

# Healthy Relationships and Sexual Violence Prevention: A GUIDE FOR CAREGIVERS



Villanova University seeks to foster and maintain a community of mutual respect and concern for all of its members. Villanova students have many opportunities to learn about healthy relationships, consent, and sexual violence prevention. However, conversations about these complex issues should start long before students arrive, as it is the responsibility of every member of the Villanova community to foster an environment free from sexual violence. While sexual violence is not something that most people want to think about, it is in fact a public health, legal, and social issue that requires ongoing discussion and education. There can be no greater violation of the terms of our community, or of the essential dignity of any member of it, than an act of sexual assault, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking or other forms of misconduct. These acts constitute the deepest affront to University standards and will not be tolerated in any form.

With this in mind, we have created this guide to provide you with information and tools that can be used to initiate meaningful conversations with your student. Each section includes a list of discussion questions to get the conversation started within your family.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR YOUR STUDENT TO KNOW ABOUT SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

Sexual violence is a critical issue on college campuses nationwide and, unfortunately, Villanova is not immune to this type of harm. To better understand sexual violence in our community, we conduct student sexual violence climate surveys every three years. Of the 1,478 undergraduate students who participated in our most recent (Fall 2024) survey, we learned that 14.7% of cisgender women and 3.2% of cisgender men experienced sexual assault (unwanted sexual contact) since becoming a student at Villanova. We also learned that:

- 82% of sexual assaults involved people who were known to each other (i.e. Acquaintance, non-romantic friend, “hookup”, former dating/romantic partner)
- Alcohol and/or other drugs were present for over 85% of these incidents
- 52.5% of these incidents occurred on-campus
- 9% of students indicated that they told no one about their experience
- The first several weeks of the year are an exciting time as new students acclimate to a new environment, navigate increased independence and meet new people, but a higher prevalence of sexual violence also occurs during this time. This six-to ten-week time period is typically referred to as “The Red Zone” (<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence>).
- 14.4% of individuals reported experiencing sexual assault prior to attending Villanova University

## Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the first six weeks are a time when there is a higher prevalence of sexual violence?
2. Who do you think is at a higher risk of experiencing sexual violence?

## TALKING WITH YOUR STUDENT ABOUT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

It can be difficult to acknowledge that those we love may be in uncomfortable situations as they navigate new experiences and relationships. No matter how close you are with your student, talking about healthy relationships, sex, and sexual violence can be uncomfortable, awkward, and complicated.

Many children and teens first learn about relationships and sex through the media and their friends, which are generally not the best sources of information. Conversations you had with them years ago may not be their experiences today as relationships can look and feel very different for each young adult. Young people are learning who they are and what they want in a relationship. Some may be seeking friendships, while others are seeking casual “hook ups” or something more serious—this looks different for each person. Talking with your student about sexual health and their personal boundaries can break down some of the barriers and create more open and honest dialogue.

## HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND CONSENT

A healthy relationship includes mutual respect, trust, honesty, and open communication. The power dynamic in a healthy relationship is equal and allows for all parties to be their authentic selves. Consent is a fundamental aspect of a healthy relationship. Consent is an explicitly communicated, reversible, mutual agreement in which all parties are capable of making a decision. Consent is informed, voluntary, and actively given. Consent exists when all parties exchange mutually understandable affirmative words or actions indicating their agreement to participate voluntarily in sexual activity.

### Consent can look like:

- “Is it okay if I kiss you?”
- “Can I give you a hug?”
- An ongoing communication at every step

### Consent is not present where:

- Confusion, hesitancy, or uncertainty exists
- A person changes their mind about participating in the activity and communicates this with words or actions to the other person

Consuming alcohol or other substances, whether voluntary or not, can greatly affect a person’s ability to make informed and voluntary decisions. While consuming alcohol and other substances can diminish a person’s ability to consent, substance use is never an excuse for sexual violence. The way each body processes these substances depends on many individual factors. All parties engaging in sexual contact should assess their own and the other person’s ability to give informed and voluntary consent.

## Discussion Questions:

1. What does consent look like/sound like to you?
2. How can you ask for consent? How can you give consent?
3. What can you do or say if you are uncomfortable in a situation?
4. What is important to you in a relationship?



