



Where to Start:

Safety Planning Guide for Middle and
High School Student Survivors

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

How to use this tool

This guide focuses on the needs of survivors of dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking (DVSAS) who are in middle school and high school. Victim Rights Law Center (VRLC) delivers trauma-informed legal representation to sexual violence survivors and has worked with experts in teen dating violence and stalking, to help civil attorneys and legal advocates understand and address survivors' safety needs following a traumatic event.

This guide should be adapted to the individual survivor's needs, capabilities, and maturity level. It is not – nor is it meant to be – comprehensive. Rather, this guide provides some scaffolding for **ongoing** safety planning conversations. Safety planning helps survivors think about ways they can feel safer. It also helps civil attorneys and legal advocates spot safety issues and identify strategies and/or remedies.

Safety planning is a skill. If you need more knowledge or training to appropriately and confidently safety plan, review the additional resources listed at the end of this guide.

A note on word choice

This guide refers to individuals who have experienced dating violence, sexual assault, and/or stalking as “survivors” in most instances. However, in the context of mandatory reporting and privacy, the guide refers to survivors as “minors”. This guide uses the term “assailants” to refer to individuals who have caused harm involving dating violence, sexual assault, and/or stalking. **Most importantly, when speaking with a survivor, you should mirror the terms/language used by the survivor.**

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

- 1 Twenty percent (20%) of adult females and five to ten percent (5-10%) of adult males recall a childhood sexual assault or sexual abuse incident.¹
- 2 Twelve percent (12%) of transgender youth reported being sexually assaulted in elementary, middle, and high school settings by peers or school staff.²
- 3 One in nine (1 in 9) U.S. high school students experienced sexual violence in 2021.³
- 4 About twenty-four percent (24%) of female stalking survivors and nineteen percent (19%) of male stalking survivors were first stalked before the age of 18.⁴
- 5 Anecdotally, nearly 100% of VRLC's teen clients have self-harming behaviors or suicidality.

What is Safety Planning, and why is it important?

Violence or the threat of violence can undermine a survivor's safety, whether it is a single incident or an ongoing pattern. Safety means feeling and being protected against physical, sexual, social, spiritual, financial, emotional, and psychological harm. A safety plan consists of practical strategies that help a survivor assess situations that may be harmful and develop strategies to respond if they feel unsafe.

Safety planning is not a single conversation. Rather, it should be an ongoing conversation because the safety plan may need to change if the survivor's circumstances or the assailant's behavior changes. Finally, constructing and implementing a safety plan cannot guarantee an escape from future violence. The goal is to help survivors consider the necessary steps, resources, and actions they can take to reduce risk and the potential for future harm.

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Importance of Population Specific Needs

Effective safety planning must account for all the circumstances in a young survivor's life, including their background, identity, and past experiences. Young survivors may face many forms of **institutional betrayal**, including those related to racism, homophobia and/or transphobia; poverty; involvement with juvenile justice, foster care, or other systems; mental, physical, intellectual, or developmental disability; being at risk of dropping out of school; an unsafe or unstable home life; past victimization; and otherwise, being perceived as a "misfit" or "different." Recognize your limits. Seek out additional resources to help address the various factors in a survivor's life for which you lack the expertise to help.

INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL

The term **institutional betrayal** refers to the failure of a system (such as a school) to protect those who depend on that system. This can include failure to prevent harm occurring within the system (like sexual assault) or failure to respond supportively in the aftermath of such harm.⁵

Anecdotally, **a significant number of VRLC's clients** in middle school and high school **say the way the system treated them was worse than the assault** itself. Very little research exists on institutional betrayal experienced by middle and high school student survivors. However, several studies of college student survivors have shown that female students, students of color, and students identifying as LGBTQIA+ experience institutional betrayal at significantly higher rates than male students, white students, heterosexual students, and cisgender students.⁶

Explaining Mandatory Reporting

A safe, trusted relationship with an adult is a precious resource for a minor survivor. To maintain that relationship, you should be clear if you are mandated to report child abuse including who you are required to notify and how much information you need to share. Communicating these obligations before a minor discloses any information builds trust and allows a minor to decide what information to share. Conversely, if a minor survivor shares information without knowing when, how, or why the information they shared may require disclosure to parents or an investigation, they could feel betrayed and avoid seeking help from adults in the future.

