

Prepare and Talk about Sexual Violence

Whether it is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, Child Abuse Prevention Month or life brings this issue to your doorstep, the dilemma of how to start and have a conversation about sexual violence is challenging.



Much like the subject matter itself, having a brave conversation about sexual violence is nuanced and situation dependent. In [Brave Step's](#) mission to foster brave conversations about sexual violence, we want to equip you with the tools and brave steps to take when talking about sexual violence. Keep in mind some situations may require more extensive help and support and/or may be a part of an ongoing investigation.

Where do I start?

As you begin to plan for this conversation, prepare yourself and how you might respond. Based on the statistics that one in four women and one in six men are sexually violated by the age of 18 and every 68 seconds someone is sexually assaulted in the United States, you may be surprised to learn that the person you are speaking to is, in fact, a survivor.

In case they are, here are some helpful suggestions.

- Believe. Make it clear that you believe the individual and that is not her/his/their fault.
- Do not deny or minimize the abuse.
- Do not blame and shame the survivor.
- Be present and patient.
- Ensure the individual is safe, physically and mentally.
- Alert the proper authorities, if needed.
- Refer to professional care and resources.

It is important that we, as adults, make intentional efforts to educate family members and friends on the subject matter of sexual violence. Before you can do that, you need to be educated yourself.

Brave Step has compiled a number of trauma-focused resources on its [Changemaker portal](#) to begin the education process. Also, recent Changemaker trainings such as author and advocate Jayneen Sander's talk on [Consent and Body Safety](#) as well as [Pat's Place presentation on online grooming](#) are great resources.

To teach children about sexual violence, it is helpful to start as early as possible. Using books from [Educate2Empower's](#) lineup or short videos like [Consent for Kids](#) are a great tool to open up the conversation. Additionally, Brave Step's "[Color It Blue](#)" campaign for Sexual Assault Awareness Month is a great conversation starter with other adults.

Here are several steps to begin the education process and dialogue:

- Teach children to properly name their body parts. Don't use nicknames or "cute" names.
- Educate children that they have the power to say "no" and understand that their body is their own.

- Explain the difference between a safe touch and an unsafe touch. Here is a great informational video from Darkness To Light: <https://www.d2l.org/education/additional-training/healthy-touch-children/>.
- Engage the child in identifying a network of adults that the child feels safe going to and trusts.
- It's also helpful that you encourage conversations on difficult topics. This sets the example that you are trusted and supportive even when the subject matter is difficult.
- Provide examples at age-appropriate levels of what a good secret might be and a bad secret. <https://youtu.be/ko9WlvZQ2Xc>

This is only a starting point. Conversations about sexual abuse, assault, body boundaries, safe or unsafe touches, among many other topics, should be an ongoing dialogue and evolve as a child you care for grows and matures.

Here are additional resources that may prove helpful in navigating conversations on this prevalent and complex topic.

- [Tip Sheet: Talking to Children and Teens by Stop It Now!](#)
- [How To Talk to Your Kids about Body Safety and Consent - Motherly](#)
- [Start the Conversation: New Yorkers Against Sexual Assault Toolkit](#)
- [Consent for Kids video by Blue Seat Studios](#)
- [Harvard Graduate School of Education: Consent at Every Age](#)

Visit Brave Step's [Changemaker portal](#) for additional resources and join an upcoming Changemaker training.

What do I do if I suspect sexual violence?

Gently and calmly talk to the child or adult.

- It is important to keep a few things in mind to create a safe space for them to talk. [RAINN](#) provides some helpful suggestions on creating this environment.
 - **Pick your time and place carefully.** Choose a space where the individual is comfortable or ask them where they'd like to talk. Avoid talking in front of someone who may be causing harm.
 - **Be aware of your tone.** If you start the conversation in a serious tone, you may scare the person, and they may be more likely to give you the answers they think you want to hear—rather than the truth. Try to make the conversation more casual. A non-threatening tone will help put the person at ease and provide you with more accurate information.
 - **Talk directly.** Ask questions that use the child or adult's own vocabulary, but that are a little vague. For example, "Has someone been touching you?" In this context "touching" can mean different things, but it is a word the person is familiar with. He/she/they can respond with questions or comments to help you better gauge the situation like, "No one touches me except my mom at bath time," or "You mean like the way my cousin touches me sometimes?"
 - **Listen and follow up.** Allow the child or adult to talk freely. Wait for them to pause, and then follow up on points that made you feel concerned.
 - **Avoid judgment and blame.** Avoid placing blame by using "I" questions and statements. Rather than beginning your conversation by saying, "You said something that made me worry..." consider starting your conversation with the word "I." For example: "I am

concerned because I heard you say that you are not allowed to sleep in your bed by yourself.”

