
Safety Planning With Teens

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Teen Center: Teen Dating Violence Technical Assistance Center

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Safety Planning With Teens

A safety plan is one of the most important tools that service providers can offer to teens experiencing dating violence. Through a safety plan, you can identify your teen client’s support network, connect her to school and community-based resources, empower her to regain control of her life, and help her to better protect herself from future harm.

What is Safety Planning?

Safety planning is the creation of an individualized set of actions, strategies, and resources designed to ensure safety both during an abusive relationship and after leaving the relationship. It can be done at any stage of a relationship, and should be reevaluated frequently as the teen’s relationship, and life, changes. The strategies employed as part of a safety plan will vary with context, including the level of abuse your client is experiencing, her goals and objectives, who the abuser is, and the nature of their relationship.

At the earliest stages of your work with a teen client, she may not yet recognize whether she is in an abusive relationship and in need of a safety plan. You can help your client by providing educational tools and allowing her to use them at her own pace, offering your guidance through the process. Break the Cycle’s healthy relationship quiz is a good place to start, along with information on warning signs that indicate dating violence and the dynamics of power and control that are at its center. These and other resources are available at Break the Cycle’s teen website, www.TheSafeSpace.org [<http://www.TheSafeSpace.org>] (Break the Cycle, n.d.).

If your teen client recognizes that she is in an abusive situation and is ready to take steps to address it, you can begin to work with her to create a safety plan. Help her to set specific goals that will enhance her safety and devise practical actions she can take to meet these goals.

Why is Safety Planning Important?

Safety planning is important because it keeps your client safe and prevents injury, empowers him to regain control of his situation, gets him to focus on safety needs, and helps create a support network and connect him with needed resources. It allows both advocates and clients to determine what safety risks exist and how to address them to ensure the safety of everyone involved.

Safety planning is particularly important with teenage victims of dating violence because of the ways in which teen dating violence and teens' lives are unique. For example, your teen client may attend the same school as his abusive partner. As a result, the conventional wisdom of avoiding the abuser may be an impossible task. Even if they do not attend the same school, your client may not be able to make the kinds of changes to his life that are necessary to avoid running into an abusive partner. Your teen client may have less control over his living situation than many adults and most likely does not have the option of going to a shelter. Finally, many of the most common services needed and used by adults experiencing domestic violence are unavailable to teens without parental consent, notification, or other involvement. As a result, your teen client's safety plan must consider whether and how his parents can be involved in his safety planning efforts.

How to Safety Plan with a Teen

Safety planning is the creation of an individualized set of actions, strategies, and resources.

Your teen client may voluntarily come to you for help, or you may have to approach her yourself if you suspect that she is experiencing abuse in her relationship. In either situation, building a trusting teen-adult relationship is instrumental to effective safety planning. The most important factor in building that trust is confidentiality. Know the limits of your own ability to keep your teen client's disclosures confidential, including the nature and extent of your mandatory reporting obligations. Be sure to communicate those to your teen client up front, before she discloses something that she may want to keep confidential. If you are unable to maintain the level of confidentiality that your teen client desires, offer to connect her with another provider who can. By allowing your teen client to determine when and how she shares her private thoughts, and with whom, you are establishing that she is in control of her own circumstances, assuring her that you respect her decision-making abilities, and creating the foundation for a successful provider-client relationship.

If you suspect that your teen client is the victim of dating violence, it is crucial to frame your concerns in the right way. If your approach is judgmental or disciplinarian it may be very difficult to gain the trust and cooperation needed to plan collaboratively for her safety. Teens are accustomed to adults being in positions of power and often see adults as trying to control what actions teens can and cannot take. If your client feels like she will be told what to do in this situation, she may hesitate to share the full extent of the abuse or fully describe the details of her experience. It is important to bridge the divide that teens perceive between themselves and adults by taking care to show respect for her choices even if you don't agree with them. For example, if you feel it's appropriate, bring up the idea of involving the teen's parents in the safety planning, but don't push the issue if she seems hesitant to involve another adult. If your client decides to remain in a relationship with her abusive partner, share your concerns but respect her choices. Remember that teens may suddenly discontinue contact with a service provider if they feel ignored, misunderstood, or betrayed. Showing yourself to be respectful and trustworthy is the best way to ensure that your teen client will continue to seek your guidance and help as she addresses her relationship.

