



# Controlling Behaviour in Relationships

Talking to young people about healthy relationships


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## Watching your child embark on their first major relationship can be tough.

This guide will help you recognise if your child is being controlled by their partner, help you to talk about healthy behaviour in relationships with your child, show you how to collect evidence of coercive control and tell you where to go if you or your child needs help.

No parent likes to see their child heartbroken or upset. So, it's important to be aware of behaviour that goes beyond the 'rites of passage of growing up'.

You might hear about patterns of controlling behaviour that are dismissed "because they love me so much". For example, obsessive texting, emailing, or dictating clothing choices is controlling behaviour. Attempting to control someone through threats and fear – called 'coercive control' – is at the heart of domestic abuse. This can result in low confidence and self-esteem. Your child may also expect their future relationships to be like this.

In 2015 the government implemented a law to make this behaviour illegal, punishable by up to five years in prison.

It's important that we talk about what is acceptable behaviour in relationships with our children. Even if they are too young to be affected by the law, we can make them aware of what healthy relationships and love really look like. A healthy, supportive relationship is a happy relationship.



## How can I tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy behaviour?

In many relationships, there are occasions where one person will make a decision on behalf of their partner, or where one person will take control of a certain situation. Within a supportive and healthy relationship this is not an issue. It is unhealthy when control of a person's day-to-day life is stripped away by their partner, and when they have 'rules' they must live by to not anger their partner.

*"When he asked me to be his girlfriend I was ecstatic. Looking back it was too intense; he'd send me eight-page word documents telling me how much he loved me and turn down going out with his friends just to talk to me online, but he was my first boyfriend and three years older than me so I was flattered by the attention."*

**Chlo, 18**

To understand coercive control, it is important to be aware of the impact it could have on your teenager or young adult when they do not give in to the control or follow the 'rules' their partner has given them. It is not acceptable, is not a 'rite of passage', and does not have to be endured.



## Coercive control and your child

A young person, especially a teenager in the first heady rush of love, may not recognise that they are experiencing coercive control. If you are a parent, it is important to understand and look out for the signs of coercive control, and to look at patterns of behaviour. **Remember, your child can have an unhappy relationship without it being abusive.** You need to watch for repeated instances of your child being controlled, and for sustained changes to their behaviour.

These are the sorts of things to look out for if you think your teenager or young adult is being controlled by their partner. If they are:

- ▶ being put down and told they are worthless
- ▶ being stopped from working or going to school/college/university
- ▶ having their money taken away or controlled
- ▶ being isolated from friends and family
- ▶ having access to food, drinks and day-to-day products restricted
- ▶ having how they spend their time and who with being monitored
- ▶ having their social media accounts – Instagram, Twitter, Facebook – monitored or controlled
- ▶ being tracked by their partner via mobile devices or spyware
- ▶ being told what they should wear
- ▶ being threatened with violence if they do not behave in a certain way
- ▶ having threats made to loved ones or pets
- ▶ being threatened with damage to personal property.

## How might a teenager or young adult who is experiencing coercive control feel?

Coercive control may have a huge effect on your child's feelings, emotions and health. They may feel:

- ▶ anxious and nervous and not free to make their own decisions
- ▶ like they are “walking on eggshells” and scared that they do not have access to money
- ▶ worried that they lack close relationships other than with their partner
- ▶ sick, experience headaches or have other ongoing physical health symptoms
- ▶ isolated from friends and family and that they have no one they can talk to.

## One daughter's story...

I met my ex-boyfriend online when I was thirteen. He was sixteen and always complimenting me. We became a couple; he said he loved me. Six months later, I broke up with him. I didn't think it was a big deal; we'd never met face to face.

He was furious. He said I'd ruined his life and started texting me abuse. I'd been bullied at school by boys who said the same things, so it didn't strike me as a big deal. He calmed down and we arranged to meet properly. He was shy and polite - so after that he would come and stay for the weekend with my parents, and I went to stay with him. He seemed perfect: charming, and always bringing presents.

But between visits he changed. He'd lose his temper, or talk about how ugly girls looked if they didn't dress in a revealing way, then call me a slut for following his instructions.

