

TAKE LOVE

BEFORE IT STARTS

Building healthy relationships
Preventing domestic abuse

Introduction

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13:34–35

Before It Starts is a four-week youth program that focuses on building healthy relationships and preventing domestic abuse. This primary prevention program includes videos, Bible studies, discussion material, survivor stories, activities and game ideas. Each component has been purposefully designed to reinforce the key theme of each week.

Topics

- **Session 1:** Identity and worth in Christ – the implications of being made in the image of God, our identity as children of God and understanding gender stereotypes
- **Session 2:** Freedom to love – recognising love and what constitutes a healthy, loving relationship
- **Session 3:** Power and vulnerability – recognising different forms of power and abuse and the importance of consent and choice
- **Session 4:** Friendships and more – keys to safe and respectful relationships and skills for setting healthy boundaries and using assertive communication to maintain them

Before It Starts provides an opportunity to reflect on our own attitudes and behaviours and those of others. It also suggests avenues for getting help and provides key information for leaders on how to respond to disclosures of abuse.

Why this course?

Christians know that we are loved by God and that we are commanded to love one another. However, we also know that we live in a sinful world and this sin affects our relationships. One manifestation of sinfulness in our relationships is the existence of abuse – in peer relationships, family relationships, dating relationships or relationships between intimate partners, whether married or de-facto. When abuse occurs in family relationships we call this domestic and family violence – or domestic abuse – the term used in the Sydney Anglican Diocesan Policy on Responding to Domestic Abuse (2018).

Domestic abuse is characterised as the exertion of power, coercion and control over someone, usually resulting in intimidation and fear. While it primarily occurs between those who are now or have been in an intimate partner relationship, it can occur in any family relationship. This pattern of behaviour may include (but is not limited to) verbal, emotional and psychological abuse, social control and isolation, spiritual and cultural abuse, stalking, intimidation and electronic monitoring, image-based and technology-facilitated abuse, and sexual and physical violence.

In Australia, domestic abuse is a serious and widespread social issue.

- At least 1 in 4 women and 1 in 13 men will experience some form of domestic abuse by a current or former intimate partner.
- Physical and sexual violence by an intimate partner occurs for those over the age of 15 at the rate of 1 in 6 women and 1 in 16 men.
- On average, 1 woman each week and 1 man each month dies in a domestic violence incident.
- Young women are recognised as a high-risk group for family domestic and sexual violence.
- More than 1 million children in Australia are growing up in families where they experience domestic abuse. This not only causes immediate trauma, fear, and sometimes injury or death, but is linked to long-term health and wellbeing problems.

Ephesians 5 reminds us that as dearly loved children of God we are to “walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us” – that among us there should not be even a hint of “sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking... but rather thanksgiving.” But research indicates that the Christian community is not immune from domestic abuse – and sadly the testimonials you will watch in this program give living evidence of that.

As leaders in the church you have the ability to demonstrate and educate our young people about respectful, non-abusive relationships within a biblical framework, and help our youth to recognise ‘warning signs’ of unsafe relationships and unloving behaviour.

What is the program about?

When we think about domestic abuse, much attention is focused on intervention. Intervention helps provide safety, healing and wholeness for those currently experiencing abuse, and also aims to change the attitudes and behaviours of those who use abuse and control in relationships. Whilst this work is very important, more attention is now being given to addressing the underlying drivers of domestic abuse; that is, changing ‘the soil in which it grows.’ This is called **primary prevention**.

Primary prevention:

- addresses the social issues that underlie domestic abuse
- changes dangerous attitudes and beliefs that lead to domestic abuse
- creates the foundations that form healthy relationships

Some of the attitudes and beliefs that are known drivers of domestic abuse are:

- disrespect for women
- privilege and entitlement in favour of men above women
- condoning violence against women, including 'male bonding' that normalises aggression towards women or blames victims for the violence they experience
- rigid gender roles and stereotypes
- men's control over decision-making in public and private spheres

Before It Starts will examine these beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, both in our society and in the church, from a biblical perspective, and promote safe, respectful relationships for young people in our churches.

Program goals

- To create safe and respectful relationships (especially in men towards women)
- To model a safe and respectful youth group program with activities that are consistent with the biblical teaching of the program
- To unpack cultural assumptions and bring them under the rule of Christ

Biblical foundations

Each and every human being is created in the image of God and therefore has value and dignity regardless of ability, background, sex or age (cf. Gen 1:26-27).

Even if someone rejects their creator God and seeks to live independently from him, they still retain dignity and value despite being subject to the judgement of God for their unworthy conduct. The glory of God's image in human beings is only made fully complete in Christ the Son who welcomes many brothers and sisters into God's family by his grace (cf. Rom 3:23-26; Heb 2:6-18). This grace profoundly shapes the identity and behaviour of God's people as his beloved children who live according to the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:14-17; 1 John 3:1).