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Privacy Considerations

Before beginning any safety assessment, consider what steps should be taken to protect the sensitive information provided. Given the consequences a minor survivor may be weighing when reporting, there are very few people a minor survivor can speak to openly about their experiences without confronting difficult choices. They may have learned from experience that mentioning one problem can upend their life. You may also want to discuss the disclosure obligations of others. Help them identify who they might want to talk to, and what the impact of disclosing to that person would be. **To learn more about your jurisdiction's rules surrounding privacy for minors, consult the [Privacy for Minors FAQs in VRLC's Resource Library](#).**

- 1** **Community-based legal advocates.** Privilege is jurisdiction specific, so advocates should familiarize themselves with their jurisdiction's privilege laws and the intersection with mandatory child abuse reporting laws. Advocates should ensure minor survivors understand, as soon as possible, whether and to what extent their communications are protected.
- 2** **Attorneys.** Depending on the jurisdiction, attorneys may not be required to report child abuse if an attorney/client privilege has been established. When working with minors, it is important to understand whether a parent/child privilege exists, or if privilege is waived if a parent/guardian is present during discussions.
- 3** **School administrators and employees.** Many – if not all – school employees are mandatory reporters of child abuse under state law and are required to report under Title IX. Title IX is a federal law that requires school employees to report disclosures and/or reports of sex-based harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking to the school's Title IX Coordinator.

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Privacy Considerations, continued

If you are not obligated to share information with the parent(s)/guardian(s) and a parent/guardian would like to be involved, **explain to the survivor and the parent/guardian that your job is to work with the survivor**, including any confidentiality or privilege obligations you may have. Meet with the survivor on their own and explain that the survivor can determine the extent of the parent's/guardian's involvement. If the survivor chooses to involve the parent/guardian, check in periodically to assess whether the situation has changed.

Safety Risk Prioritization

Young survivors, like adults, **are the experts in their own lives**. The survivor's needs and safety concerns should be addressed based on their prioritization. The initial conversation with the survivor should give you a sense of how they interpret safety and immediate safety needs. This allows you and the survivor to prioritize issues between your first and subsequent meetings. Plan to meet periodically throughout the school year (such as at the beginning of each quarter or semester) to reassess upcoming changes in routine or circumstances.

Before asking the specific safety planning questions below, **have an initial conversation to assess the overall landscape of the safety risk and potential threat of harm**. During that conversation, ask what the survivor has already done for their safety, what they need help doing for their safety, and what they're not willing to do. That initial conversation will help you identify which specific safety planning questions you need to ask now, and which questions you can disregard or address in a later conversation.

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Risk Prioritization, continued

Considerations/topics for that initial conversation may include the following:

1. Specific risk posed by the assailant, and the nature and severity of the risk

- a. Threats to the survivor's physical safety
- b. Threats to the physical safety of others (survivor's family, friends, or teammates)
- c. Any other threats (reporting the survivor to immigration authorities, unwanted sharing of videos or pictures of the survivor, unwanted posting of pictures or statements online, or "outing" a survivor who identifies as LGBTQIA+)
- d. Scope of the assailant's behavior (in-person, using technology, through social media, through third parties, etc.)

2. Cultural or population-specific safety concerns

If a survivor identifies with one or more underserved or racially/ethnically diverse communities, they may have distinct safety planning needs. For those populations, consider the impact of intergenerational and historical trauma, on-going community concerns, or how dynamics within families and friends influence a survivor's decision-making. When providing support to culturally specific populations it is crucial to assess and understand your own biases, worldview, and experiences to avoid stereotypes and prejudices, and potentially harming or perpetuating stigmas that may further harm the young survivor. If you need more support in providing culturally responsive strategies to safety and resources, engage local community partners or advocates from diverse communities for help.

3. Survivor's emotional safety

Addressing the emotional safety of a young survivor can be just as important as addressing physical safety. After experiencing sexual violence, young survivors may develop harmful coping mechanisms (for example, substance use or other addictions, self-harm or cutting, eating disorders, increased risk-taking). If you feel unqualified to discuss these issues, refer the survivor to an advocate or counselor who is qualified. Keep an up-to-date list of community resources and services available for survivors in your area.

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions

The lists of questions below are designed to guide you and the survivor in safety planning conversations. *Do not ask these questions as a checklist.* Rather, **incorporate these questions into a natural, honest, and candid dialogue with the survivor.** Use what you know about the survivor's experience, identity, competence, and maturity to determine which questions are relevant and appropriate. Avoid asking questions that are not applicable and adjust the language to fit the survivor's age and cognitive level. This list is not exhaustive. Additional questions may be required to address the survivor's individual situation. At the end of any safety planning conversation, it's vital to discuss how the survivor thinks the assailant may react to any changes the survivor or the school makes – particularly if the assailant may escalate their behavior.

