

From the Classroom to Community: Supporting Students, and Ourselves, Through Understanding Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence

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Disclaimer:

This month's Well Teacher article explores how intimate partner and gender-based violence affects individuals, families, and communities. We recognize this topic may be difficult for some readers. Please engage with the material in a way that feels safe and supportive for you. The article aims to share information and highlight resources that may be helpful for teachers, specialists and school communities. If this topic raises concerns or you would like support, resources are available. NSTU members can contact the Member Assistance Program at nurse@nstu.ca. You do not have to face these experiences alone.

I've spent my career thus far teaching people about intimate partner violence (IPV) and working to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) in our communities. As someone with lived experience of IPV, and as a person who believes in the power of meaningful education to create change, I know firsthand that awareness, empathy, and connection can save lives. Every conversation, every lesson, and every moment spent supporting a survivor or equipping someone with the knowledge contributes to a culture where violence is no longer tolerated and everyone, from students to colleagues to community members, can feel safer.

One of the things this work has taught me is that violence does not exist in isolation. It exists within our families, our workplaces, and our communities, even when we do not see it or talk about it openly.

In 2023, the final report of the Mass Casualty Commission (MCC), *Turning the Tide Together*, called for a "whole-of-society" approach to preventing mass violence by addressing root causes such as GBV. Gender-based violence refers to violence rooted in gender inequality and power imbalances, and includes forms of harm such as IPV, sexual violence, and coercive control. One of the key lessons from the Commission's work is that tragedies do not occur in isolation, and preventing violence requires action from governments, institutions, communities, and individuals.

At the [Transition House Association of Nova Scotia \(THANS\)](#), we believe that collective action and community care are essential to a whole-of-society approach to ending GBV, and that educators are an important part of this work.

Nova Scotia declared IPV an epidemic in 2024, and the province consistently reports some of the highest rates of IPV in the country, including the highest rate of self-reported IPV among Canadian provinces. In many rural communities, the impacts of IPV are intensified by geographic isolation, limited resources, and fewer specialized supports. Research suggests that approximately 30 per cent of people in Nova Scotia have experienced IPV at some point in their lives, though the true prevalence is likely higher due to persistent barriers to disclosure. Women represent approximately 79 per cent of victims and survivors, while men account for about 21 per cent. Members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities also experience higher rates of violence, reminding us that IPV can affect people of all genders, identities, and backgrounds.

Because of this reality, conversations about prevention and

support are increasingly taking place in spaces where young people spend a great deal of their time: our schools.

In response to the Commission's Recommendation C.17, the provincial government has begun implementing a new provincial P-12 GBV and bystander intervention curriculum focused on topics such as consent, healthy relationships, and challenging harmful stereotypes.

But what does this mean for teachers, who may also be experiencing GBV themselves, or supporting colleagues, friends, or family members who are?

Teachers play a vital role in the lives of children and youth and are often among the first adults outside the family to notice when something is wrong. At the same time, it is important to recognize that educators themselves are not immune to the realities of IPV. Like any workplace or community, schools include individuals who may be experiencing violence in their own relationships or supporting someone who is.

Understanding how to recognize and respond to IPV, and what supports are available, can help create safer and more supportive environments for everyone as we work towards a whole-of-society response together.

The 3 R's of IPV Prevention & Response

A helpful way to think about responding to IPV is through the "3 R's": Recognize, Respond, and Refer.

Recognize: To recognize IPV, we first need to understand the many forms it can take. IPV is not limited to physical violence; it can include emotional or psychological abuse, coercive control, financial abuse, technology-facilitated violence, criminal harassment, and threats or intimidation. Sometimes the warning signs are subtle. A person may appear increasingly isolated, anxious about their partner's reactions, frequently monitored through texts or calls, or suddenly unable to make decisions about their own time, finances, or relationships.

Recognizing IPV means paying attention to changes in behaviour, patterns of control, and the ways someone's autonomy may be restricted.

Respond: Once we recognize that someone may be experiencing IPV, the next step is to respond from a place of care, one that does not unintentionally increase risk. For example, confronting an abuser directly or pressuring someone to leave the relationship

can sometimes escalate violence, even when those responses are well-intentioned.

