

Adolescent relationship abuse: Challenges, approaches and future directions

Maya Ragavan, MD, MPH, MS
She/her/hers
Assistant Professor of Pediatrics
University of Pittsburgh

I have no conflicts of interest or disclosures to report

Land Acknowledgement

- I live and work on the ancestral lands of the Osage, Lenape, Shawnee, people.
- I pay tribute and respect to their past, present, and future people, community, and culture.
- I commit to continued gratitude for the gifts of nature, along with ongoing respect, care, and stewardship of the land, each other, and future generations.

Acknowledgements

This presentation references work done by:

- Futures Without Violence
- Project Catalyst: Statewide Transformation on Health and Intimate Partner Violence

I would like to acknowledge Kimberly Randell MD, MPH, Jaime Sidani, PhD and Elizabeth Miller MD, PhD, from whom I adapted these slides

Learning Objectives

- Describe ARA and health impacts on young people
- Review types of ARA, specifically substance use coercion and economic abuse
- Discuss strategies to support ARA survivors

We know this is a difficult topic



Take a minute to breathe

ARA is common

69% lifetime prevalence among U.S. high school students who had started dating

25-41% of teens report cyber or digital ARA

26% of female and 15% of male survivors of contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner first experienced these or other forms of violence by that partner before age 18

ARA and the COVID-19 pandemic

- 12.5% sexual ARA, 8% physical ARA (Krause, 2021)
- 18% experienced sexual violence in 2021 (CDC)
- ARA stayed the same, although help-seeking increased (from 11% to 22% from 2020-2021; Decker et al, 2022)
- Challenges around lack of affirming spaces, isolation

[J Adolesc Health](#). 2020 Jul; 67(1): 18–20.

Published online 2020 Apr 23. doi: [10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.04.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.04.011)

PMCID: PMC7177095

PMID: [32409152](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32409152/)

Supporting Adolescents and Young Adults Exposed to or Experiencing Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic

[Maya I. Ragavan](#), M.D., M.P.H., M.S.,^{a,*} [Alison J. Culyba](#), M.D., Ph.D.,^b [Fatimah L. Muhammad](#), M.A.,^c and [Elizabeth Miller](#), M.D., Ph.D.^b

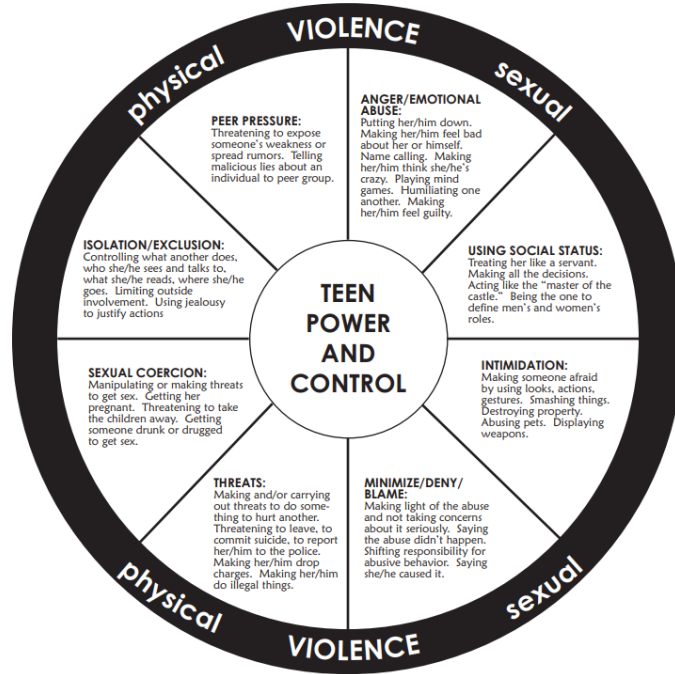
► [Author information](#) ► [Copyright and License information](#) ► [PMC Disclaimer](#)

ARA and the COVID-19 pandemic

“I think... about **the political landscape and how that's really emotionally impacted Black and Brown and LGBTQ youth, too.** I think that's just been an emotional burden and added burden to their families, which increases any family stress that's going on, which increases violence that's going on”

