

# Empowering Youth to Cultivate and Build Healthy Relationships

Child Welfare Conference 2025

Presented By: CASA, Inc.



# Presenters

## Sarah A. Gann, B.A.

Sarah began her career in human services in September 2022, starting as a Resident Advocate for CASA, Inc. and moving into the Crisis Intervention Specialist position in January 2023. Her work has involved supporting survivors of intimate-partner violence (IPV), sexual assault (SA), and sex trafficking. Sarah earned her B.A. in General Psychology with a concentration in forensic services alongside a dual minor in both sociology and criminal justice in December 2022. Currently, Sarah is working toward her M.A. in Forensic Psychology and LCPC licensure for Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Sarah presently serves as the Medical Navigator for CASA, Inc. inside of the Forensic Nurse Program at Meritus Medical Center.

## Kelsey Green, LCSW-C

Kelsey has worked as a social worker in the Washington County community since moving to Maryland in 2013. Her work has consistently involved supporting children, youth, and families, and helping them navigate the various life stressors that they are experiencing. Kelsey has a Master's Degree in Social Work and holds a clinical social work license in the state of Maryland. She currently serves as the part-time Youth Prevention Advocate for CASA, Inc. Her primary focus in that position is to support community education around teen dating violence dynamics, and helping youth understand the dynamics of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

# Citizen's Assisting and Sheltering and the Abused (CASA), Inc.

- 24 Hour Hotline
- Emergency Shelter - Transitional Apartments
- Financial Empowerment
- Medical Advocacy
- SNAP Assistance
- Address Confidentiality Program (ACP)
- Legal Advocacy
- Adult Support Services
- Youth Prevention Services
- Support Groups
- Pets Program
- STREAMS Program (formerly AIP)



Since 1977, CASA has been a lifeline for survivors of intimate-partner violence (IPV), sexual assault (SA), and sex trafficking. Through a trauma-informed perspective, CASA aims to provide inclusive support services to survivors to foster long-term growth and stability outside of abusive situations.

# WORKSHOP REMINDERS AND OBJECTIVES

## Workshop Reminders

- The material we are reviewing can be difficult to listen to and think about.
- If you need to step out or do something else to take care of yourself, please do so at any time.
- Please feel free to ask questions throughout the presentation.

## Workshop Objectives

- Identify characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Identify risk factors and consequences of unhealthy relationships in youth
- Review strategies to teach youth about cultivating healthy relationships
- Discuss some of the unique characteristics of teen dating relationships

## An Overview of Teen Dating Violence

- Teen dating violence refers to a set of abusive behaviors that occur in a past and/or present intimate relationship among youth, specifically between the ages of 12 to 24.

# Characteristics of Healthy Relationships within the Youth Population



Define, Discuss & Examine



# DEFINING HEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

A healthy relationship is defined by positive communication, accepted boundaries, and trust between each partner.

There are six primary components for recognizing healthy relationships in the youth population: trust, accountability, safety, honesty, support, and cooperation.

## Healthy Relationships



# LET'S DISCUSS HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP COMPONENTS.

Talk to your neighbor:

Look at the overall picture- what are real life example(s) of the six components to healthy youth relationships?

As a reminder, the six components are trust, accountability, safety, honesty, support, and cooperation.



# GRAYSON & ZOE: EXAMINING HEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

## Trust

- Grayson respects Zoe's privacy when she asks for it and does not question her intentions to wanting space.

## Accountability

- Zoe admits when she has made a mistake in her relationship and positively changes her behavior.

## Safety

- Grayson respects Zoe's boundaries and their relationship only moves at a pace each are comfortable with.

## Honesty

- Zoe is honest about her feelings and intentions with Grayson without being afraid of his reaction.

## Support

- Grayson supports Zoe's long-term goals and provides emotional comfort in challenging times.

## Cooperation

- Grayson and Zoe put the same amount of effort into their relationship.





# Characteristics of Unhealthy Relationships within the Youth Population



Define, Discuss & Examine

# DEFINING UNHEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

An unhealthy relationship is defined by ineffective communication, possessive behavior, and inequality.

There are six primary components for recognizing unhealthy relationships in the youth population: distrust, toxic communication, disrespect, controlling behavior, neglected needs, and hostility.

## SIGNS OF A TOXIC RELATIONSHIP



# LET'S DISCUSS UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP COMPONENTS.

Talk to your neighbor:

Look at the overall picture- what are real life example(s) of the six components to unhealthy youth relationships?

As a reminder, the six components are distrust, toxic communication, disrespect, controlling behavior, neglected needs, and hostility.



# XAVIER & SIERRA: EXAMINING UNHEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

## Distrust

- Xavier constantly accuses Sierra of cheating when she asks for privacy.

## Toxic Communication

- Sierra always tries to belittle Xavier during their conversations.

## Disrespect

- Xavier disregards Sierra's boundaries surrounding her physical and emotional health.

## Controlling Behavior

- Sierra asks Xavier where he has been, who he has been with, and why.

## Neglected Needs

- Xavier neglects to openly talk to Sierra about her feelings and comfortability in their relationship.