Love shapes the behaviour and attitude of God's children towards others. As the Father has loved the Son, and the Son has loved us, so we love one another (cf. John 15:9-13). The origin of love and the shape of what love looks like is seen in Jesus (cf. 1 John 3:16-18; 4:7-21). Love forms the basis of how we set personal boundaries and respect the boundaries of others in our friendships (cf. Prov 27:5-6).

All power is to be used in loving service for the good of others, just as Jesus demonstrated. This follows the command and example of Jesus who, knowing the Father has given him all things, lays aside his outer garment and takes up a towel to serve his disciples (John 13:1-17). This is the pattern of discipleship; Jesus lays down his life only to take it up again, and calls us to give up life in order to receive life eternal (cf. John 10:17-18; Mark 8:34-38; 9:30-37; 10:42-45; Phil 2:3-4).

How to use this program

Before It Starts is a comprehensive, four-week program for church youth ministries. Each aspect of the program has been deliberately included to reinforce the key themes of each week. Even the activities are as much a part of the teaching as the discussion times!

The program contains:

- Bible studies
- Discussion material
- Videos
- Games
- Activities
- Survivor stories
- Leader's notes
- Resources
- Tip sheets

Further resource recommendations

We realise that every youth group is different and that no one, pre-packaged program will work for everyone. With this in mind, we've designed the program to be flexible so that you can pick and choose what elements work best for your young people. Wherever possible, we have tried to provide a number of suggestions for how activities can be adjusted for different sized youth groups, meeting in different spaces, with different cohorts.

The Bible studies and discussion group material provide an overabundance of questions for you to make use of. Again, we don't anticipate that you will ask every question or rigidly stick to a script. Discussion groups always work best when there is genuine discussion about the topic at hand. In each Leader's Manual you will find leader's notes for each question to help you answer and guide conversation. We've tried to highlight the key take-aways to help you out!

Our suggestion is that you review this material together as a youth leadership team before running the four-week program so you can anticipate how it will work in your context. We then suggest that leaders meet before each session to review and plan how the material can be used effectively and creatively. This will also provide an opportunity to map out your discussion time and anticipate any potential hurdles.

We highly recommend that at least one leader from your youth group completes the KNOW Domestic Abuse course in order to understand key background information on abuse. **The *Before It Starts* tip sheets provided will equip you for any disclosures of abuse that may come from students during the program. They will also enable you to provide sound responses to some tricky questions.**

Creating 'safe spaces'

Relationship issues, such as bullying, relationship abuse or family and domestic abuse, can be challenging topics to discuss. For some people it may be necessary to step out of the discussion if it becomes too difficult for them to manage their own reactions. These reactions may stem from a firsthand experience of abuse, either current or past, or some young people may be learning about domestic abuse for the first time and find the reality of abuse confronting.

One way to assist people to manage their reactions and make it easy to step out of the conversation is to let people know in advance that there is a designated area they can go to if needed. This normalises the idea that people will have reactions and empowers them to take responsibility for what they need to do in that moment. Setting up a space in advance helps with potential supervision challenges if someone becomes suddenly distressed, as they will know where to go and a youth leader can be designated to check on people in that area or sit with them if required. Encourage leaders to familiarise themselves with the *Before It Starts* tip sheets which offer guidelines on how to respond to disclosures of abuse.

An ideal 'safe space' is away from, but within sight of, the main group activities. If the only areas within eyeshot are also within earshot of the discussion then a room nearby would also be appropriate, but would obviously require more supervision from the youth leaders.

A good principle for deciding what items to use in a 'safe space' is including at least one thing that engages each of the five senses. An effective grounding exercise used to help people manage their distress is asking them to engage their senses and tell you what they can feel, see, taste, smell and hear.

Optional ideas for what to include in a 'safe space':

- Comfy chairs or bean bags
- Colouring-in and drawing materials
- Soft blankets and cushions
- Board games
- Hand cream
- Puzzles
- Lollies (e.g. peppermint or eucalyptus flavoured)
- Tissues

Having a 'safe space' at youth group gives students a welcoming place to go to when they're unsettled and it gives leaders the opportunity to connect with those young people. You may even decide to make the 'safe space' a permanent fixture in your youth group set-up.

Who wrote the course?

Before It Starts has been developed as an initiative of Anglicare Sydney and Youthworks College. We are grateful for all who contributed to the development and review of this program. We especially want to thank those who so bravely contributed their personal stories of experiencing abuse in school, in their family or in their personal relationships. While their stories have been fully de-identified to protect their privacy, they are the ones who motivated us to write this program. Our hope and prayer is that their experiences will help others to live lives free from abuse, and that they themselves will continue their journeys of healing and recovery, and know God's abundant love and grace in every aspect of their lives. Thank you!

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Additional resources

The impacts of domestic abuse:

[Impacts of Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence fact sheet](#)

[Health impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence](#)

[The effects of domestic and family violence on children and young people](#)

[Effects of DV on kids – how to support a child experiencing domestic violence](#)

[Violence and abuse](#)

Gender stereotypes and domestic abuse:

[The Man Box project](#)

[Let's change the story](#)