In addition, refrain from judging your client and instead remain empathetic to her struggle. Instead of telling her exactly what to do and how to do it, let your client come to the conclusions with

positive assistance and guidance. One way to approach the situation is by framing questions in a style that lets the teen feel like she is recognizing violence on her own instead of being told that she is in an abusive relationship. Instead of “it’s abusive when he calls you stupid,” try “how do you feel when he calls you stupid? Do you think it’s okay that he makes you feel that way?” Also, make use of the resources available on TheSafeSpace.org [<http://www.TheSafeSpace.org>], such as the healthy relationship quiz and warning signs, and ask her if she has ever seen such behavior in her relationship.

It is also effective to be specific about the concerns that cause you to suspect dating violence, rather than to use generalized concerns that a teen in a precarious situation may easily disregard. Your client may easily tune out a blanket statement but an individualized set of concerns is much harder to ignore. Instead of “I’m afraid he might be hurting you,” try “those bruises on your arm look serious, does she put her hands on you?” or “I see that he has called seven times since you’ve been here, that concerns me.” It can be difficult to strike a balance between specifying your concerns and allowing your client to come to her own solutions. The key is to state your concerns in a way that resonates with the teen, but that allows the teen to decide the next steps.

If your teen client opens up about her situation, tailor your responses to her unique needs and your concern for her well-being. Most importantly, listen fully to the teen’s story before suggesting or concluding anything about her situation. A full picture of the situation is valuable to both of you: it gives the teen a chance to express her feelings without interruption or judgment, and it gives you a better opportunity to understand what she is experiencing and to offer a full range of appropriate options. It also helps the teen make a thoughtful decision about which options she wants to pursue. Refrain from criticizing or attacking the abusive partner. Instead, keep your focus on your client and encourage her to plan for her safety.

Be mindful of your body language when speaking to your teen client. Although you may refrain from saying judgmental things, remain aware of the message sent by tone of voice, pitch, volume, facial expressions, and choice of words. Even though it is unintentional, your responses can convey your attitudes and biases. Turn your whole body, not just your head towards her while you listen; it gives the impression that you are open to what she is saying. Your goal is to appear nonjudgmental and unbiased and to empower your client with information and support so that she can decide ultimately what will keep her safe and healthy.

If you have had personal experience with abuse, consider whether it is appropriate to share this information with your teen client. Evaluate whether she will benefit from the information before you disclose the history or any other details about your personal life. Avoid giving the impression that because you’ve been through something similar, you believe you know best what your client needs.

If it becomes clear that your client is unwilling to talk to you, provide her with resources that can help and encourage her to confide in another trusted adult. This may include parents, other relatives, family friends, clergy members, teachers, counselors, coaches, or the police.

Teen Safety Plan Specifics

Know the resources in your community so that you can make referrals as part of the safety planning process.

In many ways, safety planning with teens is no different than safety planning with adults. However, because of the ways that teens' lives are unique, there are several important factors to consider. An effective safety plan is teen-driven, emphasizes empowerment, is holistic, and is frequently revisited and modified.

The process of safety planning is empowering in that it allows the teen to recognize ways he can regain control of his personal safety and his environment. It must be holistic in the sense that it accounts for all aspects of a teen's life, including home, school, work, activities, and more. In addition, frequent evaluation is particularly important since teens' lives – the places they go, the things they do, and the people with whom they associate – are continuously changing.

While the guidelines above are broadly applicable, a teen safety plan is grounded in specifics customized to the teen's particular situation (Break the Cycle, 2008). Below are some of the common needs and concerns that teens face, as well as appropriate measures to address them.

