

The Conversation Guide

Having conversations with
young people about respect



Australian Government

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
LET'S STOP IT
AT THE START

Violence Against Women

Let's stop it at the start

Not all disrespect towards women results in violence. But all violence against women starts with disrespectful behaviour.

The *Stop it at the Start* campaign aims to end violence against women. Most victims of family, domestic and sexual violence are women, and most violence against women in Australia is perpetrated by men.

However, we know that there are many different ways in which people may experience violence. This Conversation Guide has a broad focus and aims to support adults to have conversations about respect and respectful relationships with young people.

Gender-based violence has long term and far-reaching impacts. It affects children, families, friends, work colleagues, communities and society as a whole.

But we can all take action to help prevent it. How?

- By recognising that violence starts with disrespect, understanding the impacts that gendered violence has, and being part of the solution.
- By educating ourselves about the online world that is a new source of disrespect and is influencing young people. These hidden influences put pressure on young people about their roles in society, relationships and how to behave. This has a negative impact on young people's mental health as well as their attitudes and behaviours.
- By having conversations with young people about what is influencing them and supporting them to have respectful attitudes and behaviours towards others.

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We shape our children's beliefs from a young age

Children form beliefs from the world around them—what they hear, see, and talk about at school, amongst friends, within their families, and popular culture through media and online.

Research tells us that, from a young age, people start to believe there are reasons and certain situations that make disrespectful behaviour okay¹.

There are many influences on young people's ideas about the roles of men and women and how they should behave to be valued and accepted. Pressures from social media and exposure to negative content is very real and impacts our young people.

These harmful expectations can encourage disrespectful attitudes, and when left unchallenged, can influence their behaviour.

This all plays a role in driving gender-based violence.

Together we can help stop gender-based violence

As parents, guardians, carers, family members, teachers, coaches and role models, we want the best for our young people. We want them to have rich experiences, healthy relationships, and opportunities to shine. We want them to understand right and wrong, to respect others and themselves.

We can all have a positive influence on young people and set the standard for what is and isn't acceptable, right from the start.

Together we can:

- Reflect on our own understanding of respect, gender norms and the pressures we can feel about how to behave to conform with social norms. Respect is when we treat people equally, support their feelings, rights and freedom of choice, and value their unique differences.
- Be more aware of the excuses we make, and model respect to our young people.
- Take steps to understand the type of information and disrespectful content young people may be exposed to.
- Start having conversations with other adults about the role you can play in raising a respectful generation of young people.
- Start having conversations about respect with young people as they grow up—discuss the impact of values, attitudes and behaviours.

Our young people should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of fitting into rigid or unfair expectations about gender norms.

We want them to live in a world free from violence.



Let's stop accepting disrespect

Even though most Australians think gendered-violence is wrong, we don't always recognise where it can start i.e. with disrespectful language or behaviour. Sometimes we don't understand the ways violence, including non-physical and online violence, can show itself or how to recognise it. We might feel that because we don't witness physical violence in our own neighbourhood or communities that violence doesn't happen, and it's not our problem.

Before we can talk about disrespectful behaviour with young people, we need to take a moment for honest reflection about our own biases learned from our experiences growing up.

This can mean confronting our own beliefs about gender roles and expectations, and how we influence young people. We might be surprised to recognise some of the most common ways we excuse disrespectful and aggressive behaviour.

These include:

- downplaying disrespectful behaviour
- accepting aggression as normal expected behaviour
- blaming women and girls for being treated with disrespect
- excusing violence in some situations
- denying there is a problem, or that violence doesn't occur in your local area
- downplaying the impacts of non-physical forms of violence, and violence online
- accepting a hurtful or disrespectful comment as just a joke.

What we think and do becomes normal for us very quickly, so it can be hard to challenge ourselves. But if we don't challenge our thoughts and actions about gender roles and what's OK, we might unintentionally be excusing disrespect, aggression and potentially violence.

Our young people can misunderstand what we say and see it as an excuse or permission to behave in a certain way. If this continues to happen, nothing will change.

When we talk to young people about disrespect it's important to be clear about what is acceptable, and model this ourselves.

Thinking about the conversation

Disrespect and harmful behaviours aren't always easy subjects to discuss.

As parents, carers, and family members, you never know when you may need to talk about respectful behaviour both online and offline with the young people in your life.

By thinking through what you believe, what you might say, and how you can have positive conversations, you will feel more confident to make the most of each opportunity.

