A dialogue toolkit for...

Talking About Sexual & Relationship Violence

Updated June 2024
**THIS TOOLKIT**

was developed in June 2021 by Safer, Cal Poly’s prevention education & confidential advocacy resource for sexual assault, dating violence and stalking.

*Updated June 2024.*

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GOALS FOR THIS TOOLKIT

• For parents and supporters to feel empowered in having conversations about sex and relationships with your student.
• For students to have healthy and positive relationships during their time at Cal Poly, and keep themselves and their peers safe.
• To develop a partnership between us and you to prevent violence and promote healthy relationships at Cal Poly.

These can be difficult topics to discuss. While this guide is informed by public health best practices [i], we also want it to be approachable and accessible.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

• Read through all the sections and make a plan for talking with your student. This guide features the most common topics and questions that Safer addresses.
• Scan the QR codes with a smart device to learn more about certain topics.
• Feel free to skip around. Maybe you’ve already had the STI conversation (awesome!) but aren’t sure about how to approach consent – go ahead and skip to that section!
• We have provided sample conversation prompts for each topic. Be creative and tailor them to your relationship and style!
• This toolkit may bring up more questions than it answers. Please reach out to Safer if you’d like additional support!
Many students tell us they never had these conversations with their parents or another supportive adult – and wish they had. By you having these talks with your student, we can help lower rates of violence and prevent harm from happening in the first place.

This is an exciting time for them, but also a time that can bring up feelings of uncertainty. You are in a unique position to help guide them into having a fun – and safer - college experience.

If you're thinking "not my kid, I have a good kid!" - that's a perfect opportunity to talk with them about modeling positive behavior to their peers. See our FAQs (page 17) for more information on that.

"THE RED ZONE" - THE FIRST 6 WEEKS

There is a phenomenon known in research as the “Red Zone” [ii] - wherein most sexual assaults throughout the entire academic year take place in the first 6 weeks of fall quarter. This isn’t just a Cal Poly issue – this is a nationwide trend.

Why does this happen?
There is no single factor that allows this to happen. For some students, it may be their first time away from home. With the newfound freedom, increased access to substances, and the desire to quickly establish new peer connections, an environment is created where harm is more likely to happen. Many people have a "script" about how college should be, and older students may see these vulnerabilities and take advantage of the new student experience. Also, access to comprehensive sex education, as well as how to give and receive consent in a sexual encounter, is varied, so many students haven’t been given explicit models of embodying their sexuality in a way that is attuned and respectful.
2020 CAMPUS SURVEY – IT HAPPENS HERE, TOO

In Winter 2020, Cal Poly conducted a campus-wide survey about gender- and power-based violence, which includes sexual assault, intimate partner violence and stalking.

What we found is that Cal Poly is not much different from other universities in our country, and mirrors nationwide statistics in most categories. Here is a snapshot of our campus:

- **28%** of participants reported experiencing at least one incident of sexual violence since becoming a student at Cal Poly
  - Most of these incidents occurred during their first year, within a mile of campus.
  - Of those who experienced sexual violence, **35%** reported it impacted their academics.
  - **82%** of assaults occurred between people that know each other – not strangers.

- **18%** of participants reported being persistently harassed, pursued, and/or followed during their time at Cal Poly.
  These are typical behaviors associated with stalking. However, only **32%** defined these behaviors as stalking, speaking to an increased need for stalking education.

If you would like to review more from our data summary, visit safer.calpoly.edu/campus-survey-sexual-violence.


23-24 ANNUAL REPORT

208 PRESENTATIONS & EVENTS

23,698 TOUCHPOINTS

93% FEEL MORE EMPOWERED TO BE INVOLVED

161 SURVIVORS SERVED

EDUCATION TESTIMONIALS

"[Safer Leadership Training] is hands down the best experience I've had at Cal Poly. Everyone around me was incredibly supportive and I learned how to be a better person and advocate for the people around me."

"Having a community of people who care about one another, support each other, and give their time to work toward stopping sexual violence is just beautiful. As sad as it is that this issue still exists, I find comfort in fully understanding the topic and being able to discuss it in my life. This has become a part of who I am."
WHY SUPPORTERS MATTER

These statistics don't have to be this way. Violence is not inevitable – it is a learned behavior, and therefore can be prevented.