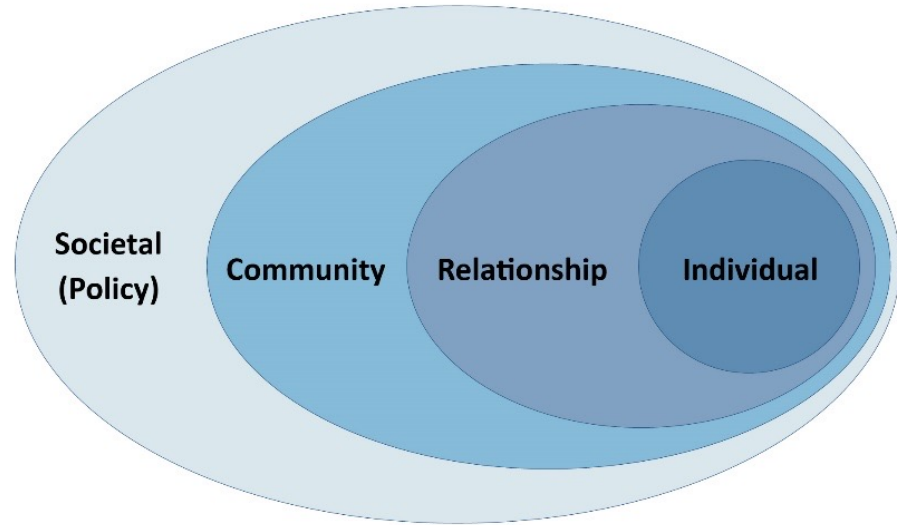
“A lot of [gender non-conforming or non-binary students] have been really struggling in feeling disconnected from other people and all pretty much have families that aren't super supportive. I think not having school as a space to physically go to, to **express themselves and be able to dress the way they want and go by names they wanna go by has been a hard cumulative thing over the last several months.**”

Power and Control Wheel



Structural oppressions

Survivors belonging to marginalized groups experience compounding challenges due to intersecting inequities including being cut off from resources



A note about gender

- Research has historically used gender binary framework
- Trans/GNC “lumped in” with LGB
- Emerging work includes range of gender identities
- Gender inclusive

Centering the experiences of gender diverse youth

- Gender diverse young people are more likely to experience ARA (Garthe 2021)
- Gender diverse youth of color experience compounding oppression rooted in racism, genderism, and transphobia (Goldenberg, 2021)
- Gender diverse young people may have difficulties accessing affirming resources and services (Ragavan, 2021)
- ARA and IPV work must continue to center the voices of gender diverse young people

Supporting boys and young men

- Restrictive gender norms are associated with increased violence perpetration
- Men with restrictive gender norms were more likely to say they have a purpose in life ([STATE OF AMERICAN MEN \(equimundo.org\)](https://equimundo.org))
- Critical to engage men and boys through multiple evidenced based *gender transformative* interventions (e.g. Coaching Boys into Men and Manhood 2.0)

What does dating mean?