Be ready to talk early and often

You might be in the car, making dinner, watching television, or walking the dog. Be prepared to talk when you see or hear something you are uncomfortable with, when your child asks a question, or when they just want to chat with you.

Try to take advantage of opportunities that come up in everyday situations, so that 'difficult' conversations become normal, and the young people in your life know where you stand and that they can talk to you.

Be curious and look out for openings or invitations into their world and ask questions. This helps keep the lines of communication open.

It's important to address disrespectful behaviour quickly and calmly. Explain why their behaviour was disrespectful and how it made others feel.

Think of examples

You may find it helpful to illustrate your points with examples from television, the internet, or other situations you have observed together. For example, if you hear a comment in a news story that a woman who was hurt by a man shouldn't have been out on her own, you could use this to talk about inappropriate views that women are to blame. Or, you may have seen a viral video online that suggests women should 'obey their partner', that you could use to talk about gender roles.

Teach by example

As a parent or carer, you are an important teacher for the young people in your life. Every day they watch you and listen to you. What you say and do influences their attitudes and behaviours. That's why it is so important to think about how they could interpret your actions and attitudes.

No one expects you to be perfect. The important thing is to be honest and consistent. You could even use personal examples when discussing how not to react to certain situations. This will help you be a positive role model for them.

Stay connected

Young people engage in a wide range of online activities and experience many benefits from using the internet. The spaces where young people talk to and interact with their friends online changes rapidly.

You don't need to be an expert in the latest technology but it's important to understand what platforms they are accessing. Ask them about what is trending on social media and who they're engaging with online but avoid excessively monitoring or restricting their online activities.

This will help you to understand what they are being exposed to.

When to get involved

Talk through how young people can handle situations themselves. Ask them if there are other trusted adults they can speak to like a teacher, counsellor or other family members. If you feel you need to intervene, discuss with them what you might do and why. Even if they say they don't want you to get involved, if they are at risk of harm then an adult must intervene.

Kids Helpline has more information about [helping kids handle conflict](#).

Starting the conversation

We might be concerned about raising issues that will worry or scare young people. We might not want to make a situation worse, or express opinions that could lead to conflict with others.

It can be hard to start a conversation that could affect our relationship with our children, cause shame, or make parents seem hypocritical.

Having the confidence to get started can sometimes be the hardest part. These suggested topic areas and conversation starters will help you take that first important step.

You don't need to have all the answers, but gathering information about the topics you think are important and practising your answers can help when talking about complicated and difficult issues.

The eSafety Commissioner has more information about the [hard-to-have conversations](#). The Line has a range of [resources for parents and carers](#).

Listen to them

Remember that a conversation is about listening as much as talking. What a young person tells you provides an important insight into their thoughts and feelings. Listening helps you to understand the attitudes they are forming and to respond to specific issues and challenges they are facing. As a general rule, try to listen more than you talk.

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Be honest

Let your children know that these aren't simple issues. Apologise if you realise there have been times you have not been respectful. Acknowledge that you don't have all the answers, that you are learning too, but that you do know it's important we treat others with respect and that others respect us. Explain that we should not excuse behaviour that is potentially hurtful or harmful. Talk about examples when you have felt uncomfortable when hearing disrespectful comments and ask them if they have examples to share.

Language

Use, and encourage your children to use language that is inclusive, rather than patronising or derogatory towards others. Language can offend, intimidate, belittle, exclude, and reinforce harmful stereotypes. When inclusive language is used it can make people feel included, valued and empowered.



Suggested topic areas

The following topics and questions are suggestions. Consider your young person's own experiences, existing knowledge, and needs.

Consider staging conversations and building on topic areas throughout their years based on their age, maturity and abilities. Consider your young person's own sense of identity including gender, sexuality and culture and speak with them in a way that will best resonate with them.

Respect

- What respect means and why it's important
- Treating people how you would like to be treated
- What respectful behaviours look like and how to be a role model
- Respect in the family, between friends and peers at school
- Self-respect
- Respect in sports teams and in the workplace
- Respectful relationships between people of all genders
- Respectful behaviour online.

The Raising Children Network has more information about the [prevention of violence against women](#) and Kids Helpline has more information about [helping kids handle conflict](#).

Gender norms

- How people of all genders are good at lots of different things
- What gender stereotypes are, and what expectations do we have on ourselves to conform to these
- What does it mean to be a boy or man, girl or woman, gender diverse or fluid—what kind of person do we want to be
- What is gender identity and what does this mean for you
- What does gender equality mean to you, and why is it important
- How different genders are portrayed in the media (movies/shows/online etc.)
- What is an equal and healthy relationship.