Maintain a Support Network

A teen safety plan should assess how to maintain access to a support network. Ask the teen which adults she can tell about the violence and the abuse. Determine whether her parents are aware of her experiences and whether she wants them involved or feels that they would be a good source of support. Ask what people in the teen's school--such as teachers, administrators, counselors, and security personnel--can help the student be safe. Ask if there are other adults, like a coach or religious leader, that the teen feels comfortable confiding in. In addition, encourage the teen to reach out to friends for assistance. Suggest a buddy system where friends can accompany the teen to and from school, classes, and other activities to help her feel safer.

Avoid a Dangerous Situation

If appropriate, a teen safety plan should include strategies for avoiding the abusive partner or avoiding situations that could lead to further violence. Encourage the teen to consider applying for an order of protection. In addition, he may consider changing his school locker or lock as well as his route to and from school. Also, the teen could consider rearranging his class schedule.

A teen safety plan should consider where the teen may go quickly to get away from an abusive person. One idea is to consider notifying a contact with whom a teen may share a code word to indicate that he needs to escape a violent situation, so that the contact can meet him at a previously designated location to escape. Also, if teen may share a code word to indicate that he needs to escape a violent situation, so that the contact can meet him at a previously designated location to escape. Also, if appropriate, encourage the teen to think about how he can best protect his physical safety during a violent incident.

Handle an Emergency

The teen should consider keeping a number of things with her at all times. Certain things are always helpful to have, as they provide ready access to help and resources when they are needed. Other things are more important to keep when a teen needs to leave home quickly to escape abuse. Things that are prudent to keep at all times include cash, ATM cards, a driver's license, passport and other forms of identification, a cell phone, and keys. In addition, a copy of any order of protection should be on her person at all times. To escape violence quickly, a teen may consider keeping additional things such as medications and a change of clothes packed. If she has young children, the teen may also consider packing diapers, baby bottles, and baby food as well.

End a Relationship

If the teen makes the difficult decision to break up with the abusive partner, he should do it in a public place. He should also tell other people about these plans, and arrange to call a friend or counselor after he talks with the abusive partner to debrief about what happened. Also, advise the teen that ending the relationship may put them at risk for increased violence—not to discourage him from doing so but so that he can take extra steps to ensure his safety during that time.

Resources

It is vital to connect the teen to resources and organizations at school or in the community. Some resources and organizations include Break the Cycle (www.breakthecycle.org [<http://www.breakthecycle.org>]), the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline (Tel: 1-866-331-9474; Web: <http://www.loveisrespect.org>), and the National Domestic Violence Hotline (Tel: 1-800-799-SAFE). Additional resources and information are available at www.thesafespace.org [<http://www.thesafespace.org>].

Self-Care

Other measures a teen may take to address the violence is to maintain a journal describing the abuse. Keeping a journal is helpful in that it allows a teen to express her emotions in a healthy way, and it also creates a record in case any legal action later ensues. Also, encourage the teen to do things that make her feel good about herself, such as taking a self-defense class, joining a new club or organization, or spending time with friends. In some situations it may be appropriate to recommend that the teen seek counseling.

Conclusion

Helping a teen who is experiencing dating violence to develop a safety plan is an essential component of being an effective service provider. You can provide invaluable assistance by encouraging the teen to think about and develop a plan for all aspects of his life – from reaching out to his support network to preparing for an emergency. This process, with your guidance, enables the teen to begin to regain control of her life by designing and implementing strategies that enhance both her physical safety and her emotional well-being.

Citations

Break the Cycle (n.d.). Am I in an Abusive Relationship? <http://www.thesafespace.org/the-basics/relationships-101/am-i-in-an-abusive-relationship/>.

Break the Cycle (2008). A Teen's Guide To Safety Planning http://www.thesafespace.org/wp-content/uploads/Safety_Plan_Workbook_Teens_3.08.pdf.