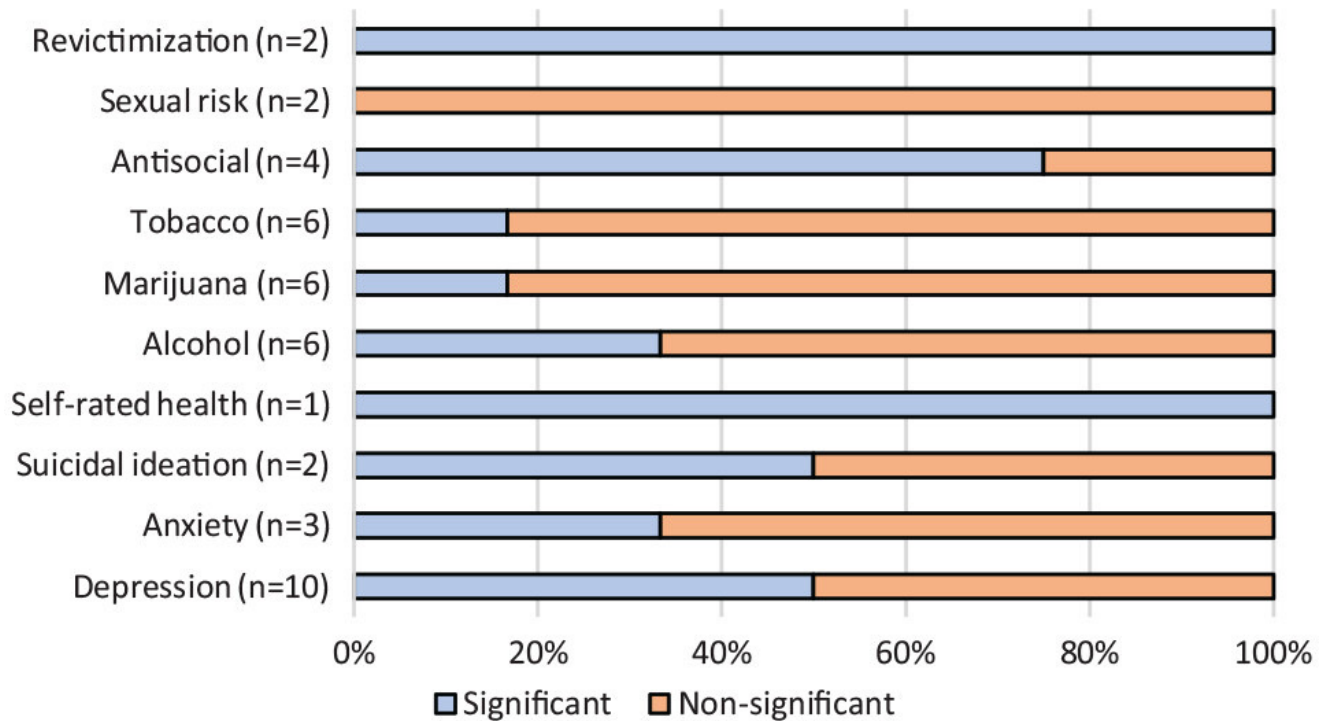
Getting to know each other
Compromising
Hanging out
Trust
Equal
Boundaries
Being nice
Get along
Respect
Supportive
Talking
Checking in
Solving problems together
Happy
Play together
Going places
Honesty
Friendship
Communication
Hugging
Understanding
Starting slow
Giggling
Smiling
Openness
Caring
Holding hands
Similar interests
Comfortable
Walk together

Co-occurrence with other forms of violence

- Important to not view ARA as a “silo”
- ARA victimization and perpetration can co-occur with other forms of violence including exposure to IPV, bullying, child abuse and neglect
- Different types of violence experienced by young people also have shared risk and protective factors (e.g., parental monitoring, future orientation)

ARA and Substance Use

- Studies have shown that ARA is associated with substance use, including non-medical use of prescription (Clayton, 2017), vaping (Ragavan, 2020), cannabis (Johnson, 2017), alcohol (Stappenback, 2016), and tobacco
- Polysubstance can lead to more ARA (Espleage, 2018; Parker, 2015)
- But not every study shows this



Adolescents' perspectives on ARA and substances

- “Getting in” with a relationship
- Something in common
- Coping with trauma

Substance use coercion

- Substances are used in a way to manipulate, control, or coerce
- Research has examined in the context of opioids
 - Controlling use
 - Limiting access to help seeking resources
 - Interfering when some wants to stop using
 - Threats to involve systems (e.g., Child Protective Services)
- Can overlap with other types of coercion (e.g., mental health coercion)

“A lot of moms, pregnant people, there's a lot of fear instilled in them by their abusive partner. If you're using, I could tell CYF, and they could take the child away. Or if the abusive partner wants custody of that child, or doesn't want their partner to seek primary custody, they'll use CYF as a form of control. **"No one's gonna believe you if you're using." Or, "I'm gonna tell them you're using marijuana, and you're gonna get in trouble, actually, if you try to get custody of our child."** Or if they already have CYF involvement, sometimes an abusive partner can use that as a form of power and control, so forcing them to fail urine drug screens or tricking them to fail urine drug screens.”