You have helped shape your student into the young adults they are, and they will bring the values, beliefs, and attitudes that you have instilled in them to campus in the Fall. As their supporter, you have an opportunity to teach them the skills needed to be a respectful, communicative partner. Otherwise, they may only learn from sources like the media (which we know can promote some harmful and dangerous relationship norms) or their friends (whose parents might not be as awesome as you and haven’t had this talk with them yet!).

If the standards are set early – that we respect people's boundaries; consent means an informed, reversible, freely given and enthusiastic YES! [iii]; healthy relationships are founded on open and honest communication – we could imagine a very different atmosphere and culture.

OKAY, BUT WHY NOW?

Right before college is the perfect time to have this conversation again. During such a big transition, they're going to want to know they can come to you as challenges arise.

On a practical note, the first time Safer interacts directly with students is during Week of Welcome. Having an opportunity to discuss these topics with students before they come to campus can set the stage for healthy relationships and hookups.
ALRIGHT, YOU GOT ME.
HOW DO I START?

To keep the conversation open, we recommend approaching it casually. You could be watching a TV show together, a TikTok, or on a walk. Since sex and relationships are integrated into so many facets of our lives, you may be surprised how often the opportunity presents itself, if you’re looking out for it!

Throughout the summer, pay close attention to the media you consume: Do you notice any unhealthy relationships? Sexually aggressive behavior? Stalking being romanticized? Are you hearing about these topics in the news? When you notice those things, that could be a great conversation starter.

- “Do you notice the way [insert behavior]? What do you think about that?”
- “Yikes - isn’t it weird how [insert character] is pursuing [insert other character] like that? They clearly don’t want that. Why do you think things like that are seen as so romantic?”
- “Oh wow, [insert person] came out with their experience about sexual assault. That’s so powerful they’re sharing their story.”

You can even blame us - we’ll be your scapegoat!

- “Hey, I got this toolkit at SLO Days from Safer and it got me thinking. How are you feeling about starting college and meeting new people?”
- “I went to this workshop by Safer during my SLO Days track – have you heard about them yet?”

Keep the conversation going. Students are required to complete an online training prior to Fall quarter that covers affirmative consent, sexual assault, and other related topics to remain in compliance with university policy. Use this as an opportunity to check in!

- “I heard you have to take a training about sexual and relationship violence. What are you learning?”
- “Let me know when you finish the training about sexual & relationship violence - those issues are really important to me. I’d love to talk about them with you.”
YOUR SELF-CARE MATTERS TOO

Discussing topics that carry a lot of emotion and stigma is difficult. This may bring up your own complex experiences or traumas, on top of preparing for this major life transition. We encourage you to seek out your own support when needed – whether that be a partner, trusted friend or family member, or a professional mental health provider.
WHAT ARE SOME TIPS TO REMEMBER THROUGHOUT OUR CONVERSATION?

• Be open, honest and transparent – The more open you are to having these conversations upfront, the more likely they will come to you when they are going through something difficult.

• Use open-ended questions and ask in a supportive, non-threatening way. Questions like “What are your relationship expectations once you get there?” set you up for a more in-depth conversation than, say, “You’re not going to date, are you?” Allow your student time to answer and listen to what they have to say, without judgment.

• Lead by example. Our students learn about relationships through watching your relationships. If we can model healthy conflict, communication, and boundaries ourselves, we are setting our children up for success.

• It’s okay to not have all the answers. Vulnerability goes a long way in connecting with your student. If you need help, you can reach out to us - we’re here to support you, too.
COMMON TOPICS AND TALKING POINTS

With each of these topics, try to remember the first time you learned it. It's okay to say, “I’ll admit, this makes me a little uncomfortable, but I love you and this is important.”

HOW TO MAKE FRIENDS THAT ALIGN WITH THEIR VALUES

The pressure to make new friends when coming to college is strong, but in reality, it can take some time to find "our people." Having friends that reflect your student's best self, practice prosocial behavior and make them feel connected to the community can prevent violence [iv]. Luckily, there are a lot of ways to get involved on campus to find peers that align with their values. We have hundreds of student clubs, intramural sports, volunteer opportunities, elective courses and more!