## Hostility

- Sierra screams at Xavier and calls him names during their arguments.





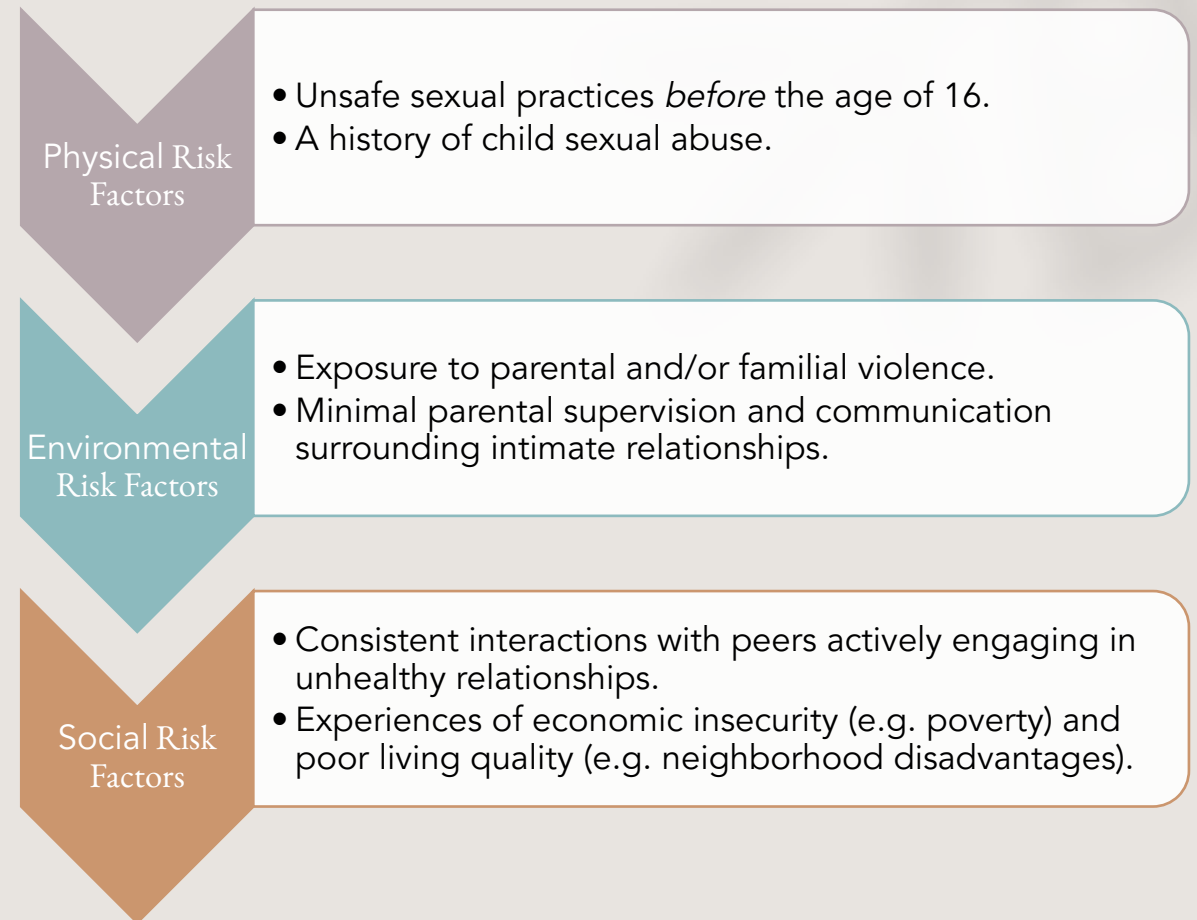
# Identifying Risk Factors for Unhealthy Youth Relationships



Define, Discuss & Examine

# DEFINING RISK FACTORS IN UNHEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

Physical, environmental, and social risk factors increase the potential for youth to engage in unhealthy relationships.



# LET'S DISCUSS RISK FACTORS.

Talk to your neighbor:

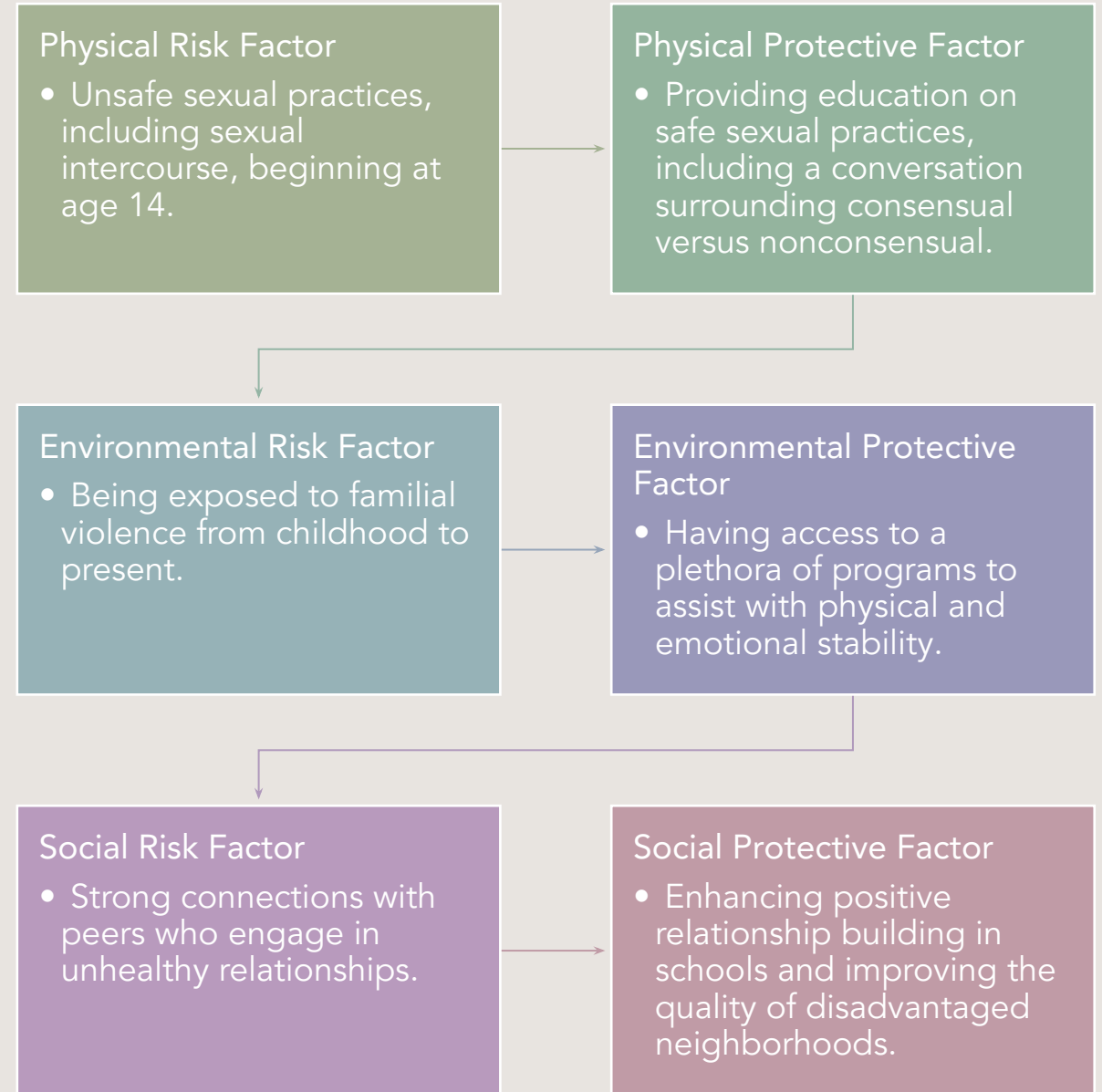
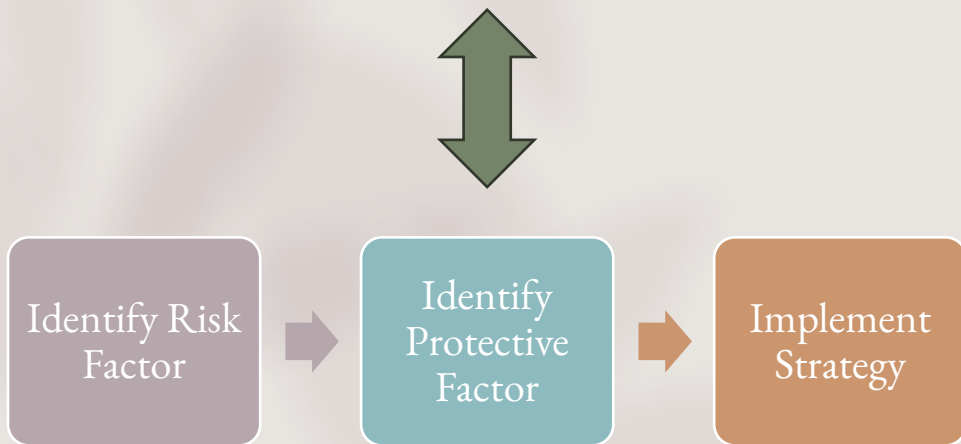
Which of these is a physical risk factor for Sierra to potentially engage in an unhealthy relationship?

- A) Hanging out with neighborhood friends who are actively in toxic intimate relationships.
- B) Sierra's history of child sexual abuse by her older male cousin from ages 7 to 10.
- C) Sierra's mother being too preoccupied with work obligations to observe Sierra's friendships and relationships.



# EXAMINING RISK FACTORS FOR UNHEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

Where there is risk, there needs to be protection.