Economic ARA

- Coercive and controlling behaviors around employment, education, and school
- 7% of participants in STRiV study reported coercive control around money lending (Copp et al., 2020)
- Study of >2,000 young people, 47% reported educational ARA, 49% reported employment ARA, and 46% reported financial ARA (Scott et al., 2023)

Social media and ARA

Cyber/digital related control

Seeing unhealthy relationships or discussion about unhealthy relationships on social media platforms

Having content shared without their permission

Misinformation and disinformation related to healthy masculinities, ARA and healthy relationships

ARA and discrimination

- Experiences of racial and gender discrimination 2.5 times more likely to experience ARA (Roberts et al., 2018)
- Adolescent-reported interpersonal and immigration related discrimination associated with ARA victimization (Huerta, under review)
- Discrimination explained the association between bisexual identity and ARA in a sample of young adults (Martin-Storey et al., 2021)

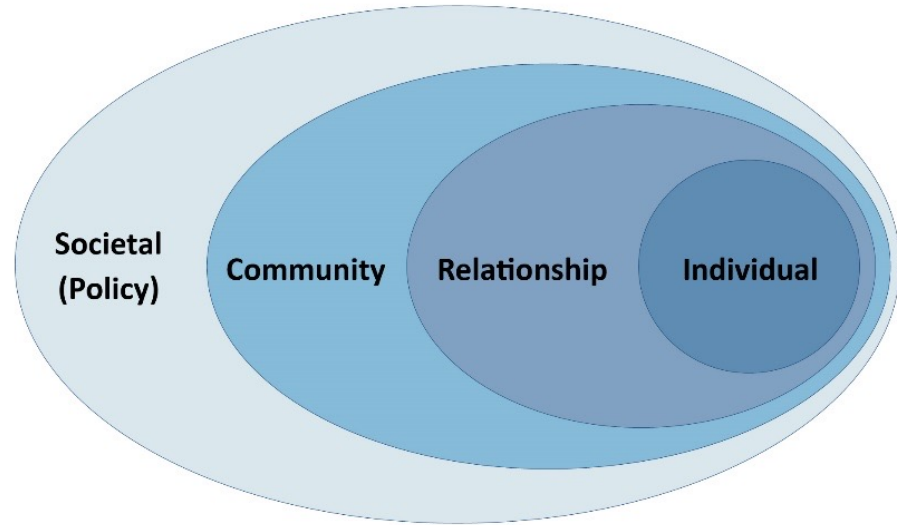
“Mi hijo en la escuela, también anteriormente me había contado que había una gringuita que le gustaba. Pero, él, al mismo tiempo se sentía, como, discriminado por ser latino... Ya, ahorita, como que, dice que ya no quiere saber nada de las mujeres por eso”

“My son in school, before he also told me that there was a white girl that he liked. But he, at the same time felt like, discriminated against for being Latino... **Now, like he, he says that he doesn't want anything to do with girls because of that.**”

“I feel like discrimination does have to tie with unhealthy relationships because it creates an unhealthy relationship with yourself from within. Like, I said, it creates a low self-esteem, you don't really know what your—you don't really understand what your standards are, or what your boundaries are, **or what you deserve or how valuable you are.**”

Structural oppressions

Survivors belonging to marginalized groups experience compounding challenges due to intersecting inequities including being cut off from resources



LGBTQ+ young people and ARA

- Experience disparities in all types of ARA experiences
- Few violence prevention interventions tailored to LGBTQ+ young people
- Improved education and skills around violence prevention and healthy relationships; advocacy channels to create more affirming systems for LGBTQ+ youth; focusing on mental health and safety

Coulter et. al (2023)

We know this is a difficult topic



Take a minute to breathe

Supporting ARA survivors

- Primary prevention approaches, consider culturally affirming programs
- Use of universal empowerment and resource provision
- Engaging caregivers and other trusted adults
- Social media literacy
- Structural interventions

Healing-centered engagement

Healing-centered approach views trauma not simply as an individual isolated experience, but highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively and concurrently.

