



**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families



# Unhealthy relationships

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## What are unhealthy relationships?

Healthy relationships with peers, families or partners have various benefits, such as feelings of safety and support that may act as a protective factor against mental health problems.

However, some relationships can become unhealthy. Unhealthy relationships, also referred to as toxic relationships, are relationships that are consistently negative and unpleasant. They cause significant damage mentally, emotionally and/or physically to one or both parties of a relationship.

This can lead to feelings of low self-worth, helplessness, fear, insecurity and/or paranoia. In turn, this can increase the risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and sometimes leading to suicidal ideations.

There is no one single cause to unhealthy relationships. Adverse childhood experiences (which might include being brought up in a household where there has been domestic violence and/or sexual abuse) may contribute to developing low self-esteem and low self-worth and unhealthy relationships. A person's early relationships with their caregivers in childhood will set a blueprint for how they build relationships as an adult.

It is important for staff to recognise and intervene if they become aware of students at risk of developing unhealthy relationships.

## What is coercive control?

Coercive control is a form of abuse within a relationship. It does not refer to one single incident - the government defines it as 'a purposeful pattern of incidents that occur over time in order for one individual to exert power, control or coercion over another'.

Coercive control was made a criminal offence in 2015. In the year ending March 2019, there were 17,616 offences of coercive control recorded by the police.

You can find out more about coercive control in [this article](#) from the Manchester Safeguarding Partnership.

## Signs to spot in students

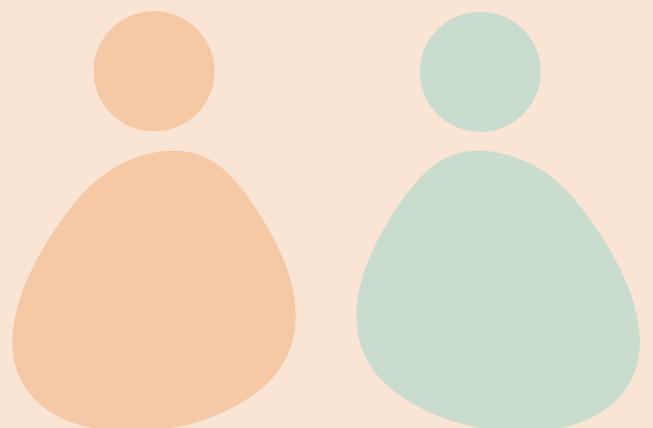


Early signs that a young person may be in an unhealthy or controlling relationship include:

- a drop in academic performance
- a drop in academic attendance
- a lack of concentration in class
- persistent changes to mood and/or behaviour
- becoming isolated and disconnected – e.g. spending less time with friends and family
- evidence of self-harming behaviour
- constantly anxious and easily agitated
- dependency – awareness that the student is overly dependent on others and sacrificing his/her own's needs.

## How to approach a student if you're concerned:

- Raise your concerns with the student in a tentative, curious and non-judgemental way.
- Have the conversation in a private setting that will not be interrupted.
- State only what you noticed, do not add your own interpretations – e.g. "I have noticed that you have been quieter than usual, is everything alright?"
- Ask open questions.
- Practise active listening and be curious about the emotional experience of the student.
- Be genuine.
- Take what the student is saying seriously.
- Ask the student about what support they have or need.
- Offer an opportunity to follow up.



## Who else to involve

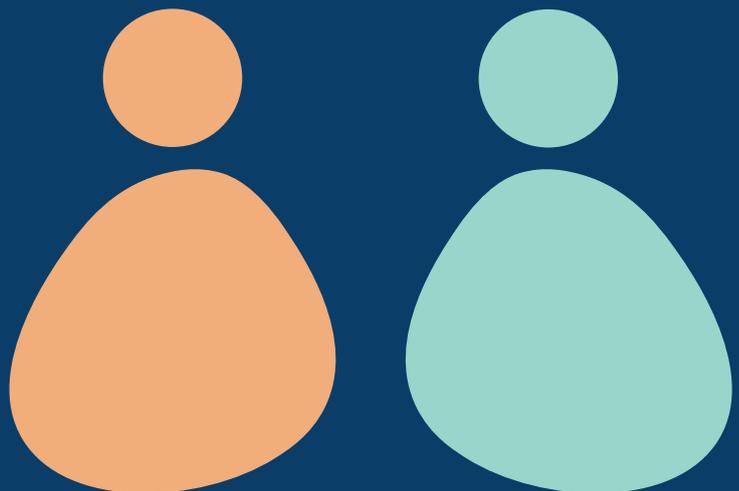
If you are worried that a young person is at risk, always follow your setting's safeguarding policies and procedures. Involve your designated safeguarding team as a matter of priority who will contact other services as necessary. If the young person is at immediate risk, ensure that they are taken to their GP or A&E as a matter of urgency, depending on the severity of the concern.

It's important to familiarise yourself with any local support services that are available in your area and ensure you understand the pathways for referring students.

Young people can find mental health support and guidance on the [On My Mind](#) section of the Anna Freud Centre's website.

Some national organisations who may also be able to offer support include:

- **Relate:** offers help and support for young adults with romantic or family relationship problems
  - [relate.org.uk](https://relate.org.uk)
- **Refuge:** Refuge supports women, children & men experiencing domestic violence with a range of services.
  - [refuge.org.uk](https://refuge.org.uk)
  - 0808 2000 247
  - Live chat: [nationaldahelpline.org.uk](https://nationaldahelpline.org.uk)
- **Galop:** an organisation offering advice and support on domestic abuse within LGBT+ relationships
  - [galop.org.uk](https://galop.org.uk)
  - 0800 999 5428



## Notes and reflections