# Consequences of Unhealthy Youth Relationships

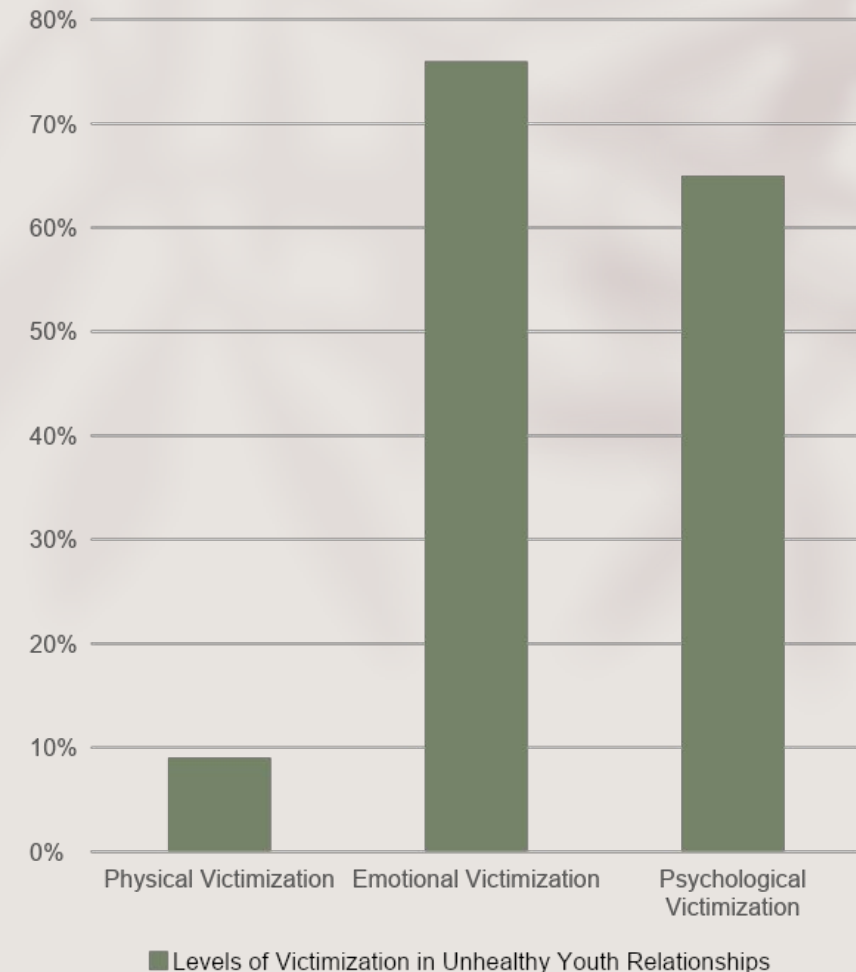


Define, Discuss & Examine

# DEFINING THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNHEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

There are three overarching consequences surrounding general well-being for youth who engage in unhealthy relationships.

- Physical- Approximately 9% of teen dating violence relationships involve physical abuse.
- Emotional- Approximately 76% of teen dating violence relationships involve emotional abuse.
- Psychological- Approximately 65% of teen dating violence relationships involve psychological abuse.

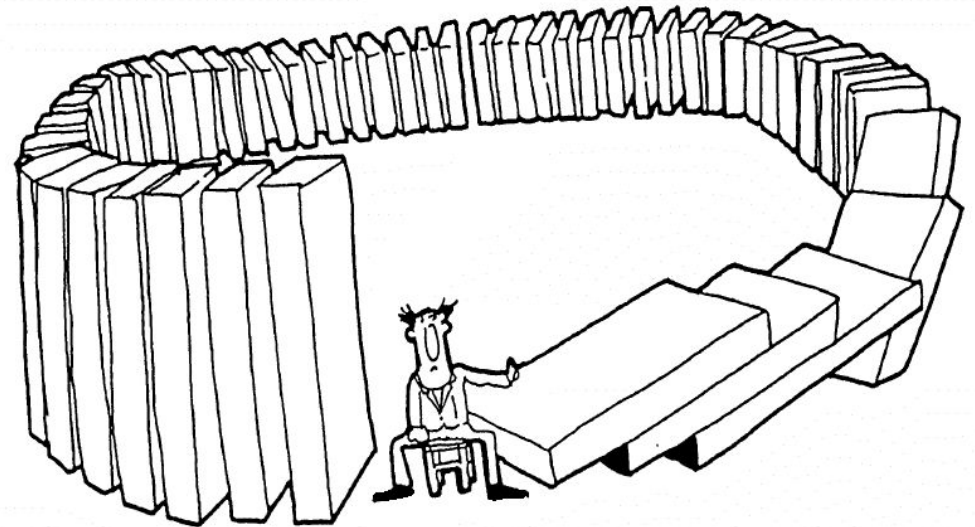


# LET'S DISCUSS THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS.

Talk to your neighbor:

What are examples of physical, emotional, and psychological consequences in unhealthy youth relationships?

In what ways can these consequences impact the youth population?



# EXAMINING CONSEQUENCES OF UNHEALTHY YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

## Physical

- Unplanned adolescent pregnancy.
- Exposure to sexually transmitted diseases/infections.
- External and/or internal injuries.

## Emotional

- Decreased self-esteem and self-worth.
- Withdrawal from social activities.
- Hypervigilance (excessive fear) of upsetting one's partner.

