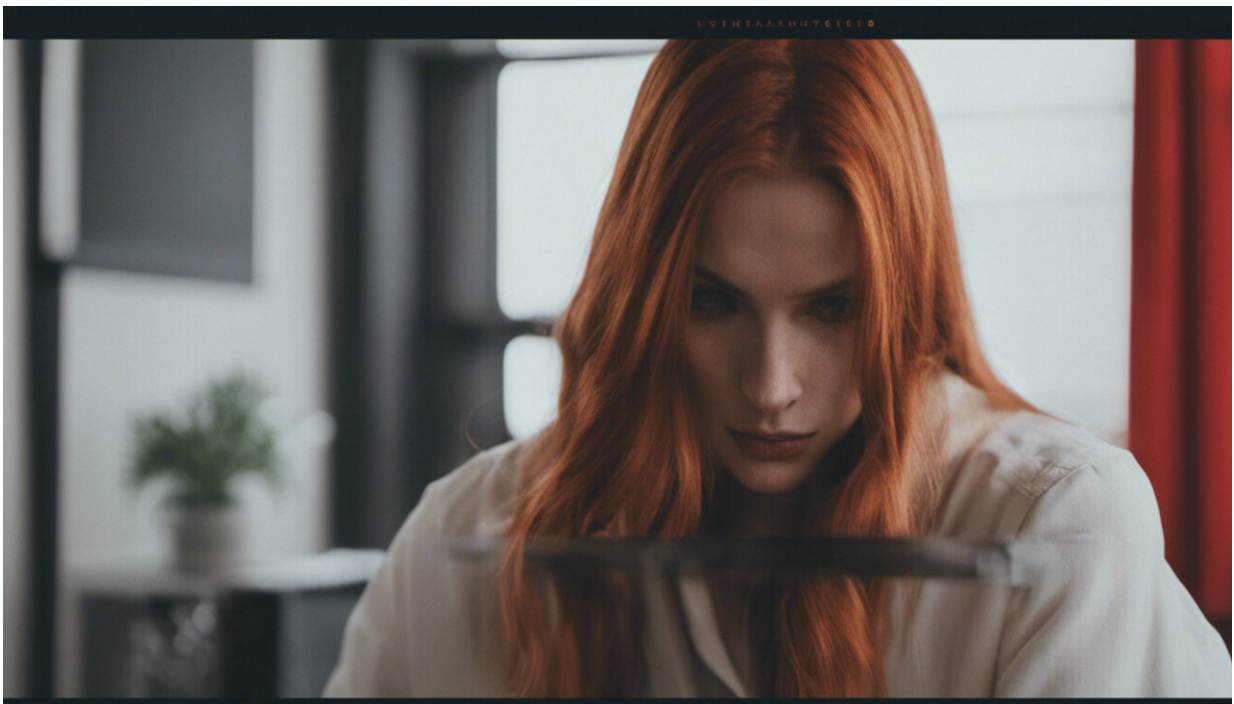


Seven red flags your teen might be in an abusive relationship. And six signs it's escalating

September 11 2023, by Carmel Hobbs



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Australian teens need adults to help them recognize red flags for potentially abusive relationships.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics [estimates](#) 2.2 million adults have

been victims of physical and/or [sexual violence](#) from a partner since the age of 15. Almost [one in three Australian teens](#) aged 18–19 report experiences of [intimate partner violence](#) in the previous year.

But physical, sexual, or [psychological abuse](#) in [teen](#) intimate relationships remains an invisible issue. The [First National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children](#) fails to mention it at all and [Australia lacks](#) youth-specific domestic violence support services.

We know teens are experiencing intimate partner violence that is putting their lives in danger. But they are dependent on [informal networks](#) for assistance. Abuse can impact all parts of their lives and their age and stage of development make them even more vulnerable to its effects.

I [interviewed](#) 17 [young people](#) about their experiences of teen intimate partner violence from when they were under 18. They wanted support and insight from the adults around them.

'I hadn't experienced a proper relationship before'

[Limited relationship experience](#) can prevent young people identifying red flags for intimate partner violence. Interviewee Elise said,

"As a young teen, I hadn't experienced a proper [relationship](#) before; I just kind of thought this is how it is."

While physical and sexual violence cross clear lines, [Australian teens](#) report difficulty recognizing more subtle forms of violence and control, such as emotional and technology-facilitated abuse.

Seven red flags that can happen early

Young people identified red flags in their past intimate relationships and described how difficult it was to see them in the moment. On their own these behaviors and actions may not be problematic. For example, spending lots of time together is a relatively normal part of a new intimate relationship.

But concern should arise when these behaviors become part of a pattern. They can become integrated into [everyday life](#), making them difficult to recognize—and they can escalate over time. Here are some examples of red flags for teen intimate relationships that can begin a pattern of violence and abuse:

1. being together all the time, using technology to monitor location when not together and a sense of always "being on call"
2. sharing passwords to [social media accounts](#) or devices (or setting up shared profiles)
3. turning up unannounced or "as a surprise"
4. saying "I love you" very early in the relationship, talking about living together or having children. This is sometimes called "[love bombing](#)"
5. showering with gifts and grand gestures
6. contacting someone's friends or family to find out where they are
7. framing controlling behaviors as "care" or "concern."

Young person Gina said, "We had a joint Facebook [account], because I wasn't allowed to really talk to people without him seeing it [...] He had to have the password."

Ingrid's partner framed control as care: "He'd just perpetually check where I am, and then sometimes he'd just turn up [...] He'd be like, "I'm just checking that you're safe."

If a teen begins to feel like their autonomy and freedom to make choices

are being restricted, it is a clear cause for concern. Jamie said, "I didn't have contribution into simple things like what movie to watch."

Sam felt like they had to spend time with their partner, even if they didn't want to:

"I'd spend hours [...] just watching them play video games, because I didn't feel like I could go and do something else [...] And I hate video games."

Six red flags that suggest escalation

Increasingly problematic (but still difficult to see) behaviors include:

1. framing the relationship as unique or fated, such as saying the partner is the only person who truly understands them and nobody else could ever "love you like I do"
2. isolating a partner by making it difficult for them to spend time with others
3. assuming [sexual activity](#) will happen because "they are in a relationship"
4. framing feelings of jealousy as evidence of love
5. "suggesting" how they should dress or look or encouraging exercise or diet changes
6. insults passed off as "just a joke."

How can you help?

[Research shows](#) parents are in a unique position to support teens to foster healthy relationships. Interviewee Addison was among those asking for guidance:

"Anybody that can see the relationship [has] red flags. Anybody that is worried for me, I want them to tell me."

Safe and reliable adults can act as [role models](#), ensure safety, involve professionals and empower teens to build safe and healthy relationships.

We can do this by building trusting, open relationships with the teens in our lives, giving them a chance to talk and listening without judgment. If your teenager does not want to talk to you, help them find another person to talk to instead. It's important to remember they may not respond the way we hope, but providing support and talking about relationships [can decrease the risk](#) of them ending up in an abusive relationship.

And we need a national plan to prevent and respond to teen intimate [partner violence](#). It is not the responsibility of teens or their families to solve this issue.

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