

The Advocate's Guide to Talking to Parents/Guardians About Healthy Relationships and Sexual Violence Prevention for Children and Youth

ADVOCATES CAN HELP PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE BY CONNECTING WITH PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Learning healthy relationship skills is a vital part of sexual violence prevention and sex education, all of which are most impactful when taught together. Parents/guardians play a significant role in what their children are learning at home and have the power to influence their schools, neighborhoods, and local communities. By building relationships with parents/guardians, advocates can address common concerns and misconceptions about sexual violence, promote healthy relationship skills, and uplift parents/guardians as prevention allies.

Building Advocate-Parent/Guardian Relationships

Advocates' interactions with parents/guardians may vary depending on the nature of their advocacy work and for some, building relationships with parents/guardians can be a challenge. Here are some suggestions for identifying parents interested in advocacy and fostering positive partnerships.

- Identify where parents/guardians gather. Parents/guardians have busy lives and working around their schedules is an effective way to cultivate connections. Volunteer at your local school, attend parent-teacher association (PTA) and school board meetings, participate in school-related events, volunteer at extracurricular activities (i.e.: youth groups, sports teams) or reach out to parent/guardian-leaders who can connect you to other parents/guardians. Look at local schools' websites to find events and volunteer opportunities.
- Adapt your services to the needs of working-parents/guardians. Reflect on your current practices and explore ways to reduce barriers. Offer to meet parents/guardians close to their place of work or their child's school. If possible, consider providing parents/guardians the resources needed to participate in meetings and events such as child-care stipends or bus passes.
- Offer daily moments of connection. When possible, daily communication makes a big difference—greetings, quick conversations, notes, or text messages if policies allow—can be incredibly impactful for parents/guardians. These small acts of connection have a cumulative effect, demonstrating a genuine interest in the wellbeing of parents and their families.
- Follow parents'/guardians' lead. Parents/guardians can provide you with a wealth of information about the issues they face. Ask parents/guardians for their perspective and listen for challenges, barriers, misconceptions, or possible points of connection. You may learn something that can help you build new relationships. Act as a bridge for involved and concerned parents/guardians by helping them connect with their children's teachers, principals and school boards. These parent/guardian leaders can help execute change in the community and educate others.

- Encourage parents/guardians to join your organization’s sexual violence prevention efforts. Where appropriate, encourage parents/guardians to join your organization’s violence prevention efforts or assess how parents/guardians could be better incorporated into your organization’s activities. Uplift knowledgeable individuals who want to serve as parent/guardian-leaders and work together to engage other parents/guardians in violence prevention. For example MNCASA’s Rosemary Project is a great way to break down prevention efforts into small actionable steps that don’t feel overwhelming to parents/guardians www.mncasa.org/prevention/prevention-is-possible.



Using Healthy Relationship Messaging to Educate, Empower, and Support Parents/Guardians

Healthy relationship education and sexual violence prevention often begins with parents/guardians and knowing what language and themes resonate best with this audience can help you have more effective and impactful conversations. In a 2017-18 study of violence prevention messaging, MNCASA found a number of messages about sex education, sexual violence prevention, and healthy relationship skills that were supported and endorsed by parent/guardian respondents¹. Applying these widely endorsed themes in your conversations with parents/guardians can help promote healthy relationship education as a form of sexual violence prevention and encourage them to take action.

Top Messages:

Until things change, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted or abused by age 18. Parent/guardians, schools, and communities share a responsibility to use proven strategies to protect all children from sexual violence so young people can build positive, healthy relationships throughout their lives.

When children are the victims of sexual abuse, the offender is a person they know in 90% of the cases. Parent/guardians and schools need to know how to recognize signs of danger, such as when a child is being “groomed” for abuse, and teach about healthy relationships so all students in our communities can be protected from harm.

Sex education is too often limited to the biology of sex. Young people need more preparation for healthy relationships, dealing with peer pressure, negotiating personal boundaries, and seeking help from caring adults—lessons they need to hear multiple times at home, in schools, and from community members.

¹ www.mncasa.org/prevention/the-messaging-project

Top Messaging Themes and Study Key Findings:

- Healthy relationship education is a shared responsibility (among parents, community, and schools) but parents/guardians should be the primary educators.
- Sexual violence is an urgent problem.
- More must be done to combat sexual violence.
- Education is the best form of sexual violence prevention.

Navigating Parent/Guardian Attitudes and Concerns

Parents/guardians hold an array of attitudes, concerns, and misconceptions about healthy relationship skills and sexual violence prevention education. As a community leader, you can learn to navigate these concerns and help parents who want to be strong advocates for their children.

Advocates can encourage parents/guardians to learn about their school's sexual education program and sexual violence prevention efforts and help them build confidence as parent/guardian-educators. A number of parent/guardian respondents in the MNCASA messaging study reported that they did not know how sexual violence was discussed at their child's school and some felt unsure about how to talk about healthy relationship skills as a way to prevent violence. You can help parents/guardians navigate daunting organizational and leadership structures and learn more about their school's healthy relationship curriculum. Helping parents/guardians request appointments with teachers/principals or finding the date of the next board meeting can help them access information about current violence prevention efforts and the status of sex education in their schools. Moreover, providing trusted resources and asking parents/guardians if they need assistance planning their healthy relationship conversations can build the confidence needed to educate their child.