Recognising disrespect and aggression

- Bullying, teasing, name-calling and laughing at others
- Fighting in the playground or unreasonable and degrading behaviour on the sports field
- Violence and harassment online and through social media content, comments and posts
- Intimidation and public harassment, cat-calling or whistling at girls in public
- Physical violence
- Persistently pursuing or annoying someone if they are not interested
- Controlling or jealous behaviour, emotional manipulation.



Personal privacy

- The right to your own privacy
- Taking photos, being photographed, and sharing photos
- Sharing photos of yourself with someone who doesn't want them
- Sharing private conversations and online chats with others
- Giving out personal information online, knowing what information is private
- Sexting, phone and cyber etiquette and setting boundaries online
- Harassment through repeated text messages or calls
- What to do if you feel unsafe online.

The eSafety Commissioner has resources to help you [*report online harm*](#).

The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner has [*privacy tips for parents and carers*](#).

Respectful relationships

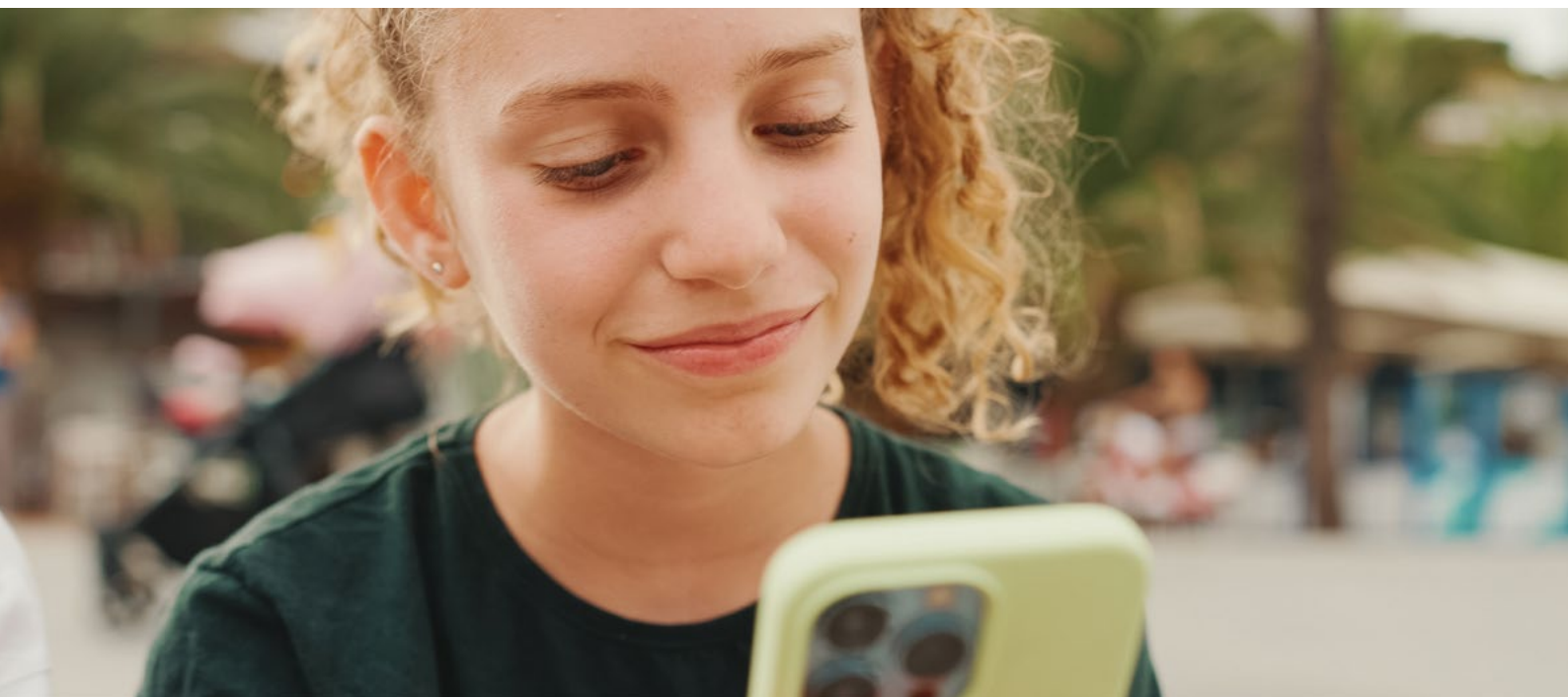
- Respectful, romantic and intimate relationships
- Freedom of choice, independence
- Doing things you both want to do and are comfortable with

- Acknowledging and apologising when you have crossed a line
- Communicating and listening
- Being clear about what behaviours you won't tolerate
- How to tell if a relationship is not healthy or equal.

