

Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month

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real love
respects.

love is
respect.



real love respects

If It's Real, It's Respectful

During Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month (TDVAM) 2026, we're reminding everyone, especially you, that healthy relationships are built on more than just vibes. Saying "I love you" isn't just about words or heart emojis; it's about showing up with trust, honesty and respect.

Let's be clear: Respect in a relationship isn't a bonus; it's a requirement. It's not about cute texts, romantic moments or social media shoutouts. Real love is built on mutual respect and understanding. That means honoring your boundaries, your feelings, your choices, and everything that makes you authentically you.

This year's theme cuts through the noise by focusing on what real love should look and feel like. In a world full of mixed messages, this theme centers around one truth: Respect is non-negotiable. It empowers youths to recognize harmful patterns early and to expect more from love. Because respect is everything, it's earned, it's honest, and it never makes you question your worth.

A Message From Our Director



This year, we're not just talking about dating abuse; we're also uplifting you and your needs outside the relationship. Your voice matters. Your relationships matter. And you deserve to feel seen, heard and supported. Whether you're trying to figure out your relationship or helping friends through theirs, what you say and who listens can make all the difference.

That's why this year, it isn't just about awareness; it's about support too: real support from parents, friends, mentors, teachers, coaches, the people who care about you, even when they're not sure how to show it. Because when you have that kind of support behind you, you're not just safer. You're stronger. You're more confident setting boundaries, recognizing red flags, and knowing what a healthy relationship should feel like, and you feel respected.

Let's make space for the hard talks, the real feelings, and the chance to change the story, together, because you deserve a relationship that feels safe, respectful and real. This guide is meant to reflect the voices and experiences of both you and the adults who support you.

Angela Lee
Director
love is respect

love is
respect



Teen Dating Violence & Statistics

1 in 10

high school students
have experienced physical
violence from a dating
partner during the
past year.

1 in 5

victims say they
experienced digital abuse
or harassment at school
during school hours; most
takes place away from
school grounds.

**Victims of
Digital Abuse &
Harassment are:**

2x

as likely to be
psychologically abused

2x

as likely to be
physically abused

5x

as likely to be
sexually coerced



What Makes a Relationship Healthy and Respectful?

All relationships exist on a spectrum from healthy to abusive, with unhealthy somewhere in the middle. Both partners must feel safe and supported. Unhealthy relationships can start with poor communication and disrespect. An abusive relationship can go further, with one partner causing harm.

The strength of a healthy relationship lies in mutual respect, trust, honesty, boundaries, open communication, and the courage to be vulnerable together.

Respect in a healthy relationship means creating space where each person feels safe, heard and valued. It's not just about listening; it's about actively encouraging each other to speak openly and honestly without fear of judgment or dismissal.

When **respect** is present, both partners understand that their voices matter and that communication is a two-way street. This involves talking openly and honestly, genuinely listening to each other, and valuing each other's feelings and needs. It also means being willing to compromise during disagreements, speaking kindly to and about each other, and supporting each other's personal growth, whether through interests, hobbies or careers.

Giving each other space when needed and building each other up through encouragement and support helps create a respectful foundation. True respect isn't silent agreement; it's making room for each person's truth to be spoken, acknowledged and honored within the relationship.

Simply put, "Respect Means Building Space for Your Voice."



Respect Isn't Clingy

Love and freedom to be you can exist together. When you genuinely care about someone, showing them **respect** means you trust them, not that you have to be all over them 24/7.

Clinginess usually comes from fear or insecurity. But respect? That comes from knowing your worth and being secure in your connection. You don't need to constantly check in or be around that person every second to feel close.

Real **respect** is being able to give space without feeling like you're losing something.

Examples of clingy behavior:

1. You feel the urge to text or call them all day, and you get upset if they don't respond right away.
2. You start feeling anxious or jealous anytime they hang out with someone else or don't include you in their plans.



“Please know,
when you lead
with respect, you’re
showing strength,
not weaknesses.”

- Youth Council
member

Respect Means Listening, Even When It's Hard

It's easy to listen when someone is saying something you agree with. But real respect shows up when the conversation gets uncomfortable. Maybe they're calling you out, setting a boundary, or opening up about something serious. In those moments, your first reaction might be to defend yourself, shut down, or talk over them. Try to pause and tap into some of your self-care tactics, acknowledging to yourself that this feels hard. Listening doesn't mean you have to agree with everything; it just means you care enough to hear them out.



How To Set Boundaries

Setting boundaries starts with figuring out what you need, then being honest about it with others. Try using “I” statements, like “I need time to study before I hang out” or “I don’t want to be called names when we argue.”

Boundaries work best when you keep them consistent but still respectful. If someone crosses a line, remind them about your boundary. If it keeps happening, consider stepping back from the situation or spending less time with that person.

Healthy boundaries help you build trust and **respect**, so you can care for others without losing who you are.

Trust is necessary in any healthy relationship. It means you feel comfortable being yourself without fear of judgment, hurting or betrayal. When there is trust, you can share your thoughts freely, set boundaries, and know they will be respected.

