

KNOW MORE

Guide for Parents and Guardians



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**Talking to teens about
relationships, sex & consent**

Published by:

The Ottawa Coalition to
End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW)
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Ottawa, ON, K1R 6K7
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**About the Ottawa Coalition to
End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW):**

Mission

OCTEVAW is a coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to ending violence against women and, through leadership, education, advocacy and political action, to promoting a coordinated response to wom-en and their children who have experienced abuse.

Special thanks:

Know More Advisory Committee

Financial support gratefully acknowledged from:

Ministry of Community and Social Services



Layout and design by:



KNOW MORE

Sexual assault, harassment and relationship violence are not new, but they are appearing in the media with increasing frequency—particularly where digital technology is involved. With so much information and opinion being shared about these topics, talking about them with your teen can be intimidating. This guide offers parents and guardians simple tools and advice on having those conversations.

Throughout this guide the terms “romantic partner” and “sexual partner” will be used generally to refer to range of relationships, such as longterm boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, and less formal or one-time sexual and romantic relationships.

IN THIS GUIDE:

- 1) The Talk(s)** Building trust and opening the lines of communication for discussions on relationships, sex & consent
- 2) Healthy Relationships**
- 3) Consent**
- 4) Sexual Activity in a Digital World**
- 5) Sexual Assault**

4 KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS GUIDE:

- 1)** Setting boundaries and expectations for your teen is important. Instead of forbidding risky behaviour and focusing on punishment for breaking the rules, talk to your teens about the consequences of their actions. Offer your support and strategies for dealing with difficult situations—even situations where your teen has broken the rules. Teens are less likely to seek help if they’re focused on losing privileges or other punishment.¹
- 2)** You can’t always protect your child from pain, and that’s okay. Focus on helping your teen make decisions that feel comfortable to them and turning difficult situations into opportunities for growth.
- 3)** Talking to all young people, including young men, about their right to consent to, or say no to sexual activity is extremely important. Teaching young men—who commit the majority of sexual assaults—to think about what consent means to them is an important way to get them thinking about how to respect their sexual partners.
- 4)** Remind your teen that being sexually assaulted is never the sexual assault survivor’s fault. Anyone can be sexually assaulted.

THE TALK(S)

Talking to your teen about relationships, sex and consent

Discussing the consequences of your teen’s behaviour is important. **It’s also important to talk about what healthy relationships and consent look like**, and the ways in which **sexual activity can be positive and enriching**.

Remind your teen that sexuality and consent are often complex issues. They don’t look the same for everyone. For example, it may take a long time for someone to recognize that they have been sexually assaulted, or for a perpetrator to recognize that they have acted without the other person’s consent.

Talking about sex and relationships during everyday activities—car rides, TV watching, walks—is a great way to avoid awkward tension.

START A CONVERSATION:

EXAMPLE 1 A father and son are watching a TV episode about a college party. At the party, two women who don’t know each other, but are both lesbians, are being pressured into kissing.

The father stops the film, taking an opportunity to discuss consent with his son.

Father: Wow, that’s not cool. Pressuring someone into sexual activity—even kissing—isn’t cool. It’s sexual assault.

Father: Absolutely. If someone is pressuring you into doing a sexual activity, it’s sexual assault. Do you want to kiss every girl you meet?

Father: So why should these girls? People attracted to folks of the same gender experience sexual assault, just like heterosexual people.

Son: But they’re both attracted to girls. Does that really count as sexual assault?

Son: No.

If they ask the question, they’re probably old enough to know the answer.

CONSENT: “Consent is a voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. In other words, it means communicating ‘yes’ on your own terms.”

– ConsentEd ⁱⁱ

Tips for conversations on sex, consent and relationships with your teens:

- **Be positive.** Remember that teen sexuality and exploration are healthy.
- **Answer every question, even the silly ones.** Your teen may ask a silly question to test you, or for a joke. Answering all questions builds trust.
- **Find out what your teen already knows about sex and relationships.** Asking about what they're learning at school, in the media, and from peers gives you an opportunity to clear up any misunderstandings or misinformation they are holding onto.
- **Use accurate language.** Using accurate terms to describe body parts and sexual activity shows your teen there's nothing to hide or be ashamed of.
- **Build trust** by being honest about your perspective and experiences, respecting your teen's perspective, not forcing your teen to talk, and not interrupting them.
- **Keep your conversations private when you can.** Discussing your child's welfare with other parents/guardians or experts can be helpful. However, if there isn't a good reason to share the details of conversations you and your teen have about sex and relationships, then don't.
- **Don't put others down to prove a point.** Harsh comments about your child's friends can dissuade them from coming to you with their own problems.
- **Don't feel like you have to teach your teen everything there is to know about sex and relationships.** Offer your teen space to learn about sex and relationships on their own. Encourage them to check out books and online resources on these topics. There are several suggestions in this guide!
- **Be open.** When you talk to your teen about sex and relationships, don't assume they want, or are in, a relationship with someone of the opposite sex if they haven't already specified.