- **Be patient.** Remember that this conversation may be frightening for the person. Many perpetrators make threats about what will happen if someone finds out about the abuse.
- *Source:* RAINN. If You Suspect a Child Being Harmed. [www.rainn.org](https://www.rainn.org/articles/if-you-suspect-child-being-harmed). May 12, 2022.
<https://www.rainn.org/articles/if-you-suspect-child-being-harmed>

Report it

- Ensure that the person is in a safe place. If you have concerns over safety, be sure to discuss them explicitly with the authorities when you make the report. If you fear that the perpetrator will cause further harm to the person upon learning about the investigation, clearly communicate this to the authorities.

What can I do in the moment to support a survivor?

There are some ways of showing support that are helpful.

- Listen to and believe the survivor
- Affirm the survivor’s decision to confide in you
- Refrain from asking questions about sexual violence
- Communicate without judgement
- Encourage the survivor to get support but realize that only they can make the decision to get help.
- Tell the survivor “You did NOTHING to cause the sexual violence. Regardless of the circumstances that led to sexual violence, it is not your fault. It is important that you don’t blame yourself.”
- The survivor’s safety is the most important concern. If they feel they may be in danger, contact a local agency to assist with a safety plan.

Know what not to do

Often loved ones or allies don’t want to believe that the abuse is true. They want to protect the family or their social relationship with the family, friends, coworkers, etc. Even if they have good intentions, loved ones may reinjure the survivor. Here are some ways they may do that.

- **Do Not Deny or Minimize the Abuse:** Many survivors never receive recognition from family members or others of their abuse. People may accuse them of lying, exaggerating, or having false memories. Even acknowledgement does not necessarily mean that families and others understand or are willing to recognize the impact of sexual abuse. Survivors may be pressured not to talk about their abuse, even after perpetrators apologize.
- **Do Not Blame and Shame the Survivor:** A common response is placing blame on the survivor. They may ask why victims did not disclose sooner, why they “let it happen,” or even make explicit accusations of seduction. When such accusations start, the family’s or friends’ focus shifts onto the survivor’s behavior instead of where it belongs — on the perpetrator’s crimes. Victim-blaming is used to keep survivors quiet.
- **Do Not Tell Survivors to Move on and To Stop Focusing on The Past:** This approach is destructive and backwards. Survivors should be given space and supported as they explore their trauma, examine its effects, and work through their feelings to heal. Only by dealing with the abuse does the past begin to lose its power, allowing survivors to move forward. This happens in

each stage of life, like starting to date as a teenager and in adulthood with a partner. Pressuring survivors to “move on” is another way that family members and friends avoid addressing the abuse.

- **Do Not Shut Down Their Voices:** Families or friends often reject or ignore survivors’ stories of abuse as well as their feelings, needs, thoughts and opinions. Survivors may be accused of treating loved ones badly because they call attention to the abuse, express their hurt and anger, or assert boundaries in ways they never could when they were younger. They are often told to stop making trouble, when they are in fact pointing out trouble that has already occurred.
- **Do Not Ostracize Survivors:** Ostracizing is when families or friends leave survivors out of events and social gatherings, even while their abusers are included. Whether it is intended or not, this action punishes the survivor for making others in the family uncomfortable and is another kind of unhealthy family behavior.
- **Do Not Refuse To “Take Sides”:** Family members or friends may say they don’t want to take sides between the survivor and perpetrator. However, staying neutral when one person has caused damage to another is choosing to be passive in the face of wrongdoing. Survivors who were left unprotected in the past need and deserve to be supported as they hold abusers accountable and protect themselves and others from additional harm. Family members and friends may need to be reminded that the abuser committed hurtful acts against the survivor, and therefore being neutral is not OK.
- **Do Not Pressure Survivors to Make Nice with Their Abusers:** Survivors should never be asked to face their perpetrators, especially to brush the abuse under the rug to make others feel better. Pressuring survivors to do that just repeats the abuse of power that was exerted upon them at the time they were violated and is therefore destructive and indefensible.

If you would like to learn more, Brave Step offers a six-session group that provides the knowledge, skills and a community to learn how to support a survivor of sexual violence. Visit www.BraveStep.org/LovedOnes to explore and sign up.