

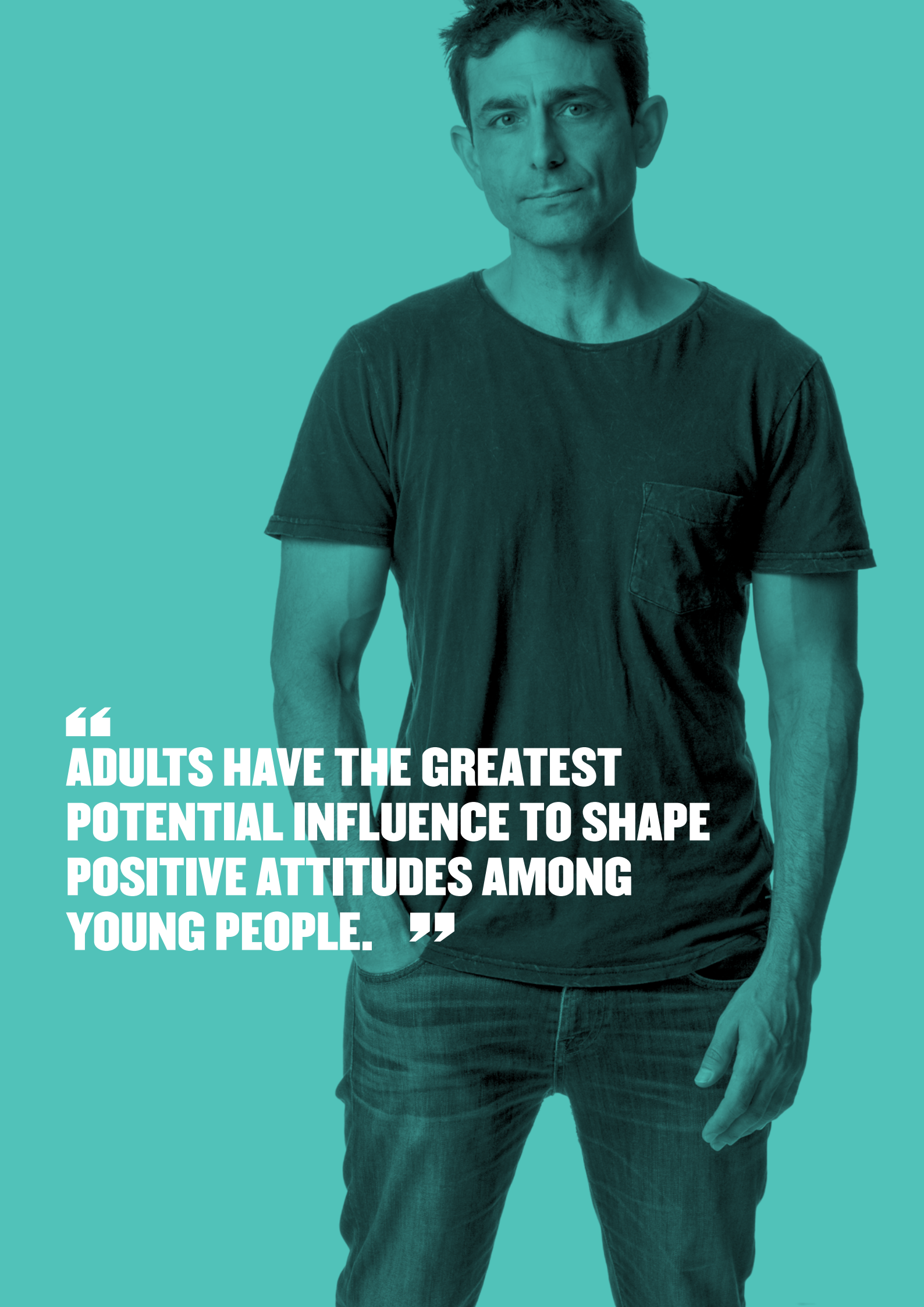
# THE CONVERSATION GUIDE

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Having conversations with young people



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN  
**LET'S STOP IT**  
**AT THE START**

A man with short dark hair, wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans, stands against a teal background. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The image is overlaid with a teal tint.

**“  
ADULTS HAVE THE GREATEST  
POTENTIAL INFLUENCE TO SHAPE  
POSITIVE ATTITUDES AMONG  
YOUNG PEOPLE. ”**

# INTRODUCTION

## THE ISSUE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Most Australians agree violence against women is wrong.

We know that:

- › On average, one woman is killed every week at the hands of a current or former partner<sup>1</sup>.
- › One in three women has been a victim of physical or sexual violence, since the age of 15, from someone known to them<sup>2</sup>.
- › One in six women has experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner<sup>3</sup>.
- › One in four Australian women has been emotionally abused<sup>4</sup>.
- › One in four young people is prepared to excuse violence from a partner<sup>5</sup>.