Even young survivors know what is best for them and what will make them safe, so always follow their lead. Survivors may not have - or want to share - the answers to all the questions you ask. And that's okay. The goal is to set the tone for active listening and dialogue.

Immediate Physical Safety

- When and where do you typically see the assailant?
- What information, if any, does the assailant have about where you live and other places you go to regularly?
- Have the assailant's actions made you afraid for your safety or the safety of others?
- Have you changed your life in any way because of the assailant's behaviors? If so, how? (For example, have you installed door locks, cameras, or lights; moved; changed jobs; altered schedule, route, and/or routines?)
- What are you most afraid of happening?
- Do you have any injuries or other health concerns because of the harm? If so, have you received medical care?

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions, continued

Immediate Physical Safety, continued

- Do you have a cell phone you can use if you need to call for help?
- Do you have a plan in case of emergencies? (For example, if you were in danger or needed medical attention, who would you call, where would you go, and how would you get there?)

Background Information

- Has the assailant followed you, watched you, or showed up unexpectedly/uninvited?
- Has the assailant repeatedly initiated unwanted contact/communication with you? Describe the contact/communication and how often it happened. (examples: calls, texts, social media messages, emails, gifts, contact through third parties, etc.)
- Has the assailant threatened or intimidated you or others you care about, either directly or in other ways? (examples: threats of physical violence, threats to destroy property or pets, threats to post/share pictures or private information, threats to report you to police, blackmail, etc.)
- Has the assailant significantly and directly interfered with your life? (examples: spread rumors about you, pretended to be you, damaged your social life, stolen from you, stopped you from leaving, etc.)

TIP: The preceding four questions address stalking behaviors (surveillance, life invasion, intimidation, interference). Survivors may not use the term “stalking” or recognize certain behaviors as stalking. If the survivor answers yes to any of these four questions, they could be experiencing stalking. In that case, there may be additional safety planning needs and/or available legal remedies to consider. For more information on how to identify stalking, check out the [“Identifying Stalking Behaviors” resources](#) provided by the Stalking Prevention, Awareness & Resource Center (SPARC).

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions, continued

Background Information, continued

- Describe your relationship, if any, with the assailant. How long did the relationship last, or is it still ongoing? How has it changed over time?

TIP #1: Pre-teens and teens may not use the term “dating” to describe a romantic/intimate relationship. The answer to this question will be important in jurisdictions where certain legal remedies, like civil protection orders, depend on the parties’ relationship status.

TIP #2: Consider helping the survivor draw a basic relationship timeline to document how it has changed over time with some examples of what has happened. This activity can help you more fully understand the situation and spot any recent escalation.

- Have you told anyone else about the harm? If so, who?
- Do you know if anyone has filed a child abuse complaint?
- Is telling the police an option for you? Why or why not?
- Are you afraid of retaliation? By whom? What are you worried they will do?
- Do you have a civil protection order or other type of protection order against the assailant? If not, do you think a protective order would be helpful?

Home

- Do you have a safe place to live right now?
- Does the assailant know where you live?
- Does the assailant live with you?
- Does the assailant have access to where you live? (For example, does the assailant live in your apartment building?)
- Do you feel physically safe inside your housing? Do your windows and doors lock? Do you have lights outside your housing? Do you need to change your window and/or door locks?

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions, continued

Home, continued

- Would it be safer to move somewhere else? Is this possible?
- Does your family rent or own where you live? If your family rents, does your family need help breaking the lease/telling the landlord you need to move? If you don't know, do you mind if I asked your caregiver/guardian?
- If you needed to leave your housing, who could you stay with? Do you have friends or family nearby? Who else do you know and trust? How would you contact them? What would you be comfortable telling them about why you might need help?

TIP #1: Practice how the survivor would ask this person for help out loud. If they are not comfortable disclosing the harm, practice saying something they believe they could say, such as, "I need help because I don't feel safe, but I don't feel comfortable talking about it. Could I [sleep on your couch, get a ride, etc.]?"