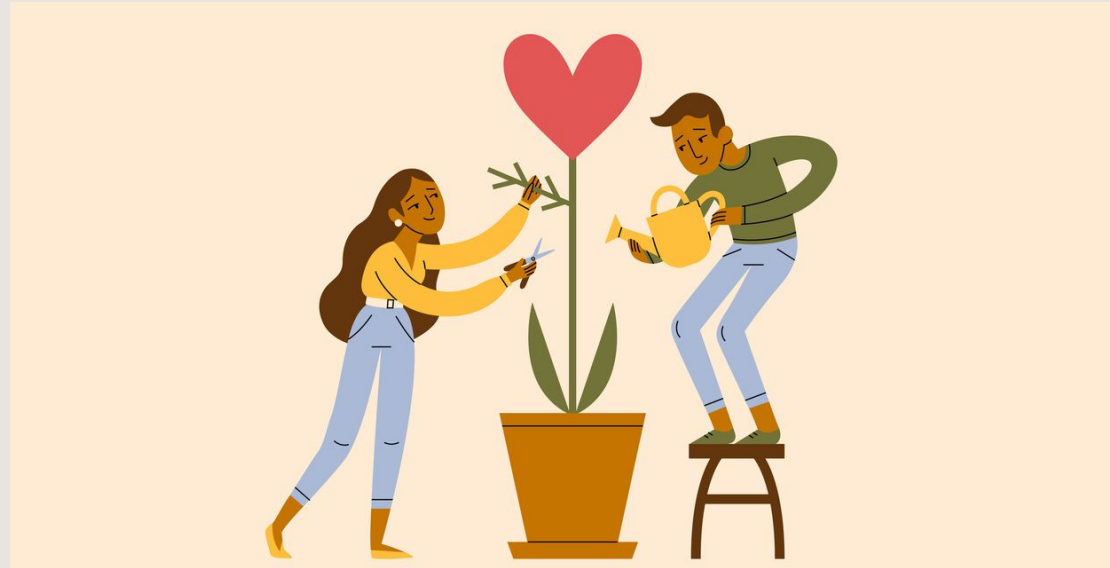
## Psychological

- Increased anxiety and/or depression.
- Increased risk of suicidal ideations.
- Unwarranted, severe aggression.

Teen dating violence can have long-term consequences.



# Teaching Youth about Cultivating Healthy Relationships



# STRATEGY 1: HAVE A CONVERSATION ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.

Talk to your neighbor:

What were you taught about relationships  
when you were growing up?

How and who taught you what you  
learned?

# Relationships exist on a spectrum.

Most parents believe that teen dating relationships are casual, but this can minimize the risks for youth if their relationship turns abusive.

Abusive relationships are often defined by physical, sexual, or psychological aggression.

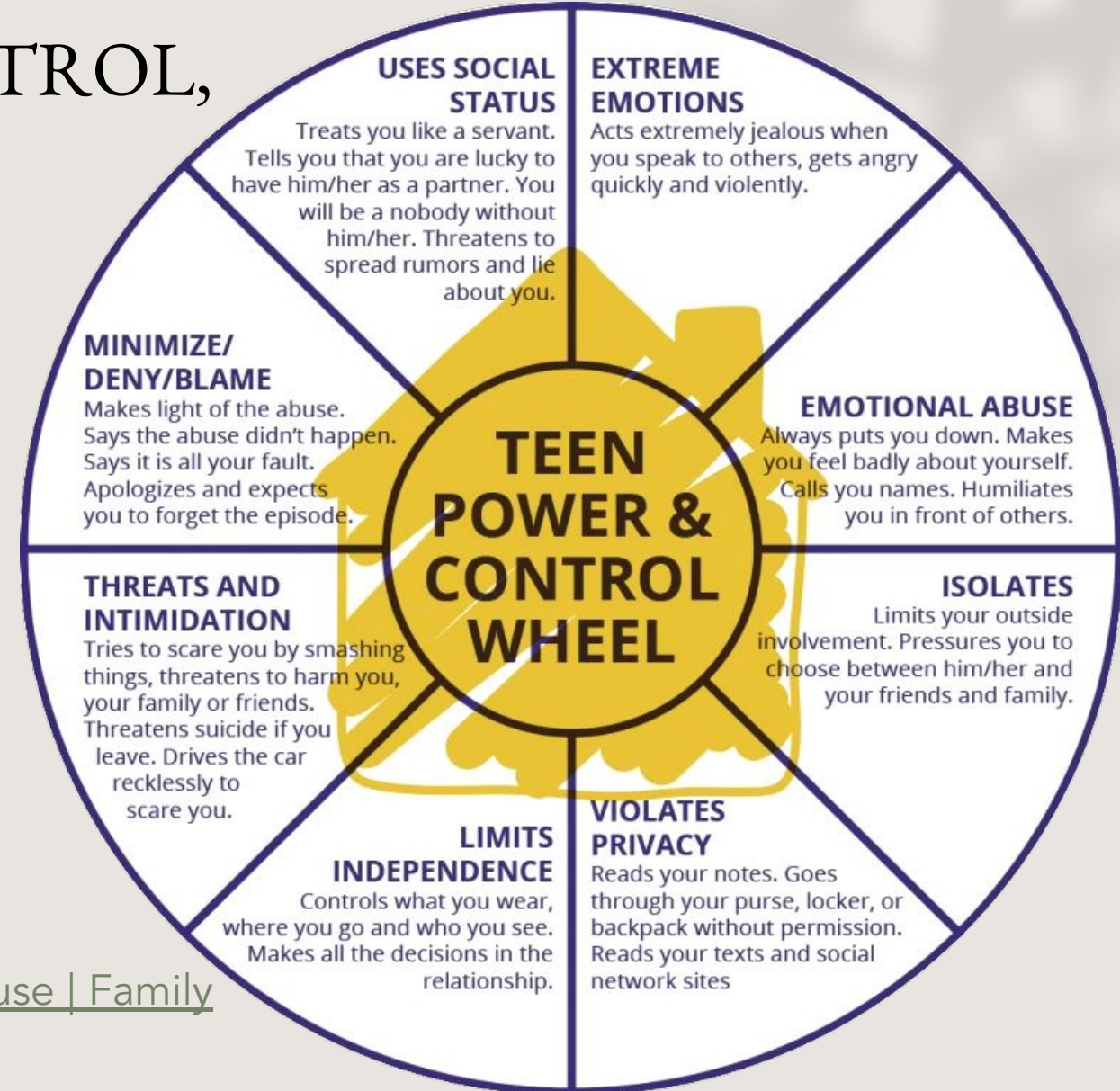
Teen relationships often include abusive tactics from both parties; this is different from adult relationships that are abusive.