If your teen uses offensive language or repeats discriminatory stereotypes, correct them. Forms of discrimination based on physical and mental ability, race, gender, sexual orientation and class are linked to many harmful stereotypes about sexuality (Eg. Stereotypes about certain groups of people being especially promiscuous or having certain sexual characteristics.) This discrimination leads to higher rates of sexual violence against women of colour and people with disabilities, for example.

TALK about what healthy relationships look like

Help your teen define what healthy relationships look like to them

- **Avoid making judgements about which of your teen's friends are "good kids" and "bad kids."** Talk to your teen about how their friends make them feel and what they bring to their life.
- If your teen is in a romantic relationship, **encourage them to spend time on other friendships and activities as well.**
- **Talk to your teen about what qualities they want in a friend or sexual partner/someone they date.**

Questions to help your teen think about what healthy relationships look like to them

Talking about a specific relationship:

- "How do you want to be treated by this person?"
- "How do you feel when you're around this person?"
- "Have you told this person how you want them to treat you/talk to you?"

About relationships in general:

START A CONVERSATION: EXAMPLE 2

Parent: "Okay, what are the top 3 qualities you're looking for in the person you date?"

Teen: "Funny, smart, attractive!"

Parent: "Those are all great qualities. How would you want that person to act toward you?"

Teen: " Hmm. I'd want him to be honest and patient. I wouldn't want someone too judgemental!"

Parent: "It sounds like you've started a pretty good checklist of qualities—things that will compliment your amazing qualities!"

When relationships aren't healthy:

If you think your teen is in an unhealthy or dangerous relationship, talk to them about it before taking action.

- Don't expect one conversation to solve your teen's relationship problem. Expect that your teen may not make a decision about how to deal with a relationship issue right away.
- If your teen says they have been sexually assaulted or abused, believe them.
- If someone says your teen has abused them, or someone else, take it seriously.

RESOURCES:

[In love and In Danger Pamphlet on dating violence](#)

[The Scarleteen Safety Plan](#)

[Calgary Sexual Health Centre tips for immigrant families on talking to teens about sex and relationships](#)

TALK About Consent

Ideas to help your teen explore what consent means to them

- Consent belongs to everyone, not just people of certain genders, identities, roles or presentations.
- Consent is ongoing—it happens from moment to moment, not just once.
- Just because you ask for consent one time does not mean it will be the same next time.
- Asking for consent can be sexy, but it is always necessary to get consent whether it is sexy or not.
- Consent doesn't always happen during sex. It is also negotiated before and after sex, and in interactions that aren't sexual.
- The most important thing with consent is how you feel. If you feel that you haven't given consent, then you haven't. If you aren't sure if consent was given to you, just ask.
- Pay attention to how you feel inside and what your body is telling you. A bit of nervousness is normal, but if you are feeling scared, pressured, or find you are not aroused or turned on, then it is likely not the right time yet.

Remember: if you do not feel comfortable you have the right to stop sex at ANY time.

- You have the right to change your mind and stop a sexual activity at any point while it's happening. It is your sexual partner's responsibility to respect that. It is also your responsibility to check in with them and to respect their feelings if they want to stop, slow down, or take a break to sort out their thoughts.

Lessons from the
Calgary Sexual Health Centre
“Wise Guyz” program:
“Consent means two people (or more) deciding to do the same thing at the same time, in the same way with each other. Any sexual act that is initiated upon someone without consent is illegal.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Teaching consent to young men

One in six men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime - 1in6.ca ^{iv}

Men are responsible for the majority of sexual assaults, which is why it's so important to speak directly to young men about respecting consent. It is also important to teach them about what consent means to them—their ability to agree to, and refuse, sexual activity. Help your teen challenge stereotypes about men and sexuality. Not all men want to have sex all the time and men can be pressured into sex.

Talking to young men about consent helps young men:

- Develop empathy toward their sexual and romantic partners.
- Feel more comfortable expressing their sexual desires and seeking help if they have been sexually assaulted.

“Giving young men the opportunity to talk about what they enjoy and what they don't opens the door to considering the desires of others, and it's a short leap from talking about pleasure to talking about consent.” – The Walrus, “The Talk” ^v

RESOURCES:

[Draw the Line](#)

[ConsentEd](#)

[VIDEO: Men Let's Talk \(Carleton University\)](#)

[Scarleteen: Driver's Ed for the Sexual Superhighway: Navigating Consent](#)

[OCTEVAW: I Can MANifest Change](#)

TALK About Sexual Activity in A Digital Age

Like most sexual activity, sending and receiving sexual messages and pictures comes with pleasure, as well as consequences

Increasing media coverage of “sexting” has many parents worried. When a person sends sexual photos or messages, they run the risk that this material will be redistributed without their permission or control. It’s important to talk about these risks with your teen. Remember that teens share sexual content for many reasons, which can range anywhere from being pressured by someone else, to exploring desires and sexuality without the risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection.

- **Talk to your kids about the reasons why they might share sexual images or messages, without judgement.**
- **Challenge sexist double standards.** The idea that boys who send sexual content are just being boys, while girls are harming themselves, is a double standard, which contributes to gender inequality and victim blaming.
- **If your child comes to you for help after sharing a message or picture that was redistributed without their permission, listen to their concerns. Ask them how they want to tackle the situation. And remind them that even though sharing explicit content comes with risk, it isn’t their fault someone violated their consent and redistributed them.**
- **Encourage your teen to be part of the solution.** Remind your teen that re-sharing sexually explicit content is a violation like other forms of sexual violence. They can make positive change by not redistributing and deleting explicit photos or messages from others.