Find out how to talk about consent at [*www.consent.gov.au*](http://www.consent.gov.au).

What we can do when we experience or recognise disrespect

- How could you call out disrespect
- Ignoring peer pressure and recognising when you're being 'duped' by online influencers to say and do disrespectful things
- How to take action as a bystander when someone else is being targeted
- Talking to your friends about respect
- Being a role model
- Talking to a trusted adult or friend
- Speaking up and getting help, even if it means ending a relationship
- Seeking further information through apps like iMatter
- Accessing services like [*Kids Helpline*](#) and [*1800RESPECT*](#)
- Referring to websites and social media pages like [*The Line*](#).



Suggested starters and opening lines

You don't have to have all the answers.

Be ready to explore topics together. Be clear that you're there to help them. Consider who might overhear and the environment you and your young person are in. You may not get a response the first time, and that's OK. You could try a different opening line when you feel the timing is right. Try using open ended questions i.e. questions that don't lead to a 'yes' or 'no' response.

You could say:

- I'm glad you came to me about this. You're not going to get in trouble, I want to hear more about your opinion and how I might be able to help you.
- You might not want to tell me everything, and that's OK. I promise to listen and not judge. I might not have all the answers, but together we can work this out.
- You mentioned before that you were OK and nothing is wrong. You seemed a little concerned or upset. How can I help? What would you like to talk about?
- You might think I don't understand, and maybe you're right. But I would really like to try. Why don't you fill me in on what's going on?

Ask questions

Ask the young person you're talking to about how they feel and what they think. For example, you can:

- Open the conversation with a real-life story and ask questions like, 'Do you think it was right for them to do that?' Follow up by asking 'Why?' or 'Tell me more' to help you understand more about what they're thinking.
- Invite their expertise if they say, 'you wouldn't understand'. They might enjoy having expertise on a subject you aren't familiar with yet. Being curious and non-judgemental is important, as it lets them know they can trust you to listen to and understand their perspective. It also provides an opportunity to identify feelings or influences about disrespect that you can talk about together.

Questions you could ask

Disrespectful behaviour

- If one of your friends was being disrespectful to you, how would you feel?
- If one of your friends was being treated with disrespect, how would you feel? What would you do?
- If you ever felt unsafe, where would you go for help?
- Can you think of a time you may have treated someone with disrespect?
- If you were being treated the way you treated that person, how would you feel? What would you do?
- Do your friends sometimes use words online or in person that you think are disrespectful but you aren't sure?
- Who are your role models? How do they treat others?
- What does it look like to treat your partner with respect?
- If you felt unsafe in a relationship what might you do? Do you know where to get help?

Gender norms

- Should we treat people differently based on their gender identity? How should we treat each other?
- Do you feel any pressure to behave a certain way, or fulfill a role?
- What does it mean to be a boy/ man or girl/ woman, or to be gender diverse or fluid? What kind of person do you want to be?
- Does the girls' sports club get the same kind of respect and support as the boys' club? Does that seem fair given they all train hard?
- Have you heard something a boy said to a girl, or vice versa, or something said to a non-binary person that you didn't agree with?
- What do you think of the way that women/men/gender diverse people were treated in that movie/show/game/ social media post?
- Have you seen any videos online that are offensive or degrading to boys or girls, or people who identify as non-binary? What did you think of them?
- Do you think men, women and non-binary people get the same opportunities and have an equal say in things?

During the conversation

Listen out for cues and be ready to respond.

Sometimes conversations can reveal things you didn't know about the children or young people in your life. For example, someone may have picked on them, or a friend may have pressured them into doing something they didn't want to. If this happens, stay calm and keep listening so they don't shut the conversation down.

Responding to a young person's experience of disrespect or aggressive behaviour

Your young person might try to play down the seriousness of a situation. They may blame themselves or the person who has been affected by the behaviour, or they may empathise with those who are in the wrong.

Let them know:

- These attitudes are not OK and how we speak to one another is important
- Everyone deserves to be treated with respect
- They are not to blame for other people's behaviour.

