lives, and most teens have some kind of access to devices, apps, and social media. As technology spreads, so does tech abuse. In a 2021 survey, 86% of anti-violence workers in British Columbia reported that "teens have disclosed experiences of technology-facilitated harassment by an abusive dating partner." Misusing technology to perpetrate harassment,

stalking, or reputation damage is a common tactic of abusive people within the context of teen dating relationships.

Teens experiencing digital dating violence may avoid going online because they fear further abuse from the current or ex partner or bullying from their peers. This can make it hard to build or maintain other social connections or access educational, employment, or other online resources. Teens in violent relationships report experiencing depression, anxiety, failing classes, drug use, and suicidal thoughts.

Now more than ever, it is important to support teens as they navigate digital dating violence. Helping teens find ways to address the violence while increasing their safety and privacy online can help them feel empowered and supported.

Tips to Support Your Teen

Anti-violence workers and caregivers may feel uneasy when engaging with teens experiencing digital dating violence if they are unfamiliar with the tech themselves. That's normal! Luckily, you don't need a deep understanding of the technology or platform involved to provide support. By focusing on building connections, establishing trust, and remaining youth-centred, we can empower teens to make informed decisions around tech use.

Prevent Problems Before They Start

- Talk about negative messages in the media. Remind your teen that violence is never okay.

- Point out examples of healthy relationships where people respect and support each other.
- Teach your teen to protect themselves. Discuss dating violence and brainstorm safe ways to handle tricky situations. Review the privacy settings on their devices and apps together, and help them think about what happens when they share things online.
- Encourage respect. Help your teen feel good about who they are and what they do. Teach them to stand up for themselves and that no one has the right to hurt them.

Warning Signs of an Unhealthy Relationship

- You don't need to know the details of every type of technology teens are using to recognize patterns of abuse, stalking, and harassment.

Watch for:

- Signs of isolation, such as losing touch with friends or family, or giving up hobbies.
- Mood swings, anxiety, fear, depression, secretive behaviour, or unexplained injuries.
- Feeling anxious if they miss messages or calls from their partner or upset after speaking with their partner.
- Extreme jealousy or controlling decisions by a partner.
- A partner who is checking in constantly.
- Making excuses for a partner's behaviour such as laughing off violence or anger, apologizing for the partner, or normalizing abuse.

Remember: You can't force your teen to end a relationship. Pushing them too hard may make them feel isolated or unsafe and may lead them to try to hide what is happening from you rather than seeking your support.

How to Support Your Teen

Be Prepared

- Learn about dating violence so you can spot warning signs.
- Discuss what healthy relationships look like and give examples from real life.

Listen and Give Support

- Stay calm and supportive. Avoid blaming or judging.
- Reassure your teen that abuse is never their fault.
- Let them share on their own terms.

Believe Them

- Even if it's hard to hear, trust what your teen tells you.
- Skepticism or minimizing what you are hearing can push them away from sharing important information.

Show You Care

- Focus on their safety and feelings.
- Remind them they deserve respect.
- Avoid shaming them for being in the relationship.

Focus on Behaviours, Not the Partner

- Your teen may still have feelings for their partner. Focus on the abusive actions, not the person.
- Avoid threats or revenge talk. Model that violence is never the solution.

Avoid Ultimatums

- Don't blame or punish your teen for what their partner is doing.
- Encourage them to make their own decisions safely.
- Trust that they will leave the relationship when ready.

Offer Support & Resources

- Help your teen create a safety plan.

If your teen tells you they are experiencing tech abuse, start by listening and finding out what they need. You do not need to know every detail to help. Ask questions calmly and let your teen share what they are comfortable sharing.

Together, you can talk about:

- ***What is happening?***
  Is their current or former partner sending messages, making threats, tracking their location, sharing information, or doing something else?
- ***Where and when is it happening?***
  Is it happening on a particular app, at school, on a team, or somewhere else?
- ***What does their partner seem to know or have access to?***

This can help you understand whether accounts, devices, or location information may be involved.

- ***What has your teen already been doing to stay safer?***
  Build on what is already working.
- ***What are they worried might happen next?***
  This can help you plan for changes or escalation.
- ***What does your teen want to happen?***
  They may want the behaviour to stop, want help dealing with something being shared about them, want support at school, or want to explore reporting options.

Use their answers to explore options together. This might include changing account or privacy settings, limiting contact, saving evidence, getting support from school or another trusted adult, or considering whether additional services are needed.

Remember that some technology changes can be noticed by the person causing harm. Before blocking someone, turning off location sharing, changing passwords, or removing access, think together about how their current or former partner might react and what support your teen may need.

A safety plan should respond to what your teen is experiencing and what they want, while also considering their immediate safety and any responsibilities you may have as an adult supporting them.

You can also:

- Use the Kids Help Phone safety planning tool.
- Contact local domestic violence resources for support; find one close to you on www.ShelterSafe.ca

- Use the Tech Safety Planning Checklist
- Help your teen think about other safe people they could go to for support, such as a guidance counsellor or youth worker.
- Help your teen review the privacy settings and location sharing settings on their apps and devices; for more information on what steps to suggest, you can view the other documents in this toolkit.
- Share information about reporting pathways and legal options in case your teen wants to pursue this.

Decide on Next Steps Together

Whenever possible, involve your teen in decisions about what happens next. Experiencing abuse can take away a young person's sense of control. Listening to what they want and explaining their options can help give some of that control back.

- Ask what they want to happen and what would help them feel safer.
- Talk through options together, such as getting support from a counsellor, school, anti-violence program, or another trusted adult.
- Avoid automatically taking away their phone, banning social media, or forbidding contact with their partner. This can leave them feeling punished for the abuse and may make them less likely to come to you for help.
- Talk about whether additional help may be needed, including from police, child protection, or other services.

Sometimes you may need to involve others. Depending on what happened, your teen's age, and your role, you may have a responsibility to report or get additional help, even if your teen does not want you to.

If you need to involve someone else, be as open as you can with your teen. Tell them who you need to contact, why, what information you may need to share, and what might happen next. Where possible, involve them in how the report or request for help is made.

If you are unsure whether you need to report something, get advice from an appropriate professional or service before making promises about keeping information private.

Conversation Prompts

If you are concerned something might be happening:

- “Sometimes people behave in ways that are scary or threatening. Trust your feelings and talk about it.”
- “If you don’t want to talk to me, that’s okay. You can talk to someone you trust or a confidential hotline, like the Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 for help.”
- “I noticed this [describe incident/what you observed] the other day. How did you feel about that? Is there anything you want to talk about?”

Remember: Although technology can be misused as a tactic in teen dating violence, technology can also have many positive effects when used strategically. Empowering teens to take control of their tech use will help them understand how it can be used as a tool to support them and how they can create safe spaces free from violence. Teens often have a lot more insight and skills to navigate technology, online spaces, and abusive people than they are given credit for. Create space for them to tell you what they need.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is part of a continuum of violence that can be both online and in-person. If you or someone you know is experiencing technology-facilitated violence, you are not alone. Encourage them to chat with a trusted adult, connect with the Kids Help Phone to create a safety plan, or use ShelterSafe.ca to find a shelter/transition house near you to discuss options and create a safety plan. You don't need to stay in a shelter to access free, confidential services and support.

Adapted with permission from BCSTH's Technology Safety project.