Sexting: the sending, posting or possessing of “sexually suggestive text messages or images, including nude or semi-nude photographs.”^{vi}

From Media Smarts: “Just under one quarter of the students with access to a cell phone who have sent a sext of themselves report that the person who received the sext forwarded it to someone.”

“In spite of widespread concerns on the part of adults, the young people we spoke with were aware of online risks, largely self-regulated their own behaviours to avoid and manage those risks, and consistently demonstrated resiliency and competence in their responses to those risks. They actively sought out parental guidance when needed, and indicated a desire to work with adults when online conflicts or concerns arose.”^{vii}

RESOURCES

Media Smarts Talking to your Teens about Sexting - Tip Sheet

Media Smarts Internet Safety Tips

needhelpnow.ca

Cybertip's Resource Guide for Families Addressing Self/peer exploitation

cybertip.ca

Get Cyber Safe - getcybersafe.gc.ca

PREVNet

TALK About Sexual Assault

Supporting your teen and challenging victim-blaming

If your teen discloses an experience of sexual assault or harassment, believe them and listen. Remind them it's not their fault.

- Ask your teen how they want to handle the situation. **Discuss** their options, including reaching out to police, a local rape crisis centre, or other community support program. They may also wish to do nothing at all. **Important questions to ask your child are, “what will make you feel the safest?” and “is there any thing I can do to better support you?”** This builds trust and encourages your teen to seek your help if future issues come up.
- **Calm down.** If you need a few moments, or even hours, to calm down after your child's disclosure, let your child know you are there to support them, but need some time to process what you have heard:

PREPARE FOR THE CONVERSATION EXAMPLE 4

Parent: I love you so much and I'm really upset this happened to you. Would it be okay if I took a few minutes to collect myself so we can chat about what you need?

- Check in with your teen during the hours, days, weeks, months, and even years after their disclosure. Talking about a sexual assault for the first time is just one step towards dealing and living with what has happened. Consider asking your child how and how often they want you to check in with them.

It doesn't matter what a person was wearing when they were sexually assaulted, who they were with, what they were doing, or whether they were intoxicated. No one is ever asking to be sexually assaulted.

“Studies indicate that women with disabilities are sexually assaulted at a rate at least twice that of the general population of women.” ix
- Plan

“More than 80% of rapes that occur on college and university campuses are committed by someone known to the victim, with half of these incidents occurring on dates.” x
- Canadian Federation of Students

“Many racialized women face barriers to reporting incidents of physical or sexual assault or seeking help. ‘A study with young women of colour in Toronto found that one-in-five experienced racism in the health care system which included cultural insensitivity, racial slurs, and poor quality care.’” xi
- Canadian Women's Foundation

Victim Blaming Many sexual assault survivors face shaming and judgement when they speak out. **It is important for survivors to be heard and believed.** Remind your teen that anyone can be sexually assaulted, regardless of race, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, gender clothing or actions.

EXPAND THE CONVERSATION

EXAMPLE 5

A teenager comes home from school and sits down for a chat with their step-mom:

Step-mom: How was your day?

Teenager: Okay. This girl at school told some of her friends her boyfriend pressured her into having sex, but now the whole school is talking about her. Some of my friends think she was sort of asking for it, though. She wears really skimpy clothes and moved from somewhere in Latin America a few years ago. Apparently girls from there are really into sex.

Step-mom: Alright. Let's think a little more carefully about this. Is it fair to pressure people into having sex?

Teenager: No, obviously not.

Step-mom: You know, if someone pressures someone into sex, it's sexual assault. Even kissing someone without them wanting to be kissed is sexual assault.

Another thought: people should be free to wear whatever they want, don't you think?

Teenager: Yeah.

Step-mom: So, why would you blame a girl for being pressured into sex because of what she's wearing? He pressured her into sex. All she did was pick an outfit she liked. That's not consent.

One more thing: do you really think every girl from Latin America is really into sex? Are all girls from Canada really into sex? Are all girls from any country, or race, really into sex?

Teenager: No, you're right. I guess that's unfair.

Step-mom: It's important to challenge your friends when they repeat ignorant stereotypes like that. It's a form of racism and not cool at all. It takes a lot of courage for people to talk about sexual assault. We have to believe survivors and support them.

Setting your teen up for success and safety at a post-secondary institution:

If your child is planning to attend a post-secondary learning institution, consider asking prospective schools what resources or action plans they have in place for students who have been sexually assaulted.

RESOURCES:

The Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre:
[Reporting Sexual Assault](#)

Sexual Assault Support Centre of Ottawa
sascottawa.com

Planned Parenthood Ottawa
ppottawa.ca

DRAW-THE-LINE:
Where to Get Help

Canadian Federation of Students Fact Sheet:
Sexual Violence on Campuses

OCTEVAW R.I.S.E
Social Media App

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