TIP #2: When considering disclosing to a trusted adult, let the survivor know that a neighbor or family friend may have a mandatory reporting obligation based on a professional licensing or other membership. If they do not want to talk to someone who may be obligated to make a report, they can practice asking, "Are you a mandatory reporter?" and if the person is, saying "I need help, but I do not feel comfortable talking about it right now. Can you help me _____?"

- Is there something else that makes you feel unsafe or uncomfortable at home that we haven't talked about? What are some ideas that might help?

School and Extracurricular Activities

- Do you feel safe and comfortable at school?
- Is there an adult at school that you feel comfortable speaking to when you feel unsafe?
- Does the assailant know where you go to school or your school schedule, practice schedule, etc.?

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions, continued

School and Extracurricular Activities, continued

- Is the assailant a classmate or a person of authority at your school or any other school activity you are involved in (examples: teacher, principal, guidance counselor, mentor, or coach)?
- Have you reported the harm to anyone at your school? Is there someone you think you could tell or want to tell?
- If your school issues no-contact orders, would some type of order from the school be helpful?

TIP: Schools typically issue mutual, rather than unilateral, no-contact orders. If that is the case, explain to the survivor how the no-contact order may restrict their movements/activities, and how violations of that order could be grounds for disciplinary action.

- Are there things that you or others can do that would make you feel safer at school or during activities related to school (examples: class schedule changes, bus service to/from school, remote classes, locker change, hallway escort, change practice or meeting times, “safe” cafeteria lunch period, “safe” parking space or locker room area)?

TIP: When a school has reason to believe that a student has experienced dating violence, sexual assault, sex-based harassment, or stalking on school-controlled property/online platforms or during a school-sponsored activity, a federal law called Title IX requires the school to provide “supportive measures”. Using this Title IX language when making a request often gets results and informs the school of its legal obligation.

- Have you read your school’s or district’s sexual misconduct policy? Would you like to look through it together?

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions, continued

School and Extracurricular Activities, continued

- Are you involved in any student groups or clubs? Do you have any concerns about particular members of these groups? Are any group members threatening or harassing you? Have any group members retaliated against you?
- Are you on any school sports teams? Do you have any concerns about teammates, coaches, etc.? Are any of your teammates or coaches threatening or harassing you? Have any teammates or coaches retaliated against you?
- Do you want to continue involvement in a sport or activity?
- Do you want to continue going to your current school?

TIP: Under a federal law called the Unsafe School Choice Option, when a student experiences a violent crime at a public school, the school must offer the student the option to transfer to another school in the district.

Transportation

- How do you typically get to and from school?
- Does the assailant know your transportation routes and routines?
- Are you comfortable using the schools' transportation (for example, school bus to/from school, away games)? Does the assailant ride the same school bus route? Are you concerned about getting on the bus either near home or at school?
- Do you have your own vehicle? Do you drive to school? Where do you park at school? Are you worried about being harassed when arriving or leaving the parking area?
- Does the assailant use the same transportation you use, such as the subway or bus system? Do you have access to alternative transportation or a friend who could drive you?

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions, continued

Social Media and Technology

- Does the assailant know your phone number/email address/social media handles?
- Does the assailant know any of your passwords on phones or accounts? Do they have access to your phone/computer/accounts via the “cloud”?
- Does the assailant have any intimate photos/videos of you that you would not want shared publicly or with your friends and family?

TIP: If intimate photos/videos of a survivor (under age 18) are online, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) can help remove them. To learn more, visit these websites: [Take It Down](#) and [Is Your Explicit Content Out There?](#)

- Has the assailant had access to your cell phone? Do you think they could have installed tracking software?
- Do you have any social media accounts? Are you “friends” with the assailant online? Is anyone in your social media network connected to the assailant? Do you know how to block the assailant and their contacts from accessing your information?
- Has the assailant or their friends or family contacted you through social media? If so, can you gather (and keep) evidence of this contact?
- Has the assailant or their friends or family posted anything about you online? What was posted? Where was it posted? Is the post still active online? Did you take a picture or screenshot of it?
- Have you reviewed your privacy settings (on personal devices, shared devices, social media sites, etc.) since the harm? Can you adjust those settings to keep your personal information more private?

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Safety Planning Questions, continued

Social Media and Technology, continued

- Have you searched your name online? If so, does any private information (home address, phone number, email address, etc.) show up? Do you need help removing this information?
- Did you meet the assailant online? Are you concerned that the assailant would contact you online?
- Do you participate in any social/location tracking apps to stay in touch with your friends? Do you know if the assailant participates?
- Does your school have an online forum? If so, are you being harassed on that forum?