# STRATEGY 2: LEARN ABOUT POWER, CONTROL, AND THE CYCLE OF ABUSE.

Talk to your neighbor:

Think about your best friend in high school – how did you decide what you did for fun within that friendship?





# Violence is one expression of power and control.

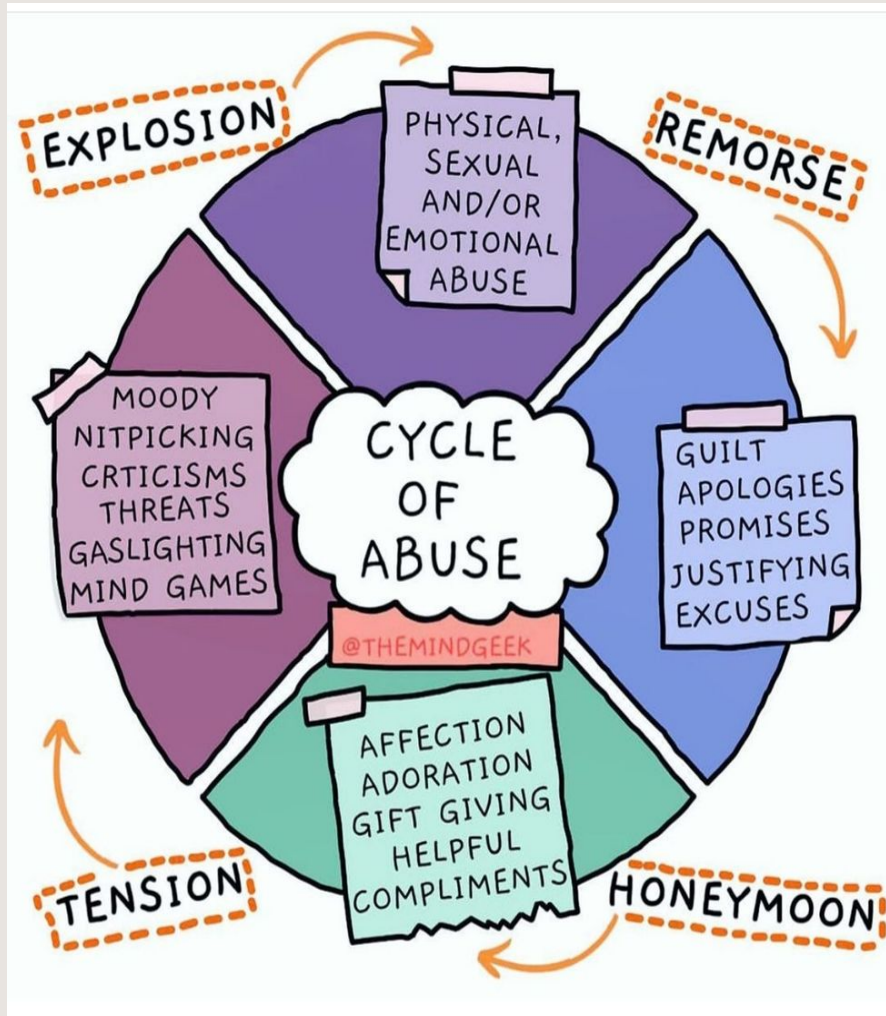
- “Power and control” describes the tactics that one partner uses to manipulate, intimidate, or exert control over another partner.
- Violence should be looked as a symptom of an abusive relationship but not the definition.
- These tactics often leave one person feeling stuck in the relationship, and questioning their self-worth within and apart from the other person.
- Many times, abusers will use more subtle tactics to reinforce larger demonstrations of control.