PROMPT: Ask your student what kind of friends they want to make. What values would they want those friends to have? Where might they find those friends?

Do a search on the club directory, and make a dream list. Make sure they visit Club Showcase during WOW in the Fall - we’ll be there!
COMMUNICATING BOUNDARIES

Boundaries help you define what you’re comfortable with and how you want to be treated by others. They help people define their identity and autonomy, communicate needs, set healthy limits, and bolster self-esteem and assertiveness.

In every relationship (sexual, platonic, family, etc.), boundaries are crucial to maintaining a healthy connection. Examples of boundaries:

- **Physical** - I’d like for you to knock before entering my room.
- **Emotional** - I’m having a tough day, can we talk about this later?
- **Sexual** - I’m okay kissing, but I don’t want to have sex tonight.
- **Material** - I need you to ask before you borrow my car.
- **And many more! Digital, time, intellectual, spiritual...**

Setting clear, firm boundaries can be a way of signaling that you care about a relationship enough to want to continue it in a healthy way! If something doesn't feel right or their personal boundaries are being violated, it is okay to speak up.

**PROMPT:** What are some of your boundaries? Share those with your student – it humanizes and normalizes this thought process. How do you communicate your boundaries? What do you do if someone crosses your boundary?

RESPONDING TO BOUNDARIES

Remind your student if someone asserts boundaries with them, they should respect the other person’s wishes. It can be hard to hear “no” or get a less-than-enthusiastic response, especially from someone they may be interested in.

**PROMPT:** What is a healthy way to respond to someone communicating their boundaries, while remaining firm in your boundary? (Example: "That makes sense - thank you so much for letting me know. What do you want to do instead?")
ACCOUNTABILITY

“We judge ourselves by our intentions, and others by their behavior.”

Do we have control over our intent? Absolutely. Do we have control over our impact? Not always. If someone is impacted by our actions, we need to respond to the harm caused. We don’t necessarily have to admit fault – but we do have to admit that another person was harmed.

How we approach these situations makes a big difference. Holding ourselves accountable and having empathy for those that we hurt goes a long way in repairing relationships.

**PROMPT:** Think about a time that you’ve hurt someone else – even if it was completely unintentional. How did/do you address situations like that? How would you want to see your student to address that?

**OR:** Can you think of a time where someone hurt you, and when you brought up your feelings, they got defensive? What did that feel like?

GETTING TESTED

You might be wondering how this is related to violence prevention.

Informed consent involves each partner knowing what they are getting into – including sexual health status! Every sexually active person should get regularly tested for STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections). Campus Health and Wellbeing offers STI screening, treatment, and birth control for low- to no-cost, as well as free condoms.

Having a conversation with a potential partner about sexual health is a great way to open up conversations about general boundaries, desires, and needs.

**PROMPT:** It’s more likely than not that your student will have sex at some point during college [v] – if that’s the case, it’s better to keep it safe, right? The only way to ensure safety is to talk about it. Keep it simple – and refer to the peer health educators at PULSE if that’s easier.
There's a perception that everyone is "hooking up," but at a fall 2022 national survey found that only 61% and 58% of students reported ever having oral or vaginal sex, respectively [vi]. This perception, paired with potential discomfort about being the "odd one out," may result in students feeling pressure to go outside their comfort zone.

We encourage students to have open, honest communication about their intentions, define what hookups mean to them, and continue modeling consensual communication throughout the hookup.

**PROMPT:** How do you define a “hookup”? How might other people define it? What if you were hooking up with someone and they had a different definition than you - how could you come to an agreement of expectations? What if both people have different definitions?

**AFFIRMATIVE CONSENT**

Yes means yes. Sexual consent is a voluntary, ongoing, engaged, reversible, informed, mutual decision between everyone involved.