In The Community

- Do you see the assailant outside of school (for example, at the grocery store, the mall, local restaurants, religious services)?
- Is there someone you trust who can come with you to the places you need to go?
- If the assailant approached you while away from school, do you know of a place you could go to be safe?
- Are you currently working? Does your assailant work at the same job? Do you see the assailant while you are at work?

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Referral Sources

Keep a resource list specific to your location and the populations you work with. Before making a referral, address survivor confidentiality. For instance, if you refer a minor to a mental health counselor who is a mandatory reporter, inform the minor of the counselor's reporting obligations at the time of the referral and before the minor contacts the counselor. Also, determine whether or not you should note the referral in your records. Understand how your records could inadvertently provide information to the assailant in the future unnecessarily.

Potential referral sources could include:

- Sexual Violence Crisis Lines
- Mental Health Crisis Lines
- Population Specific Resources
- Faith-Based Support Groups
- Student or Peer-Led Advocate Groups
- National Online Resources

More Information on Supporting Survivors

If you don't feel knowledgeable or experienced enough to safety plan around certain issues (like technology, social media, stalking, school environment, etc.), seek out additional resources and/or providers that specialize in those issues of concern.

Potential additional resources/providers could include:

- SPARC's [Identifying Stalking Behaviors resources](#)
- [End Technology-Enabled Abuse \(EndTAB\)](#)
- Safety Net Project's [Technology Safety & Privacy Toolkit](#)
- NCMEC's [Take It Down](#) and [Is Your Explicit Content Out There?](#)
- VRLC's [Privacy for Minor's FAQs](#)
- VRLC's [Webinar on Schedule Mapping and Other Key Safety Planning Strategies for Student Survivors in Middle and High School](#)
- VRLC's [Webinar for Legal Advocates on Safety Planning](#)
- VRLC's [Webinar for Attorneys on Safety Planning](#)

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

Conclusion

While prevalence rates of DVSAAS among survivors in middle and high school are high (and even higher for those with disabilities), the availability of legal assistance for these survivors is extremely limited. Every advocate or attorney who makes the choice to support this population helps to bridge the gap.

Thank you for doing this extremely difficult, but important work! **Legal advocates and attorneys who need 1:1 consultation or support can reach out to VRLC at TA@victimrights.org.**

References

1. "Sexual Assault Fact Sheet," Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/resource/sexual-assault>.
2. Jaime M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011.
3. "Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary and Trends Report: 2011-2021," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed April 17, 2024, https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/data/yrbs/yrbs_data_summary_and_trends.htm.
4. "Fast Facts: Preventing Stalking," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified February 5, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/stalking/fastfact.html>.
5. Jennifer J. Freyd, "Institutional Betrayal and Institutional Courage," University of Oregon, last modified March 10, 2024, <https://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/institutionalbetrayal/>.

Where to Start: Safety Planning Guide for Middle and High School Student Survivors

References, continued

6. See these studies on institutional betrayal: Bloom, Brittnie E., Cierra Raine Sorin, Laury Oaks, and Jennifer A. Wagman. "Graduate Students Are 'Making a Big Fuss': Responding to Institutional Betrayal Around Campus Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment." *Journal of School Violence* 22, no. 1 (2023): 44–60. doi:10.1080/15388220.2022.2130346; Gómez, J. M. "Gender, Campus Sexual Violence, Cultural Betrayal, Institutional Betrayal, and Institutional Support in U.S. Ethnic Minority College Students: A Descriptive Study." *Violence Against Women* 28, no. 1 (2022): 93-106. doi:10.1177/1077801221998757; Grocott, Lauren R., Nykia R. Leach, Leslie A. Brick, Richard Meza-Lopez, and Lindsay M. Orchowski. "Institutional response and impact of reporting sexual violence: An examination of sexual and gender minority college students." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 21-22 (2022): NP20653-NP20676. doi:10.1177/08862605211055078; Smidt, Alec M., Marina N. Rosenthal, Carly P. Smith, and Jennifer J. Freyd. "Out and in Harm's Way: Sexual Minority Students' Psychological and Physical Health after Institutional Betrayal and Sexual Assault." *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 30, no. 1 (2021): 41–55. doi:10.1080/10538712.2019.1581867.

©2024 Victim Rights Law Center. All rights reserved. Preparation of this material was supported by grant number 15JOVW-23-GK-05167-MUMU awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.