Healing-centered engagement: use of a holistic approach to foster well-being.

Strength based and centers culture as pivotal to well-being

Healing-Centered Engagement

**What is
wrong with
you?**



**What
happened
to you?**



**What is right
with you?
+
Where do you want
to go
and how may I help
you get there?**

Ways to be healing centered



Being open to listening, with empathy and compassion



Share your story, role model vulnerability [in ways that feel safe and secure to you]



Encourage discussion about future dreams, hopes, and goals.



Critically reflect, introspect, and continue to learn and grow



Take action, aligned with the young person's priorities



Learn from those you are teaching

Prevention programs

- Meta analysis found prevention programs effective in reducing physical but not sexual ARA
- Better effect when engaging parents and for adolescents with history of violence exposure
- Need to also consider prevention of other types of violence and considering culturally tailored programs

(Piolanti et al., 2022; Ragavan et al., 2022)

Rethinking our goal: Universal Education



Barriers to help-seeking

- 1/3 of AYA reported concern about others finding out or authority figures being contacted as a reason to not report economic abuse (Scott et al., 2023)
- 48% of participants less than 18 did not disclose IPV because of concern around reporting (Lippy et al., 2020)

CUES: a healing-centered approach

- Evidence-based universal education intervention to promote healthy relationships using:
 - **C**onfidentiality
 - **U**niversal education & **E**mpowerment
 - **S**upport
- Provides for all teens
 - Affirmation, education, resources
 - Support after disclosure

Essence of CUES

Considers
structural
inequities

Strength based

Focus on Altruism

Improves Access
to Advocacy

Empowers patient
and the people
they care about

Shares power
between clinician
and patient

In a nutshell

- **Confidentiality**
 - Deliver the intervention privately
 - Disclose limits of confidentiality
- **Universal education + Empowerment**
 - Make the connection
 - Provide information
 - Equip the teen to help themselves & their peers
- **Support**
 - Share resources

Does CUES work?

- Randomized controlled trial, school-based health centers
- Among adolescents receiving CUES:
 - Increased recognition of abusive behaviors and sexual coercion
 - Increased awareness of ARA resources
 - Decreased ARA victimization at 3-month follow-up, among youth reporting recent ARA victimization
 - Increased likelihood of ARA disclosure during the health visit

Healing centered systems

1. Prioritize development of comprehensive services and supports
2. Develop sustained and funded programs to co-locate ARA advocates
3. Partner with ARA survivors and advocates when making recommendations
4. Invest in community-medical partnerships
5. Provider survivor-centered training to staff
6. Reimburse follow up calls with survivors
7. Invest in healing for clinicians and advocates

Engaging caregivers

Parents and trusted adults are critical to preventing ARA and supporting young people who are experiencing ARA



Help seeking sources for economic abuse

Help-Seeking Sources	<i>n</i> = 1,586
Positive help-seeking intentions	
Parent or guardian	682 (43%)
Friend	561 (35%)
Sibling or other family member	532 (34%)
Teacher or school counselor	384 (24%)
Someone I work with	141 (9%)
Other school personnel	120 (8%)
Clergy/religious leader	109 (7%)
Extracurricular, cocurricular, club director, or coach	117 (7%)
Neighborhood or other community member	98 (6%)
Phone or chat line	89 (6%)
Other:	
Therapist	1 (0%)

Caregivers who have experienced partner violence

Caregivers who have experienced partner violence or other trauma may have unique challenges when discussing healthy relationships with their children

Important to support caregivers, referrals to resources, affirmation of challenges

National Domestic Violence Helpline: 800.799.SAFE (7233)

Ideas to share with caregivers

- Center yourself first!
- Consider multiple types of controlling and coercive behaviors
- Suggest strategies for initiating these discussions including discussing relationships you may see when watching social media or TV together
- Help caregivers come up with clear rules around dating
- Working together to think about the adolescents' strengths
- Provide resources for caregivers for further education/information

Conversation starters for middle school students

What do you think about dating?

