If there is anything good to come from the alleged beating of 21-year-old pop star Rihanna by 19-year-old celebrity Chris Brown, it is the teachable moment it provides all of us.

As adults, it's time to arm ourselves with accurate information about dating violence and to start talking with children and adolescents about the importance of choosing respect and developing healthy relationships. Only by being open about this issue can we change young people's expectations for their own relationships.

Most adults, like children, know very little about dating violence and how common it is. For instance, did you know:

* That 72 percent of eighth- and ninth-graders reportedly date.

* About one in four adolescents reports verbal, emotional, physical or sexual abuse from a dating partner each year

* That about 10 percent of students nationwide report being physically abused by a girlfriend or boyfriend in the past 12 months?

In order to talk about dating violence, it's important to know what a healthy relationship - and an unhealthy relationship -- look like.

Things that do not belong in a healthy relationship include being put down, yelled at, shoved, controlled, ignored, embarrassed in front of others, told what you can and cannot wear, or made to feel afraid of your boyfriend or girlfriend. These are signs of dating abuse.

Qualities of a healthy relationship, meanwhile, include mutual respect, trust, open communication and the ability to compromise, control anger and solve problems non-violently.
You can find more on the 12 qualities of a healthy relationship at Chooserespect.org, a national initiative to help kids form healthy relationships and prevent dating abuse before it starts.

The initiative targets 11- to 14-year-old kids and their parents/guardians with the message that dating violence is not just unacceptable, but preventable. It is chock-full of information that will help you start a conversation about this topic with anyone, including a spouse, significant other, child or friend.

As someone with more than 30 years of experience developing and evaluating programs that empower youth and families, I have witnessed firsthand where unhealthy relationships lead.

Teens who are victims are more likely to do poorly in school. They may engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use. The anger and distress that teens feel may lead them to eating disorders, depression and suicide. Teens who are victims are also three times more likely to experience violence in future relationships.

And violent relationships don't just hurt the victim. Child witnesses of violence are more likely to experience developmental delays and behavioral problems that affect school performance. They are also more likely to suffer from depression, and in some cases post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thankfully, after the distribution by DoSomething.org of a video re-enactment of the incident between Rihanna and Brown, it appears teens are "getting the picture."

As one blogger wrote:

"I don't support either artist because they are stuck with a cycle of abuse and them getting back together shows total lack of consideration of their young fans. They need counseling and I think it would be great if they could USE THEIR MUSIC TO STOP THIS VIOLENCE."

Like the anonymous blogger above, the teachable moment that I would love to see is the one where Rihanna and Chris act as role models on how to conduct a healthy relationship, and stand up and tell their fans that what they did was unhealthy and not to be emulated.

_Yvonne Wasilewski is a research scientist at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University._

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