## WHAT CAN I DO IF MY STUDENT OR SOMEONE THEY KNOW EXPERIENCES SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

At Villanova, we seek to empower our community by providing tools and resources to prevent and respond to sexual violence. It can be difficult for someone to share an experience of harm, so it is important to know how to respond and what resources are available.

### When someone experiences sexual violence:

1. **Listen**—By listening to a survivor’s experience, you are showing that you care and are available to support them.
2. **Believe**—When a survivor discloses to you, you can show support by believing them without judgment.
3. **Limit asking questions except for assessing safety of the survivor**—It is best not to investigate, ask for specific details or try to figure out what happened. It is strongly recommended not to ask specific questions about the incident as this can be re-traumatizing for the survivor. Let the survivor lead the conversation with what they are comfortable sharing. You can always ask them what they need, keeping in mind that they may not know what they need in that moment.
4. **Provide resource information**—Familiarize yourself with available on and off campus resources. By providing these resources, the survivor has an opportunity to choose what works best for them. There is no one way for survivors to react, so no one resource is the best choice.
5. **Support decisions in next steps**—This may be hard as a parent or caregiver, but by doing this, survivors are provided with ownership of their healing process.
6. **If your student discloses an experience of sexual violence, ask**—How can I support you? What do you need?

If your student shares that a friend has experienced sexual violence, ask: Do you know what resources are available on or off campus? If not, let’s see what is available for your friend? What support do you need? Information on available resources can be found at <https://www1.villanova.edu/content/university/sexual-misconduct/support.html>.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Do you know what resources are available at Villanova?
2. Do you know you can report sexual misconduct to Villanova?

## WHAT ARE SIGNS I SHOULD LOOK FOR?

While there is no single indicator that someone has experienced sexual violence, there are some changes in behavior that may give you pause for you to check in with your student. You know your student better than most and could be the first to notice that something is different.

Significant changes in patterns and behaviors are important to acknowledge, for example:

- Changes in sleep schedule (sleeping all day or not sleeping at all);
- A lack of interest in participating in their normal activities;
- A decline in their grades or academic attendance;
- Refusing to go to certain places they used to enjoy (this could include returning to school);
- Significant changes in their personality or behavior;
- Increased awareness of surroundings;
- Inability to concentrate;
- Misusing alcohol and/or drugs; and,
- Self-harming or risky behaviors.



While this list is not exhaustive these could be red flags that your student is struggling and needs support. It is important to understand that there could be many reasons unrelated to sexual violence which can cause these changes. Simply check in with them to let them know you care about them and want to help.

## BYSTANDER INTERVENTION

Bystanders play a critical role in the prevention of sexual violence and other types of harm. We encourage all community members to take reasonable and prudent actions to prevent or stop an act of sexual violence. Each situation is unique, and each person has different strengths when it comes to intervention. First, it is important to determine if the situation is an emergency or non-emergency. An emergency can happen quickly and require an immediate response; for example, if someone is unresponsive calling 9-1-1 may be the best response. In non-emergency situations, there may be more time to plan and think about the best way to intervene.

### Taking action may include:

- **Direct intervention**—Approaching one of the key people involved in the situation and attempting to prevent the situation from escalating further.
- **Delegating**—Involving other people to prevent a situation from worsening. This can include recruiting friends, Resident Assistants, Public Safety, or local law enforcement.
- **Distracting**—Altering the flow, interrupting, or shifting a situation to prevent something from escalating.
- **Delaying**—Checking in with someone afterwards to ask if they are okay and offer to help them access resources and support.

When considering options, it is most important for students to make the safest choice available to interrupt or intervene in situations that could result in acts of harm.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What are examples of emergencies?
2. What would you do if you witnessed an emergency?

## RESOURCES, POLICIES AND PROCESSES



Reporting sexual violence to any on or off campus resource does not automatically mean someone must go through a criminal and/or disciplinary complaint process. Reporting an experience of sexual violence gives people options should they, at some point, decide that they wish to pursue a complaint. Resources for support and reporting can be found at:

[villanova.edu/sexualassault](https://villanova.edu/sexualassault)

The full Sexual Misconduct Policy can be found at: <https://studenthandbook.villanova.edu/sexual-misconductpolicy>

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