Trust in healthy relationships is built through honesty, consistency and communication, and not through control or pressure. If your partner consistently makes you doubt yourself, doesn't follow through on commitments, or disrespects your privacy, that is not trust; that is a warning sign.

“Being trustworthy and able to trust others in return creates relationships that are respectful, safe and authentic.”

– love is respect
campus ambassador



Real Love Respects Everyone!

Keep in mind that 1 in 7 men will experience dating violence during their lives. Many men are raised with the belief that expressing vulnerability, emotions or the need for support is a sign of weakness. This can make opening up about abuse difficult for them, even in safe and respectful relationships.

Due to stigmas and societal messages about masculinity, creating space for male survivors to be open about their challenges in a relationship can sometimes look and feel different. This means actively breaking down those barriers by encouraging honest communication, validating their feelings without judgment, and making room for emotional expression that might not come easily. It also involves challenging stereotypes, like the idea that men should always be strong, stoic or unemotional. Respect, in this case, is about helping to undo harmful messaging and creating a space where they feel safe to show up authentically.

“As Aretha Franklin shared in her song, respect in everyday life means acknowledging the worth of others and setting boundaries that honor both yourself and those around you. Genuine respect goes beyond words; it is shown through actions, patience and understanding.”

– love is respect campus ambassador



“When respect is present, relationships thrive, trust deepens, and people feel empowered to be their authentic selves.”

– love is respect ambassador

“As a child, I was taught real men are silent and stoic — that they don't cry. Over time, I've discovered that real love also respects men, too. It listens without expecting unwavering strength, and it makes room for vulnerability without shame. Real love is patient and gives everyone, men included, the space to be fully seen, heard and encouraged.”

– Andy, Youth Council member



Scene One



Student

I've been seeing this person for a while now, and I feel bad when I tell them I don't want to hold hands in public. Like I'm letting them down or something.

Adult

But saying no doesn't mean you don't care. It just means you know your limits, and that's key to building a healthy relationship. It was hard for me when I was learning to set boundaries, too, and it affected me emotionally because I wanted to be liked so badly.

Student

I'm worried they're going to ghost me or stop talking to me altogether. What if they start ignoring me?

Adult

That happened to me once. It hurt, but I realized that if someone gets upset when you set boundaries, they might not truly respect you or the relationship.

Student

That makes sense. It's really hard sometimes, though.

Adult

I feel that. It takes a lot of courage, but respect means hearing "no" and not seeing your boundaries as a threat; they see them as part of respecting you.

Student

That takes a lot of pressure off me. Thanks for not judging me.

Adult

Of course. I'm here for you. Your voice matters, and thank you for trusting me and feeling safe to have this conversation! Remember, your no is just as important as your yes. And you deserve respect.



Scene Two



Daughter

Sometimes I worry that I overcommunicate, and that it's making me seem selfish or that I'm always putting myself first.

Dad

I get that. I used to think the same thing. But in healthy relationships, both people respect each other's needs. Putting yourself first isn't selfish; it's actually a loving act for oneself. It's how you keep the relationship balanced and real.

Daughter

I've never thought about it like that. I thought I was doing too much. You thought that even though you were a man? And what if my partner thinks I'm being difficult or "too much"?

Dad

Yes, when I was your age, I would get laughed at if I said I was being abused, but I was a victim of verbal abuse now that I think about it. I just never felt comfortable enough around my guy friends to talk about it. Boundaries aren't about being difficult; they're about self-respect. When you say, "This is what I need," you're helping your partner understand you better. That's how trust and respect grow.

Scene Two Continues on Page 9



Scene Two Continued

Daughter

That's so sad, Dad. I've seen that too many times with my friends at school. Guys can be so hard on each other.

Dad

Exactly. I wish someone had told me that sooner, but I didn't feel comfortable talking to my friends about it mainly because I feared I wouldn't be believed or would be seen as less of a man. But I have learned that respect starts with how you treat yourself, male or female.

Daughter

I really appreciate you sharing your story with me. Knowing what you went through makes me feel like I need to be honest in my relationship. I am sorry you did not feel supported speaking up about what you were experiencing.

Dad

You can always talk to me. Remember, respect in love means feeling safe, heard, and free to be yourself. You deserve it.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

February 9-13, 2026

Respect Week

Respect Week invites communities to come together to promote kindness, inclusion, and understanding. Throughout the week, individuals can participate in activities that celebrate empathy and highlight ongoing efforts to create safe and supportive environments.

February 10

Wear orange to show support for healthy relationships and survivors of abuse.



National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline is here for you.



1.866.331.9474



loveisrespect.org



Text LOVEIS to 22522

**NATIONAL
DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE
HOTLINE**

The National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline is a 24/7 program of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and provides phone, text or chat support by trained advocates. loveisrespect.org is a program of The Hotline and its purpose is to engage, educate and empower young people to prevent and end abusive relationships.



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