What are your friends doing? Are they going out on dates?

How do you decide if you like someone or want to go out with someone?

What does a healthy romantic relationship look like?

What do you think family rules should be around dating?

Conversation starters with older teenagers

Have you seen unhealthy relationships at your school or with your friends? What did that look like?

What would you do if one of your friends was in an unhealthy relationship?

What's the best way to break up or end a relationship?

S

I

F

T



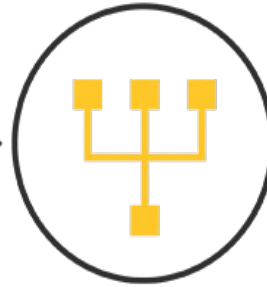
Stop



Investigate
the source



Find better
coverage





Trace claims,
quotes and media to
the original context

Suggestions to engage around ARA and social media

- 1) Talk with adolescents early and often about unhealthy relationships and the ways social media can be used to control
- 2) Talk about media literacy with adolescents
- 3) Encourage them to follow healthy relationship organizations on social media!

Futures Without Violence

 @FuturesWithoutViolence
 @WithoutViolence



SEPTEMBER
Suicide Awareness Month
Many branches of suffering can lead to suicide, so the question is: How can we prevent suffering?
Learn what causes suffering and #BeThe1 to prevent suicide.
FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE



WORKING WEDNESDAYS
Economic justice is survivor justice.
#SurvivorInTheWorkplace
FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE



August 31
International Overdose Awareness Day
Harm Reduction Can Help Prevent Overdoses
FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

Love Is Respect

 @LovesRespectOfficial
 @LovesRespect



5 common red flags associated with love bombing:
1 Over-the-top compliments
2 Calling you their "soulmate" early in the relationship.
3 Intense & constant communication throughout each day.
4 Giving you expensive gifts that often validate harsh treatment later.
5 Showing jealousy of others in your life or demanding you spend all free time with them.

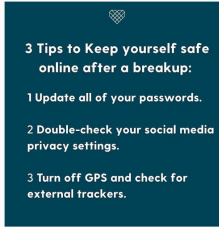


love is...
consent.
love is respect



One Love Foundation

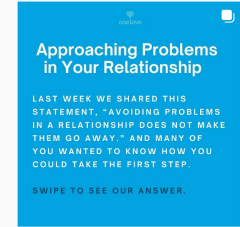
 @Join1Love



3 Tips to Keep yourself safe online after a breakup:
1 Update all of your passwords.
2 Double-check your social media privacy settings.
3 Turn off GPS and check for external trackers.



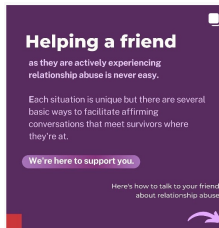
"We need to step up and create a deeper sense of safety for survivors and for individuals who want to leave relationships."
- Kavita Mehra, executive director of Sakhi, a survivor-led South Asian community organization.



Approaching Problems in Your Relationship
LAST WEEK WE SHARED THIS STATEMENT: "AVOIDING PROBLEMS IN A RELATIONSHIP DOES NOT MAKE THEM GO AWAY." AND MANY OF YOU WANTED TO KNOW HOW YOU COULD TAKE THE FIRST STEP.
SWIPE TO SEE OUR ANSWER.

Unapologetically Surviving

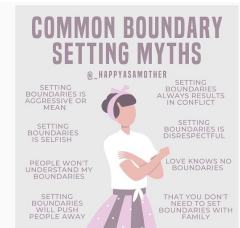
 @UnapologeticallySurviving



Helping a friend
as they are actively experiencing relationship abuse is never easy.
Each situation is unique but there are several basic ways to facilitate affirming conversations that meet survivors where they're at.
We're here to support you.
Here's how to talk to your friend about relationship abuse.



