



The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds

Shining light on mental health through education.

Coercive Relationships

The recent rise in reports of sexual coercion among public figures may seem new, but it's long been part of our culture. Technology has simply increased its transparency. This creates opportunities for vital conversations with teens about coercion and sexual exploitation, especially online. While many parents find discussing intimate relationships difficult or awkward in today's tech-driven world, these conversations are essential.

Two Key Factors of Coercive Relationships:

1. **The Imbalance of Power.** For teens, this power imbalance may be a difference in age, social status, intelligence, etc.
2. **Alternating good and bad treatment.** This refers to behavior that is sometimes loving and caring, and at other times controlling and unkind. This pattern is incredibly confusing and can strengthen unhealthy attachments.

Advice for Parents:

1. **Initiate conversations about healthy sexual relationships.** They might of course roll their eyes, cover their ears, and run out of the room. But there is evidence that they are also listening to you.
2. Contrary to popular belief, most teen "**sexting**" is consensual and part of normal development. If discovered, it's usually a chance for conversation, not an emergency or sign of coercion. However, the line between consensual and coercive can be blurry, as boys may view requests for sexual images as a sign of success, while girls often feel pressured or ashamed.
3. Coercion is often a **gradual process**, with repeated requests that wear down the victim's will. This can make victims feel complicit in actions they didn't want but were coerced into, leading to regret. Explaining this pattern to teens can help them feel less responsible for "giving in."
4. **Sextortion and revenge porn** cause profound distress for teens. The emotional aftermath could result in safety concerns (e.g., digital abuse / harassment; suicidality; self-harm), which may require parents to restrict teens' digital media access.
5. **LGBTQ+ youth** may be uniquely vulnerable to exploitation due to the challenges of consolidating sexual identity into what remains a largely heterosexual cultural setting. Stigma and discrimination have long been identified as barriers to seeking help.

Thanks for all you do to support a young person in your life. It really makes a difference.

For more resources on managing relationships, visit us online: mghclaycenter.org/topic/relationships