He stashed fifty boxes of paracetamol, threatening to overdose. He'd show them to me but say if I told anyone he'd do it immediately. I would stay up all night whilst he repeatedly hung up the phone, saying he was on a building ready to jump. I was too exhausted to go to school; he said there was no point anyway because I was stupid. I said I wanted to go to university. He said he couldn't believe I would do that instead of spending time with him.

I first called the police in March 2013. He'd been shouting for everyone in the city centre to look at me because I was a "slag". He threatened that he and his friends would stab me, and he described fantasies about luring me to his house and killing me, as he'd seen a TV character do.

The police officers really helped me, because they told me that what he was doing was abuse. It had never occurred to me before. He was my first boyfriend; I think it's often the case that young people and teenagers don't have the experience of healthy relationships to know that what's happening isn't normal. It's so easy just to think "all couples argue" - especially when someone is telling you that you provoked them. Once they start wearing down your self-esteem and isolating you, it spirals to a point that you can't see a way out.



## How to talk to your child about coercive control

All children, no matter what age they are, need to feel that they are able to talk to their parents.

However, anyone experiencing controlling behaviour within an abusive relationship can start to 'shut down' and withdraw from their loved ones. This is due to their partner isolating them. They are likely to be feeling frightened about opening up to you - even if they want to - as this will be going against the "rules" their partner has set out for them. It is therefore vital that you approach the subject carefully. Teenagers can generally be more difficult to communicate with, particularly with sensitive issues.

- ▶ Your child must know that your support for them is unwavering so that they don't become fully isolated. If your child becomes fully isolated, it is more dangerous for them, as that gives their partner more power. So, maintain contact with them, even if they do not respond or if they become angry.
- ▶ Let your child know that you are worried, and you are there if they need to talk.
- ▶ Give them time. It might take a while before they can open up to you.
- ▶ When you tell your child that you want to talk, make sure they know that it will be a private conversation. It can be good to go somewhere outside of the home – for a walk, to a coffee shop, or out for a drive. A more neutral environment, away from other people and distractions, can help people to open up. Avoid places where it is likely that you will bump into someone one of you knows. Create as comfortable and relaxed environment as you can, and listen respectfully.
- ▶ Make sure that they know that is not their fault. It is NEVER the victim's fault. Tell them that they deserve a healthy, supportive relationship that is free of coercive control and abuse.
- ▶ If your child isn't ready to openly communicate with you about his or her relationship, let him or her know there is help available. Pass on the information, but remind them that you are there for them too.

## How can coercive control be proven?

The types of evidence that will be used in a coercive control case are:



- ▶ text messages and screenshots of messages on social media
- ▶ copies of emails or letters
- ▶ details of previous threats
- ▶ phone records
- ▶ 999 tapes
- ▶ records of interaction with services such as support services

- ▶ medical records
- ▶ CCTV / body-worn video footage from when police attend a domestic abuse situation
- ▶ witness testimony from family, friends or neighbours
- ▶ bank records
- ▶ evidence of isolation such as lack of contact with family, friends, or other agencies they were previously in contact with.

## What is the punishment for an offender?

The most serious perpetrators of coercive control can be sentenced to five years in prison. In other cases, it is more likely that there will be a shorter prison sentence or a fine.

The perpetrator will only be prosecuted for this crime if there is some evidence that it has happened on at least two occasions. There must also be evidence that the victim has feared that violence will be used against them, or that they have suffered serious alarm or distress which has affected their daily life.

## Where can we go for help?

- ▶ If you, or someone you know, are in immediate danger then call the police on 999.
- ▶ Call the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge) on 0808 2000 247 (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week).
- ▶ Access support from other women experiencing abuse on the Survivors' Forum on the Women's Aid website: [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)
- ▶ Use the Women's Aid website to find your local specialist domestic abuse service where you can access counselling, legal help, refuge and other support: [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)
- ▶ Find out more information about relationship abuse on the This Is Abuse website: [thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk](http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk)

# One of the hardest parts of being a parent is seeing your children feeling hurt in their friendships and relationships.

Yet we cannot shield them from every insult and argument; it's an important part of growing up.

However, it's vital to be aware of the difference between behaviour that can be thought of as 'rites of passage' and behaviour which has more serious implications.

We want young women, young men and teenagers to have relationships that are free from abuse. Educating young people and teenagers about domestic abuse is one of the most effective ways of preventing abuse in future relationships.

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the company for women

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