*Demonstration of Power:* smashing a cell phone

*Demonstration of Control:* limiting who can text, what is posted online, sharing location, how often communication occurs



# Abusive relationships follow a cycle.



There is always a cyclical pattern to abusive relationships.

- ☐ Honeymoon
- ☐ Tension Building
- ☐ Explosion
- ☐ Remorse



Each phase can take different amounts of time, but typically follow this pattern

This cycle can look the same during each abusive incident or be different; each abusive incident can also increase in intensity

This cyclical pattern is the primary reason that individuals don't leave a relationship. The individual either can't identify that they are in the pattern, or they don't know how to get out of cycle

# STRATEGY 3: TEACH ABOUT RESPECT AND BOUNDARIES.



When you're treated worthy of someone's time and energy.

# Boundaries are invisible lines that are typically used to protect oneself.

## Physical

- We can hold hands in public.
- You can pick me up when you hug me.
- You can't grab my arm when we're fighting.
- You can't touch me sexually when I've told you no.
- You can't block me from leaving a room.

## Emotional

- We keep some aspects of our relationship between us, like pet nicknames.
- I will not tell my friends about everything we talk about as a couple, and this includes \_\_\_\_\_.
- We will not call each other mean or embarrassing names when we fight.

## Digital

- I don't have share my password.
- I expect that when we have a fight, it stays off of the internet.
- I expect you to show me respect in the digital space.
- I don't have to share my location with you.
- I don't have to text you back within a certain amount of time.



# We should anticipate that boundaries need to be communicated more than once.

- How we interpret situations and relate it to our expressed boundaries is unique to our own viewpoints and associations.
  - A partner that does not want to understand or learn from a boundary you set is not communicating respect.
  - If you constantly feel drained or invisible in relationships, you may have weak boundaries or none at all.
  - A disregard or breach of boundaries over time may be a signal that it's time to end the relationship.
- 
- ☐ Identify the boundary
  - ☐ Communicate the boundary
  - ☐ Anticipate initial resistance
  - ☐ Be realistic about how long it takes to change





# STRATEGY #4: TEACH THEM ABOUT FRENCH FRIES.



# **This video is about consent**

Consent is willingly  
and knowingly  
agreeing to  
something.

## Consent

**FREELY GIVEN**

**REVERSIBLE**

**INFORMED**

**ENTHUSIASTIC**

**SPECIFIC**





# STRATEGY 5: TALK ABOUT HOW TO END A RELATIONSHIP.

Talk to your neighbor:

How many times of “breaking up” does  
it typically for someone to leave an  
abusive relationship?

**WE ARE  
NEVER  
GETTING  
BACK  
TOGETHER  
LIKE EVER.**

# Help a teen assess their readiness to leave the relationship.

- Do they enjoy hanging out with their significant other?
- Do they describe their relationship as hot and cold?
- Has cheating occurred or some other big violation of trust (physically or emotionally)?
- Does one partner always do things that they don't want to do? Or is one partner always control how time/energy/resources are spent?
- Does their partner make them feel stupid?
- Do loved ones perceive that there is not respect equally given?
- Are they afraid to bring certain things up to their partner?
- Does one partner appear manipulative?





# Breaking up is considered the most dangerous time for a partner during an abusive relationship.

Women are 70x more likely to be killed by their partner while trying to break up compared to any other point in the relationship.

- Society normalizes unhealthy behavior and most people don't know that their relationship is unhealthy
- Self-esteem and a sense of autonomy gets compromised in abusive relationships because of examples on the power and control wheel
- The cycle of abuse leaves one partner hoping for change from the other partner
- Your partner has left you feeling responsible for their mental health
- Fear of how others will react (parents, friends, peers)
- Rose-colored glasses for past fights

# Safety plan around ending a relationship.

- Encourage teens to assess and connect with a safety network.
- Encourage them to have the conversation in a public setting, or with a trusted friend.
- Setting boundaries after the relationship ends matters too.
- Encourage them to focus on themselves and how they feel in the relationship.
- Anticipate them missing their partner. Anticipate they may go back into the relationship.
- Assess for factors that increase danger/potential for lethality.
  - Does one partner have access to a gun?
  - Does one partner have a history of suicidality?
  - Has physical violence been part of the relationship?
  - Has strangulation been part of the relationship?
  - Is one partner threatening harm or death towards the other?

Unique  
characteristics in  
teen dating  
relationships:  
the internet



# Test your knowledge of youth online behavior.

- What percent of teens flirt online?
  - ☐ 25% flirt online once they have experience dating
  - ☐ 2% flirt online without any previous dating experience
- Are boys or girls more likely to block or unfriend someone online?
  - ☐ Girls
- What are some ways teens communicate emotions online?
  - ☐ Emojis
  - ☐ Extra letters in their words
  - ☐ Responsiveness in general to a post or comment
- What is the primary way teens communicate digitally?
  - ☐ Texting