Think of consent like negotiating toppings on a pizza. What toppings do you like? Which ones do you hate? Any allergies? What if there are toppings you're curious about trying? Now, couple that with your partner's own wants, boundaries, and curiosities - and come up with a mutual pizza order. **It's all about communication.** You can't come up with a pizza order on body language alone. You can't force someone to eat a food they hate. And if, half-way through eating the pizza, you're full - you are allowed to stop.

**PROMPT:** Can you think of other times that we ask for consent in our daily lives, that have nothing to do with sex? We'll help you start: “Can I have some of your fries?” “Can you pick me up from the airport?” “Can I borrow your phone?” We can normalize asking for consent like we do in other areas of our lives and respecting the “no” or a non-answer as we would in other settings.
USING DATING APPS

College students are often using dating apps and other social media to meet people and develop community. This makes dating more accessible than ever before – but can also inhibit authentic communication. If students are planning to date via apps, we encourage them to take things slow, maintain strong boundaries, trust their gut, and let a friend know where they’re going (if they meet a date in-person).

PROMPT: Share a story of your experience dating at their age!
Technology may have changed some things, but some important lessons may not have changed as much as they think. What are some red flags [vii] you look for? What about green flags [viii]?

SEX VERSUS SEXUAL ASSAULT

By definition, sex is a voluntary act between people who have capacity & agency to make decisions about their body. Sexual assault, on the other hand, is when someone violates boundaries and takes away another person’s decision-making power (through manipulation, threats or coercion). The difference between these two terms is bodily autonomy (the idea that we each have the ability to make decisions for our own bodies and have those decisions respected).

It’s critical that we make this distinction. Sometimes, when we talk to survivors of assault, they express shame over having “lost their virginity” or that “someone had sex with me and I didn’t want it.” If it was done without their consent, that is not sex. Sexual assault is not bad sex – it is a violation, and conflating the two can be deeply harmful.

This is especially true when someone’s first sexual experience is assault; this could create a barrier to future healthy interactions since they don’t have a consensual reference point. Understanding the difference between these terms can validate experiences and reduce retraumatization.

PROMPT: How would you explain the difference between sexual activity that someone might regret (bad sex, unpleasurable, etc.) versus sexual assault? Why does this distinction matter?
**DRINKING & PARTYING**

Research shows that students whose parents talk to them about alcohol use in college tend to drink less, and less often, than their peers who have not had that conversation [ix]. And, most students think everyone around them is drinking consistently and irresponsibly; but more likely than not, they are engaging in healthier behaviors.

**The Link Between Alcohol and Sexual Assault**

Rather than alcohol causing sexual assault, people who cause harm may consciously or unconsciously drink alcohol to have a justification for sexually assaulting someone. Alcohol can provide a catalyst for those who hold toxic attitudes and beliefs to act upon those beliefs. People may also act out more aggressively, or without a regard for others, than they would without the cover of intoxication. [x]

**PROMPT:** Take a look at this Consent & Drinking Roadmap. Does anything surprise you? Can you think of examples in your lives to map out onto this graphic?

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**REACHING OUT FOR HELP**

You will continue to play an irreplaceable role of support for your student as they transition into college. If you can position yourself now as a source of unconditional support, they will feel they can approach you if they need guidance. The first step is empowering your student to ask for help when they need it. There is a rich web of resources on campus here to support your student, but first we need to know that something is going on in order to help.

Many students share with us that upon entering college, this is their first time doing things for themselves – like making doctor appointments, paying rent, etc. You can help by reminding them it’s okay to ask for help along the way.
There are free resources readily available - they are listed at the end of this toolkit, and on our website.

**PROMPT:** Think of a time that you ran into a personal challenge, and approaching problem-solving by yourself for the first time. What was that like for you, and what do you wish you’d have known? Share this experience with your student and encourage them to share their own.

**BYSTANDER INTERVENTION**

Bystander intervention comes up a lot in relation to sexual violence. Educators make it seem so easy - “just say something!” But we know it’s more complicated than that. To intervene in a harmful situation takes confidence, privilege, practice, and social capital (knowing that their words will have weight/significance in their peer group).

It’s never too late to learn how to be an active bystander. While this isn’t the only way to prevent violence, it is one of the ways each of us can feel empowered to help in a situation.

