

Responding to Disclosures of Abuse

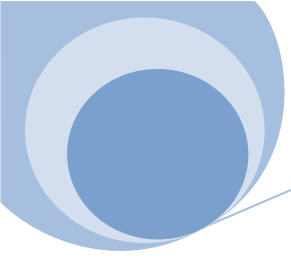
Disclosures of abuse can happen in any setting, even at a public event. Young people will talk to the adults they feel most comfortable with, and this is not always the school counselor...it could be you! Before planning and hosting any awareness or educational event, be sure that all staff and volunteers know how to respond to disclosures of abuse.



Every state has enacted reporting statutes requiring those working in child-oriented professions to report incidents of child abuse. “Mandated reporters” who know or suspect abuse of a minor are required to report the abuse to a local child welfare or law enforcement agency. These laws are meant to ensure that adults will intervene to protect a minor, but they can be confusing, especially when it comes to the application of the law to teen dating abuse.

PRIOR TO THE EVENT, ALL STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS SHOULD:

- Know their mandated reporting duties, including what types of abuse must be reported, to whom, and what type of information the report must include.
- Know what information they can and cannot keep confidential and what information they have to include in a mandated report. If a mandatory report must be made, keep the report details limited to only what is required by law to report.
- Be able to explain their reporting duties and confidentiality rules to youth *before a disclosure*.
- Know where to refer youth for local resources and services, especially organizations who specialize in dating abuse or working with youth.
- Learn about local laws and policies, including school policies, which can offer protection to young people experiencing abuse.
- Know and practice what to say if a youth discloses abuse, such as:
 - “I am glad that you told me about this.”
 - “I want you to be safe.”
 - “Let’s make sure you get the help you need right now.”
 - “It’s not your fault.”



AFTER A DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE:

- Listen.
- Make sure the young person is not injured or in immediate danger. If a young person is in immediate danger, call 911
- Determine the level of emotional distress the person is experiencing and respond appropriately. Always have a second adult available during programs or events so that if a young person has an extreme emotional reaction, there will be an adult who can address their needs immediately.
- Respond in a non-judgmental and supportive way.
- Don't minimize the abuse OR the importance of the relationship.
- If a young person says something concerning during a class or in a big group, be prepared to take the student aside to learn more about the situation.
- Share information about school and community resources and refer the young person to the appropriate services. Whenever possible, accompany the youth to the referral agency or walk the student to a meeting with a school counselor.
- Connect with local advocates who can work with youth who have serious emotional reactions or who require crisis counseling.

A NOTE ABOUT TRIGGER WARNINGS

“Triggering” is when a person who has experienced violence or abuse is reminded of their experience in a way that is scary or brings up strong negative feelings. A young person may be triggered in the process of learning about healthy relationships or dating abuse. Before an event, offer a trigger warning by letting participants know that you will be discussing abuse and that if anyone feels uncomfortable they should feel free to step out. If a youth is triggered, a staff member or volunteer teacher should support the youth by:

- Acknowledging the young person's feelings and emotions.
- Giving the young person information about the school counselor or local advocate and, if possible, accompanying the young person to the counselor.
- Determining if the young person is experiencing extreme distress. If so, bring the young person to a counselor immediately and notify a supervisor.

Whenever possible, have an advocate or volunteer from a local domestic or dating abuse organization at your event to be a resource for any participant who needs to talk further about their experience with abuse.