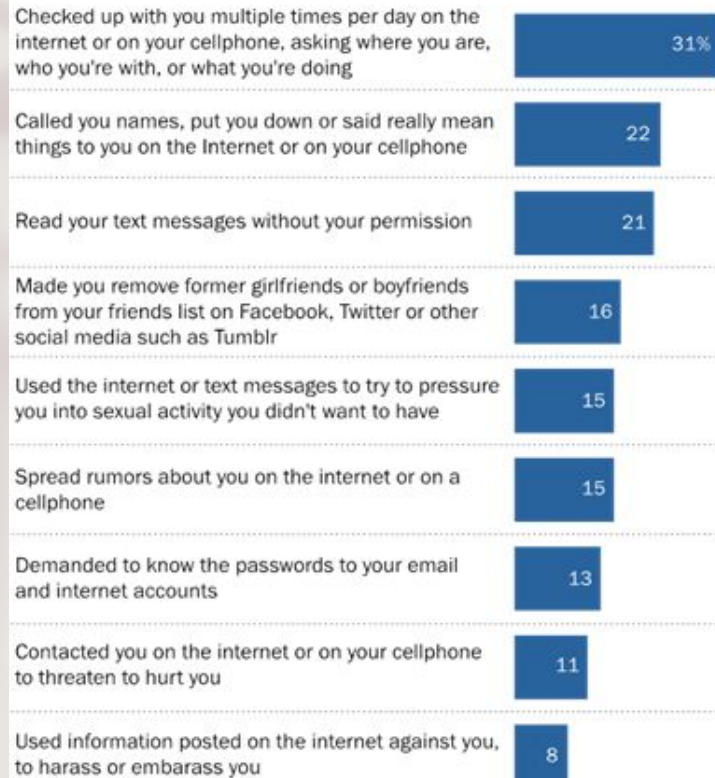
# A significant portion of a teen's relationship occurs online.

- Texting, voice calls and in-person hanging out are the main ways teens spend time with their significant others. But many teens consider the online aspects of their relationship just as important as the in-person ones.
  - Over 50% of teens report feeling closer to their partner *because* of the online aspects of their relationship
  - 27% of those surveyed acknowledged that their social media involvement leaves them feeling jealous in their relationship
- There are two patterns with online presence in youth relationships, and most online dating presence happens online after previous dating experience.
- Most teens do not meet their partner online, with only 8% reporting this to be true for them.



## A Small Share of Teens Have Experienced Controlling or Harmful Behaviors From a Current or Former Romantic Partner

*% of teens with dating experience who have experienced the following from a current or former romantic partner*



Source: Pew Research Center Teens Relationships Survey, Sept. 25-Oct. 9, 2014, and Feb. 10-March 16, 2015 (n=361 teens ages 13 to 17 who have ever been in some kind of romantic relationship).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

# What does technological abuse look like during a teen's relationship?

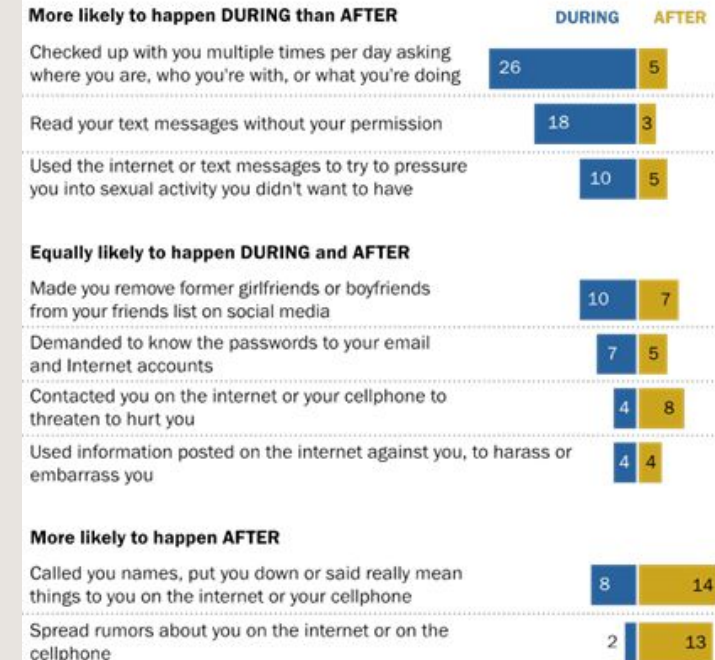
- 1/10 teens have been contacted online and threatened harm by a partner
  - threatened harm is a red flag for future violence
- 1/5 teens report that their messages were read by a partner without their permission
- 1/3 teens have reported that their partner is checking in on them and their activities throughout the day

# What does technological abuse look like after a teen's relationship?

- Teens report that the rates of threatened harm double after a relationship as compared to during.
  - The time when the relationship is most dangerous.
- The rate of name calling, put downs, and rumor-spreading increases significantly after the relationship ends compared to during it.

## Teens Engage in Different Forms of Harmful and Controlling Behavior During and After a Relationship

% of teens with dating experience who have had these experiences from a current or former romantic partner



Source: Pew Research Center Teens Relationships Survey, Sept. 25-Oct. 9, 2014, and Feb. 10-March 16, 2015 (n=361 teens ages 13 to 17 who have ever been in some kind of romantic relationship).

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# RESOURCES