HOW TO GET GROUNDED
DESCRIBE 5 THINGS YOU CAN SEE
NAME 4 THINGS YOU CAN FEEL
NAME 3 THINGS YOU CAN HEAR
NAME 2 THINGS YOU CAN SMELL
NAME 1 GOOD THING ABOUT YOURSELF



COMMON BOUNDARY SETTING MYTHS
@HAPPYASAMOTHER
SETTING BOUNDARIES IS ALWAYS RESULTS IN CONFLICT.
SETTING BOUNDARIES IS DISRESPECTFUL.
PEOPLE WON'T UNDERSTAND MY BOUNDARIES.
THAT YOU DON'T NEED TO SET BOUNDARIES WITH FAMILY.
SETTING BOUNDARIES IS SELFISH.
SETTING BOUNDARIES WILL PUSH PEOPLE AWAY.

National Domestic Violence Hotline


 @ndvhofficial  @ndvh



Are you a survivor of relationship abuse?
The National Domestic Violence Hotline is conducting a survey to learn about the intersections between domestic violence and primary healthcare.
If you are a survivor of DV, take our survey at <https://bit.ly/ndvhofficial>
Completely anonymous and confidential.



How to document abuse
Documenting evidence of abuse is important for those seeking legal help. It occurs through a variety of means, including photos, text messages, voicemails, and other digital evidence.
For some survivors, it can be difficult to capture and preserve evidence of abuse in a safe and secure manner.



In a recent survey, 97% of survivors stated their pets affect their decisions on seeking shelter.

Structural interventions

- Safe and affirming spaces for young people experiencing marginalization
- Firearm advocacy and prevention
- Advocacy for evidenced-based ARA prevention in schools
- Justice-focused intervention for caregivers (e.g., employment justice)

Conclusions

- ARA is pervasive and rooted in multiple types of controlling and coercive behaviors
- ARA is impacted by compounding structural inequities impacting young people with marginalized identities
- Multi-pronged, multilevel approaches are needed to prevent ARA and support survivors, including a robust response from the healthcare sector

Resources for Adolescents

- Text
 - “loveis” to 22522 (ARA)
 - “Befree” to 233733 (sexual exploitation)
 - “Hello” to 741741 (crisis text line)
- Call
 - 1 888 33 9474 (ARA)
 - 1 888 373 7888 (sexual exploitation)
 - 1 800 273 8255 (suicide crisis line)
- Online
 - www.thatsnotcool.com – ARA, healthy relationships
 - www.loveisrespect.org – ARA, healthy relationships
 - www.bedsider.org – info on contraception
 - www.joinonelove.org/my_plan_app - develop a safety plan
 - Youngwomenshealth.org—health info
 - Youngmenshealth.org---healthinfo

Resources for Caregivers

- www.thatsnotcool.com
- www.loveisrespect.org
- www.healthychildren.org
 - Teen dating violence
 - Expect respect: Healthy relationships
- AAP Connected Kids
 - Expect respect: Healthy relationships
 - Teen dating violence: Tips for parents
- Start Strong parent website: [Parents | Start Strong \(futureswithoutviolence.org\)](http://parents.startstrong.org)
- Dating Matters for Parents: [Dating Matters® Toolkit | VetoViolence \(cdc.gov\)](http://datingmatters.org)

Resources for Advocates and Clinicians

- www.futureswithoutviolence.org
 - Webinars
 - Pocket safety cards
 - [Hanging Out or Hooking Up](#) clinical guidelines
 - www.ipvhealthpartners.org
- *Reaching Teens: Strengths-Based, Trauma-Sensitive, Resilience-Building Communication Strategies Rooted in Positive Youth Development* (AAP)
- [Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan](#) (CDC technical package)
- Ragavan, Culyba, Muhammed, & Miller. Supporting Adolescents and Young Adults Exposed to or Experiencing Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
[https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(20\)30187-7/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(20)30187-7/fulltext)

Thank you! Reflections

ragavanm@chp.edu

[CIRCLE Lab \(ragavancircle.com\)](http://ragavancircle.com)