## THIS CYCLE OF VIOLENCE STARTS WITH DISRESPECT

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

Disrespect starts with the beliefs and attitudes we develop from a young age.

Without realising it, we can sometimes say and do things that make young people think disrespectful and aggressive behaviours are acceptable.

Gradually, boys and girls start to believe that disrespect is just a normal part of growing up.

## TOGETHER WE CAN HELP STOP THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

As parents, family members, teachers, coaches, employers and role models, we can have a positive influence on young people and set the standard for what is and what's not acceptable, right from the start.

We can be more aware of the excuses we make, and how they can have a lasting impact.

We can start having conversations about respect with boys and girls.

We can 'stop it at the start' and help prevent violence against women.



### References:

- <sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Criminology, (2015). *Homicide in Australia: 2010–11 to 2011–12: National Homicide Monitoring Program annual report*
- <sup>2,3,4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2012). *Personal Safety Survey*
- <sup>5</sup> VicHealth, (2013). *Young Australian's Attitudes towards Violence Against Women report (the summary Youth Report)*.

# WE SHAPE OUR CHILDREN'S BELIEFS FROM A YOUNG AGE

**As parents and family members, we want the best for our kids. We want them to have rich experiences, healthy relationships and opportunities to shine. We want them to understand right and wrong. We want them to respect others and respect themselves.**

We do our best to set a good example and talk about the values, attitudes and behaviours we hope our children will develop as they grow up.

But sometimes, without meaning to, we might say things that excuse disrespectful behaviour in young people. To break the cycle of violence against women we must understand how it is linked to disrespect and gender inequality.



## WHAT IS DISRESPECTFUL BEHAVIOUR?

Examples are:

- › putting pressure on someone to do something they are not comfortable with
- › using power to control, abuse or harm someone
- › treating someone as though they are not as important as you
- › treating someone differently because of their gender, religion, cultural background, sexuality or skin colour
- › dismissing someone's beliefs, or how they feel about something.

Research tells us that, from a young age, boys and girls start to believe there are reasons and certain situations that make disrespectful behaviour acceptable. Some of the things adults say or do may unintentionally give the message that this behaviour towards women is OK. It is important to be aware of the things we say to our children because parents and other family members have the greatest potential to shape positive attitudes.

This guide is a practical tool to help you talk more confidently and openly about respect with young people.

You can also use the **Excuse Interpreter** to uncover how the everyday expressions we use may send the wrong message, and the **Respect Checklist** to explore what you think your child understands, or topics to cover during conversations.

“

*Attitudes can be very difficult to change because after a while they become invisible. They're as natural as taking a breath.*”

**Ken Lay, Chair, COAG Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children**

# WHAT HAS DISRESPECT GOT TO DO WITH VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

**Violence against women can start with disrespect. Without realising it, we may be making excuses for disrespectful behaviours in young people. Although we may not have intended it, these excuses can allow disrespect to grow.**

There are many influences on young people's ideas about the role of men and women and how they should relate, including popular culture and peers. However, the adults in their lives – especially parents and other family members – leave the deepest imprint.

Even though most Australians think violence against women is wrong, we don't always know how or when to change things. In fact, without realising it, we sometimes allow boys to develop disrespectful attitudes toward women and teach girls to tolerate disrespect or downplay the serious impacts on girls' self-esteem.

As the figures below show, these attitudes have somehow become a normal part of growing up.

**1 IN 4**

**young people don't think it's serious when guys insult or verbally harass girls in the street**

**1 IN 5**

**young people believe there are times when women bear some responsibility for sexual assault**

**1 IN 4**

**young people don't think it's serious if a guy who's normally gentle sometimes slaps his girlfriend when he's drunk and they're arguing**

**OVER 1 IN 4**

**young men believe that girls like guys who are in charge of the relationship**

Statistics:

TNS, *Reducing violence against women and their children* campaign research, 2015

Our Watch, *The Line* campaign research, 2015

VicHealth, *National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey*, 2013

# LET'S STOP ACCEPTING DISRESPECTFUL BEHAVIOUR

**When we talk to young people about disrespect it's important to be clear about what is acceptable.**

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 the roles of men and women, 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.

Before we can have a conversation with young people we need to take a moment for honest self-reflection.

For parents, this can mean confronting our own beliefs about boys and girls or men and women, as these can form the basis for our reactions.

When thinking about our own reactions, we might be surprised to recognise some of the most common ways we excuse disrespectful and aggressive behaviour.

These include:

- › playing down disrespectful behaviour
- › accepting aggression as just part of being a boy
- › blaming girls for being treated with disrespect.