Advocates can empower parents/guardians with practical tools and resources they can use at home. Some parents/guardians may have concerns about the quality of sexual violence prevention education taught by schools and may prefer to opt-out of these programs for a variety of reasons. A small number of parents in the MNCASA messaging study were opposed to adding healthy relationship education in school, reporting that changes to curriculum may take time away from other subjects and priorities while others distrusted some teachers' ability to competently teach these skills to their children. As an advocate, you can connect parents/guardians to trusted sources and help parents/guardians be better prepared to talk to their children about healthy relationships outside of school. Offer to talk to parents/guardians about their plans or connect them to knowledgeable community-leaders who can offer support.

Advocates can also rectify common misconceptions about sexual violence and stress the importance of teaching healthy relationship skills in their families and local communities. The MNCASA messaging study found that parents'/guardians' sense of urgency and desire for action was on par with nationwide rates of sexual violence. However, a significant portion of parent/guardian respondents believed that sexual violence is a problem that is happening "elsewhere." Parents/guardians may unintentionally share myths about sexual violence with others and it is important to provide them with accurate information. As a knowledgeable advocate, you can help parents/guardians appreciate the pervasiveness of sexual violence and transform their strong sense of urgency into concrete action for their families and local communities.



Sample Parent/Guardian Concern:	Sample Advocate Response:	Notes:
<p>“I don’t feel comfortable talking about this with you.”</p> <p>“I don’t feel comfortable with my child having these conversations at school.”</p>	<p>“I can certainly understand that. You are your child’s best advocate and you can have these conversations with your child at home. They don’t need to be very long conversations as long as they hear from you often. Do you know what you might say to your child?”</p> <p>“I can certainly understand that. You can model healthy relationships for your child and continue having conversations about what healthy relationships mean at home. They don’t need to be very long conversations as long as they hear from you often. Do you know what you might say to your child?”</p>	<p>Acknowledge hesitancy, especially if sexual violence or sex education are considered culturally taboo topics. It may be more effective to focus on the planning and information-gathering process. Remind them that short, frequent conversations are more effective than one big talk. Provide an opportunity to explore effective conversation strategies by asking what they will talk about with their child. Offer resources, support networks, and culturally competent information.</p>
<p>“Sexual violence is a big problem but it doesn’t happen in our neighborhood.”</p> <p>“Sexual violence is an urgent issue but it doesn’t happen among___.”</p>	<p>“You’re right! Sexual violence is a serious problem and it affects everyone in our community. You may be surprised to know that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys experience sexual violence before age 18. We can help prevent violence by teaching healthy relationship skills to our children. Do you know what you might say to your child?”</p>	<p>Validate awareness of the issue and offer a compassionate challenge to common misconceptions. Parent may not realize the pervasiveness of the sexual violence or may not be ready to acknowledge that it happens within their own families, community, culture etc. Keeping the issue at a distance might be a way for parents to cope with feelings of shame, disgust, or fear. Provide an opportunity to explore effective conversation strategies by asking what they will talk about with their child. Offer resources, support networks, and culturally competent information.</p>
<p>“I want to talk to my child about healthy relationships but I don’t know what to say or how to begin.”</p>	<p>“That’s great! Teaching your child about healthy relationships is a lifelong process and you can simply begin by having short, frequent conversations with your child about what they see on television or witness at school. I can provide you with some talking points and resources to you get started. Would that help?”</p>	<p>Validate desire to talk to their child. Remind them that short, frequent conversations are more effective than one big talk. Offer resources, support networks, and culturally competent information.</p>

Minnesota Schools and Districts Index

<http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MdeOrgView/districts/index>

Minnesota Association of Charter Schools

<https://www.mncharterschools.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/mncharterschools/>

Minnesota Parent-Teacher-Association (PTA)

<https://mnpta.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/MNPTA/>

Minnesota's School Board Association

<http://www.mnmsba.org/>

Minnesota Association of Independent Schools (MN AIS)

<https://www.mn-ais.org/>

Education Minnesota – Teacher's Union

<https://www.educationminnesota.org/home>

<https://www.facebook.com/EducationMinnesota/>

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) Class Finder

<http://w20.education.state.mn.us/ELSSearch/search.do>

Minnesota Parent Magazine – Free Family Events Calendar

<http://www.minnesotaparent.com/calendar>

Family Voices of Minnesota – Networking for Parents of Children with Disabilities

<http://familyvoicesofminnesota.org/>

Prevention Curricula List

<https://www.mncasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Evidence-based-and-informed-prevention-curricula.pdf>

Making a Change Together: Sexual Harassment within Secondary Schools Resource Package

<https://www.mncasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Making-a-Change-Together-Sexual-Harassment-within-Secondary-Schools.pdf>

Sexual Development in Children

<https://www.mncasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Sexual-Development-in-Children.pdf>