Practice these scenarios with your student and ask what they might do. It’s a lot easier to respond to something in the moment if you’ve already prepared in advance. Check out our Be That Mustang campaign for more tips.

**PROMPT:** Have you intervened in an uncomfortable or dangerous situation before? What was that experience like for you? What worked? What didn’t? What did you learn from that experience, that you might be able to share with your student?
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

IS SEXUAL ASSAULT A PROBLEM HERE? DOES IT HAPPEN MORE OFTEN AT CAL POLY THAN AT OTHER UNIVERSITIES?

Sexual assault at Cal Poly is no more prevalent than at any other university. Statistics show that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men will be sexually assaulted while in college [xi]. Our 2020 Survey shows that 28% of participants had experienced sexual assault while at Cal Poly.

I DON’T NEED TO HAVE THIS CONVERSATION – I HAVE A GOOD KID.

That’s great! In that case, this is a perfect opportunity to talk to your student about being a role model and active bystander for their peers.

Peers who model pro-social behaviors have a strong impact on the people around them [xii]. So essentially, when people model respecting boundaries, asking for consent, and intervening in problematic situations - and those are acknowledged by their peers - others around them are more likely to exhibit those same healthy behaviors. Have a conversation with them about how powerful it is to have that skillset, and how important it is to model that for the people around them, especially as they enter new social environments.

DOES CAL POLY OFFER SELF-DEFENSE CLASSES?

Occasionally, the Recreation Center will offer self-defense classes, as well as some off-campus organizations. It is important to note that physical self-defense tactics are not an effective stand-alone strategy. As most sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone you know and trust, not a stranger, physical self-defense tactics are often not realistic. Additionally, the reliance on framing self-defense as a prevention tactic could perpetuate the idea of victim blaming (such as, “if they knew how to defend themselves, they would not have been assaulted”). No one deserves to be assaulted, no matter what.
SHOULD I ENCOURAGE MY STUDENT TO BRING PEPPER SPRAY OR OTHER WEAPONS WITH THEM TO CAMPUS?

While the concern for your student is understandable, we do not endorse bringing pepper spray or any other weapons onto campus. In many cases, they are prohibited. In addition, like other self-defense techniques, these tools require training and regular practice to be used effectively. We recommend talking with your student about assertive communication and having a safety plan should a situation arise that they need one.

IF MY STUDENT TELLS ME THAT THEY WERE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED, SHOULD I MAKE A REPORT ON THEIR BEHALF?

It can be frightening and heartbreaking to see your student struggling. However, it is a personal decision for a survivor of sexual violence to make an official report, whether that be to Title IX or law enforcement. As a supporter, it is best to let them know that you love and care about them and let them know that there are confidential resources available. In fact, working with a confidential resource, like a Safer Advocate, to learn more about options often leads to higher rates of reporting.

Advocates can advise on options and resources, as well as assist you with how to have a discussion with your student if they have been assaulted or in an abusive relationship. Due to FERPA and confidentiality policies, Safer Advocates will not be able to share any personal or private information about your student with you.

HOW DO I RESPOND IF MY STUDENT HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED OR IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

If something does happen to your student, recognize that it is NEVER their fault. It does not matter how much they have had to drink, what they were wearing, or where they were. The only person at fault is the person who took advantage of them. Placing blame (“You really shouldn’t have done ___”) or asking investigatory questions (“Why were you even at that party?”), even with good intent, could hinder their healing process and damage the relationship you have. It is important that you respond in an empowering, non-judgmental way. Many survivors never tell anyone – so if they’re telling you, that’s an act of trust. Here are some tips:
• **Actively listen** without judgment. Believe them.
• **Respond in an empowering way.** Thank them for sharing, validate their feelings, and let them know it’s not their fault. While it might be hard, it must be their decision what to do next. They had their power and control taken away from them when this happened – it is our job, as loved ones and supporters, to give them that power and control back.
• **Offer resources.** You don’t have to do this alone. You can refer your student to Safer for confidential on-campus support.
• **Check on them.** Be accepting of where they are in their healing journey and let them know you are there for them.

**WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SAFETY AT CAL POLY?**

Cal Poly annually reports crime statistics and prevention education offerings in compliance with all state and federal laws. View the current Annual Security Report [here](#). Keep in mind, these statistics reflect crimes that are *reported* within campus geography and other designated reporting criteria – not all incidents of violence are reflected in this report.

**WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION DOES CAL POLY PROVIDE TO STUDENTS ON THIS TOPIC?**

All incoming and returning students must complete an online training about sexual and relationship violence each fall quarter. Completion of the trainings is monitored by the Dean of Students office.

Save works closely with various campus partners, such as New Student and Transition Programs, Fraternity & Sorority Life, Athletics, Club Sports, and a myriad of academic and programmatic departments to provide education year-round.

Action Months are hosted throughout the school year to coincide with topics related to intimate partner violence, stalking and sexual assault.
MY STUDENT HAS ALREADY EXPERIENCED ASSAULT OR ABUSE. HOW CAN I CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THEM WHEN THEY MOVE TO CAMPUS?

Before leaving home and moving into a new environment, you can have a conversation with them about ways to maintain their mental health and wellbeing. Making a plan over the summer can make a smoother transition in the fall – things like getting established with a new therapist (which may take time to find a good fit), making an appointment with a Safer Advocate, or accessing accommodations with the Disability Resource Center.

It may be helpful to ask your student directly what they need – what would make them feel most comfortable? It might be weekly check-ins over the phone, conversations reminding them about communication, boundary setting, relationships expectations, or a whole list of other strategies. We are more than happy to help with these conversations.

HOW CAN MY STUDENT GET INVOLVED WITH SAFER?

There are many ways for your student to get involved! Safer Leadership Training, a quarterly course, is a great place to start.

We can also integrate anti-violence work into any facet of student life at Cal Poly – email our Prevention Specialist at jmacmart@calpoly.edu to learn more about individualized Prevention Consultations, or joining our specialized groups for FSL and Athletics!

I THINK THE WORK SAFER DOES IS IMPORTANT – HOW CAN I SHOW MY SUPPORT?

We love when parents and supporters show their engagement and appreciation for our work! We recommend that you sign up for our monthly newsletter to stay up to date about what Safer is offering.

If you are looking for ways to donate your time, we recommend looking into the Parent Advisory Council and continue to share the importance of our work with other parents.

If you have resources that you would like to contribute, you can make one-time or recurring donations directly to the Safer Fund.
RESOURCES

Wow, that was a lot of information to take in. You did it! We are grateful we are to have a partnership with you to develop a violence-free culture on our campus. We will leave you with some helpful resources - these are free to students and can be used without shame.

- **Counseling Services** - licensed therapists offer individual and group counseling
- **Health Education** – professional and peer Health Educators can help screen for substance use; coaching on mental, physical and sexual health; support groups for students in recovery
- **Dean of Students** – students who are experiencing hardships and in need of additional support
- **Basic Needs** – free, no-questions-asked food pantry and more
- **Student Diversity and Belonging** – finding a community, especially for students who hold marginalized identities, is critical for their health and wellbeing
- **Civil Rights & Compliance Office** – Title IX and Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation; assists with access to supportive measures in response to sexual misconduct and provides a campus administrative complaint and investigation process
- **Rave Guardian** - free safety app that can send anonymous tips, set a safety timer, text Mustang Patrol, or connect to 24-hour police.
- **Mustang Shuttle** - Free shuttle rides for students across campus
- **Mustang Patrol** - Free walking service to meet and accompany students to any on-campus destination
- **Other off-campus resources are available on our website.**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns after reading through this toolkit, please feel free to reach out.

FEEDBACK

We would love to hear your feedback on your use of this toolkit. **Please participate in our short survey** - it should only take a couple minutes, and will help us help you!
REFERENCES

[i] https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/index.html


[iii] https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/relationships/sexual-consent


[v] 2018 National College Health Assessment Data – 65.4% of respondents had sex within the last 12 months of the survey


[vii] https://www.joinonelove.org/signs-unhealthy-relationship/

[viii] https://www.joinonelove.org/signs-healthy-relationship/


preventing violence • supporting survivors

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