Even if you haven't reached an agreement, let them know that it is important to keep talking about these issues and that you care about how they feel.

Responding to barriers or negative responses from children

Some young people are very reluctant to talk about difficult issues with adults. If this happens, there are a few things you can do to increase the chances of a more open conversation next time.

- Calmly set out the issues as you see them and encourage your children to think about them
- Always work at keeping the conversation open and let them know you appreciate them speaking to you
- Discuss the difficult issues they face and acknowledge it can be challenging to work out what is right
- Talk about successes as well as hard times. Recall a time that they showed respect or reacted to a situation in a positive way
- Let them know if they ever want to talk or if they feel unsure they can come to you.

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Talking with children

If you are talking to a child about a situation where they have been treated with disrespect or a person has been aggressive towards them it is important to be very clear the behaviour is not acceptable:

- Acknowledge how they feel and assist them to express their feelings
- Explain that they do not have to put up with disrespectful behaviour
- Recognise that sometimes it is hard to know what to do
- Suggest and discuss ways they might respond to situations like this in the future
- Encourage them to consider the situation through someone else's eyes—if one of their friends was in this situation, how they would react, and what would they say?
- Talk to them about who they can go to for help
- Reassure them that whatever they are feeling (frustration, distress, embarrassment, guilt, anger, worry) is normal
- Let them know you will support them when they are ready (or want) to take action.

If you are talking to a young person about disrespectful or aggressive behaviour that they have used, it's important to be very clear that it's not acceptable:

- Stay calm and keep the door open for more conversations
- Try to understand the context and motivations for their actions, but make it clear that what they did was wrong
- Don't use threatening or aggressive language or behaviour
- Let them know that they can choose to do things differently, and explore these choices together
- Encourage empathy—ask them how their behaviour might have made the other person feel
- Question if they would treat a friend that way
- Talk about how to remove themselves from a situation before their behaviour escalates
- Discuss the difference between the emotion (feeling angry) and the behaviour (being aggressive)
- Reassure them that whatever they are feeling (frustration, distress, embarrassment, guilt, anger, worry) is normal
- Explain that they are responsible for how they react to their feelings
- Encourage them to set a good example for their friends.



Keeping the conversation going

Like anything tricky or challenging, these conversations will become easier with practice.

Conversations about respect are difficult to have with our children, but they are important. It's a way of checking in with them and offering advice as their attitudes and behaviours change over time.

Then, when they face disrespect, they know there are options, and they know there are different ways they can react. They know they can come to you to talk about it or ask questions.

As parents and carers, we have the strongest influence. This is multiplied when we work together with other people who are influential in our children's lives such as other family members, teachers, coaches, managers, and religious and community leaders.

Reach out to your community, including other adults and parents you trust, and bring up respect. It can be helpful to connect with a network of people to get different perspectives and share ideas about how to engage with and support young people.

By positively challenging attitudes and behaviours, and setting a good example, we can prevent gender-based violence before it happens.



Resources

There are resources and tools available on the *Stop it at the Start* website, www.respect.gov.au, to help you learn more about the issue, the type of information young people are engaging with online and ways you can talk about it.

The Issue Explained

Understanding and talking about violence against women in Australia.

The Hidden Trends of Disrespect

A guide to help parents and carers understand the types of disrespectful and aggressive content young people may see and hear online.

The Excuse Interpreter

Discover the hidden meanings behind the words we use to talk about disrespect between men and women.

Generation Respect

This is a practical guide to help adults talk to other adults about raising respectful young people.

Support Services

This page offers a range of support services that can be contacted if you need support or think you might be at risk of experiencing violence.

Find out more

The Line

The Line encourages healthy and respectful relationships by challenging and changing attitudes and behaviours that support violence. The Line is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. It is delivered by Our Watch. www.theline.org.au

Student Wellbeing Hub

The Student Wellbeing Hub is a one-stop shop for information and resources on safe school strategies to assist teachers and school leaders, students, parents, specialist professionals supporting students and pre-service teachers. www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au

eSafety Commissioner

eSafety is Australia's independent regulator for online safety, educating Australians about online safety risks and helping to remove harmful content such as cyberbullying, cyber abuse, and intimate images or videos shared without consent. The eSafety site has many resources and tips for keeping children safe online. You can also report online harm at www.esafety.gov.au

Say It Out Loud

Say It Out Loud encourages members of LGBTQ+ communities to have healthy relationships, get help for unhealthy relationships and support their friends. www.sayitoutloud.org.au