“

*Self-reflection is ... courageous and necessary. Self-reflection shapes how we connect to our children – how we mentor young adults.* ”

**Ken Lay, Chair, COAG Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children**

“

*Of course we want to protect our daughters from harm but do we want them to think it's always their fault? On the other hand, do we talk to our sons about how to control their sudden bursts of emotion ... Do we talk to them about respectful relationships?* ”

**Anne Coutts, Educator, Canberra Girls Grammar School Principal**

# HOW TO RECOGNISE OUR MOST COMMON EXCUSES

## 1. PLAYING DOWN THE BEHAVIOUR

This is when we brush off or try to lessen the seriousness of disrespectful or aggressive actions.

### HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...

“Just ignore it, it wasn’t that bad”

“He’s probably just trying to get your attention”

Responding in this way teaches young people that this behaviour is acceptable in certain circumstances and portrays it as a normal, even playful, aspect of boys’ behaviour towards girls.

## 2. ACCEPTING AGGRESSION AS JUST PART OF BEING A BOY

When we take the boys’ side, it can imply that boys and men find it harder to control themselves or they must have had a reason for their behaviour.

### HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...

“Boys will be boys”

“He was having a bad day, it’s tough being a boy”

Responding in this way teaches young people that disrespectful or aggressive behaviour is more acceptable among boys.

## 3. BLAMING GIRLS

Sometimes we shift the blame when a male is disrespectful or aggressive towards a female. This may imply that she must have done something to provoke the behaviour or manipulated the situation.

### HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...

“Did you say something he didn’t like?”

“It takes two to tango”

Responding in this way teaches young boys that it is not always their fault if they are disrespectful or aggressive, and teaches young girls to question if they themselves are to blame.



# THINKING ABOUT THE CONVERSATION

## As parents and family members, you never know when a situation will open the door for important conversations with your children.

By thinking through what you believe, what you might say and how you can have positive conversations with your son or daughter, 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, shopping, 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. For example, think about how your daughter might respond to a boy's insult or teasing, or what your son could do if one of his friends showed him a photo of a girl without her permission. Take a look at the Respect Checklist for more topic ideas.

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

### THINK OF EXAMPLES

You may find it helpful to illustrate your points with examples from television 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 views that women are to blame. As before, the Respect Checklist has some other topics that could help you get started.

### BE HONEST

Let your children know that respect and disrespect aren't simple issues. Acknowledge that you may not have all the answers, 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.

### ASK QUESTIONS

Ask your children how they feel and what they think during conversations. Then you can discuss their responses, taking the opportunity to educate them and tell them what you think. For example, you can talk to your daughter about what might happen if a boy was verbally aggressive toward them. Ask them how they might feel, what they might be thinking, what they would do, and how they would feel about taking action.

### SEE IT THEIR WAY

Children are surrounded by many different and sometimes conflicting influences, such as peers and the media. This can be confusing and can make it hard to know how to react in different situations.

You can help guide them by talking regularly about issues they face and by supporting them to feel confident in the actions they take. If you have a son this may be about showing respect to girls and not demeaning them in any way, even if their mates are doing it. If you have a daughter, this may be about encouraging her to speak up when a boy teases her or puts her down, not to keep it to herself, and not to feel that it is her fault.

### LISTEN TO THEM

Remember that a conversation is about listening as much as talking. What your children tell 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 and listen more than you talk.

### TEACH BY EXAMPLE

As a parent, you are an important teacher for your children. 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 children 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.

### WHEN TO GET INVOLVED

Talk through how your children might handle such situations themselves. If you feel you need to intervene, explain this to your children and do whatever you think is necessary. Even if they say they don't want you to get involved, children who are at risk of harm do need adults to intervene.



*It's going to take several decades to change society. It's not an overnight thing, but we've now started.* ”

**Rosie Batty, 2015 Australian of the Year**



# STARTING THE CONVERSATION

## Disrespectful and aggressive behaviour aren't always easy subjects to discuss.

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.

We might be reluctant to discuss things that could affect our relationship with our children, or want to avoid feeling embarrassed or seen as 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.

## SUGGESTED TOPIC AREAS

### EXPLAINING RESPECT

- › What respect means and why it's important
- › Respect in the family
- › Self-respect
- › Respect between friends
- › Respectful relationships between boys and girls.

### RECOGNISING DISRESPECT AND AGGRESSION

- › How to know if someone is being disrespectful
- › Laughing at others or putting them down
- › Bullying, teasing and name-calling
- › Fighting in the playground or rough behaviour on the sports field
- › Intimidation and public harassment
- › Physical violence.

### PERSONAL PRIVACY

- › Taking photos, being photographed and sharing photos
- › Giving out personal information online
- › Sexting, phone and cyber etiquette and setting boundaries online. Visit [esafety.gov.au](https://www.esafety.gov.au) for more information.

### RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

- › Treating people how you would like to be treated
- › Not tolerating disrespect and aggressive behaviour
- › Apps like iMatter
- › Services like Kids Helpline and 1800RESPECT. Visit [respect.gov.au](https://www.respect.gov.au) for more information and support.

### GENDER EQUALITY

- › How boys and girls are both good at lots of different things
- › Gender stereotypes
- › Males and females in the media
- › Why you are both equally 'in charge' of a relationship.

**SUGGESTED STARTERS AND OPENING LINES**

**Remember, you don't have to have all the answers, but be ready to explore topics together.**

Do you notice any differences between how boys and girls are treated at school?

Do you notice any differences between how boys and girls behave at school? For example, are there any sports at school that mostly boys play? Or are there any activities that mostly girls do?

Have you heard something a boy said to a girl that you didn't agree with?

Have you ever found it difficult to talk to boys/girls? What are the main reasons?

What do you think of the way the women/men were treated in that movie? Other examples might be a TV show or game your child enjoys.

Can you think of a time you may have treated someone with disrespect?

If one of your friends was being disrespectful to you, how would you feel? What would you do?

If one of your friends was being disrespectful to someone else, how would you feel? What would you do?

If one of your friends was being treated with disrespect, how would you feel? What would you do?

If you ever felt unsafe around a boy/girl, where would you go for help?

# DURING THE CONVERSATION

## Listen out for cues, and be ready to respond.

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

## RESPONDING TO CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF DISRESPECT OR AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Your children 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
- › everyone deserves to be treated with respect
- › they are not to blame for other people's behaviour
- › they have a right to be treated with respect.

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

## 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.



# TALKING TO YOUR CHILD



If you are talking to your son or daughter 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

explain that they should not accept 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 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

talk about actions that could be taken and assure them that you will support them when they are ready (or want) to take action.

If you are talking to your son or daughter about a situation where you have observed behaviour by them that is disrespectful or aggressive to another person, it is important to be very clear that the behaviour is not acceptable:

stay calm and keep the door open for more conversations

explain that you understand why they behaved that way, but that it was wrong

separate the behaviour from the person—let them know it is not OK to behave in a way that is disrespectful or aggressive towards others, rather than condemning them as a person (for example you love them, but you don't like that behaviour)

be a good role model and avoid using threatening or aggressive behaviour

let them know that they can choose to do things differently, and explore these choices together

encourage empathy—ask them how they think others feel when they behave that way

question if they would treat a friend that way

talk about how to respectfully disagree

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 express 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 disrespect 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. By setting a good example and talking about these issues regularly, we can teach our children that respect is an automatic starting point for all relationships.

Preventative conversations help prepare our children for the future. Then, when they face a situation, they know there are options, and they know there are different ways they can react.

By talking with our children and young people about respect and gender equality, we can influence the attitudes and behaviours they take with them into adulthood.

As parents, 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, religious and community leaders.

By positively challenging attitudes and behaviours, we can prevent violence against women before it happens.

In this way, we are not only doing the best for our own children, we are also playing a critical role in reducing the prevalence of violence against women and their children across our society.

“

*As an educationalist, I tend to go back to first principles, to look at prevention rather than cure. I believe that if we can equip our sons and daughters for the future we may be able to prevent some of these sad situations.* ”

**Anne Coutts, Educator, Canberra Girls Grammar School  
Principal**



# FIND OUT MORE

Learn more at [respect.gov.au](https://respect.gov.au)

Other useful tools:

## THE RESPECT CHECKLIST

A practical checklist to help parents identify some important aspects of respect and gender equality to talk about with children.

## THE EXCUSE INTERPRETER

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



## THE LINE

The Line encourages healthy and respectful relationships by challenging and changing attitudes and behaviours that support violence. The Line is an initiative under the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 - 2022 and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. It is delivered by Our Watch.

[theline.org.au](https://theline.org.au)

## WHITE RIBBON

White Ribbon is a primary prevention campaign that aims to prevent and reduce violence against women and girls by working directly with men and encouraging men and boys to take positive action to create change.

[whiteribbon.org.au](https://whiteribbon.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.

[studentwellbeinghub.edu.au](https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au)

## QUOTES SOURCED FROM:

Ken Lay: International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women speech at Monash University, Melbourne. Delivered 25 November 2015.

Anne Coutts: Canberra Times 'Can we begin to change embedded attitudes about violence against women?' Published 17 February 2016.

Rose Batty: Interview with ABC News. Published 25 January 2016.

**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**  
**LET'S STOP IT**  
**AT THE START**



Australian Government

A joint Australian, state and territory government initiative.