Instead, the goal is to reduce isolation and open the door to support while respecting the survivor's safety and autonomy. One simple framework for starting these conversations is the "SNCit" model:

- **See It:** see visible warning signs and risk factors.
- **Name It:** name your concern (e.g., "I noticed you are a bit more distant recently, and that your partner has been showing up a lot. I'm feeling concerned about you.")
- **Check It:** This step is about creating space for the person to respond on their own terms. It involves gently checking in to see how they're doing, asking if they need support, and letting them know you're there for them. It also means checking in with yourself, recognizing that supporting someone experiencing IPV can be emotionally heavy, and making sure you seek support when you need it too.

The first two steps move the conversation forward, while checking in allows space for the person to respond. People experiencing IPV may not be ready to disclose what is happening, may not identify their experience as abuse, or may be navigating complex safety considerations. It is also important to check in with yourself, as supporting someone experiencing IPV can be emotionally heavy, and seeking support for yourself matters too.

Refer: If someone discloses abuse or expresses concern about their safety, connecting them with specialized supports can make a significant difference. Across Nova Scotia, transition houses, women's centres, outreach programs, crisis lines, and culturally specific services provide safety planning, emotional support, legal information, and assistance accessing housing or other resources.

The Transition House Association of Nova Scotia and its Members

The Transition House Association of Nova Scotia is an umbrella organization representing 14 member agencies across the province that provide life-saving services to women and children experiencing intimate partner and domestic violence. **Services are free and confidential, and individuals do not need to be staying in a shelter to receive support.**

THANS also offers [in-person training](#), such as the *Neighbours, Friends, and Families* training program, a nationally recognized public education initiative originally developed at Western University. The program helps people recognize warning signs of IPV, respond supportively, and connect individuals with local resources. It is grounded in research from domestic violence death reviews, which consistently show that those closest to victims often notice warning signs but may not know how to respond—so, as a society, we should teach everyone to recognize, respond, and refer.

For additional support in Nova Scotia, individuals can contact the provincial *Neighbours, Friends, and Families* line at 1-855-225-0220 or connect with local services through 211 Nova Scotia, a free and confidential resource available 24-hours a day that helps people navigate community, social, health, and government supports. Our friends at 211 are incredible allies in helping navigate safety and support for those experiencing or at risk of experiencing IPV.

THANS Education Toolkits

- [Consent](#)
- [Healthy Relationships](#)
- [Recognizing Relationship Violence](#)

THANS Member Organizations

Our members have been supporting survivors since 1978, often as the primary organization in their area providing specialized service to survivors. Some of these services include:

- Safety Planning
- Outreach
- Emergency Shelter
- Programming, including for children and youth
- Second Stage Housing
- Court Accompaniment
- Education & Awareness
- Supportive Counselling
- Crisis Information & Support Lines
- Referrals & Advocacy
- Support with basic needs, such as food, personal care products, household items, etc.
- Support with Peace Bonds & Emergency Protection Orders

See below for a list of THANS member organizations and their catchment area within each of the Nova Scotia Health Authority zones:

Central Zone

[Alice House](#)
[Bryony House](#)
[Weli-ankweyasimk](#)
[Women's Shelter](#)

Eastern Zone

[Leeside Society](#) (Richmond, Inverness, & Port Hawkesbury)
[Naomi Society](#) (Antigonish & Guysborough)
[We'koqma'q Mi'kmaq Family Healing Centre](#) (Cape Breton Island)
[Willow House](#) (Sydney)

Northern Zone

[Autumn House](#) (Amherst & Cumberland)
[Millbrook Mi'kmaq Family Healing Centre](#) (Mainland NS)
[Tearmann Society for Abused Women](#) (New Glasgow, Pictou, Antigonish, & Guyborough)
[Third Place](#) (Colchester, East Hants, & Truro)

Western Zone

[Chrysalis House](#) (West Hants, Kings, Annapolis)
[Harbour House](#) (Bridgewater, Lunenburg, & Queens)
[Juniper House](#) (Yarmouth, Digby, & Shelburne)

Ending GBV requires informed communities that are willing to support one another, because GBV is a community issue that impacts us all. Educators are uniquely positioned to foster these values in the classroom while also recognizing when students, colleagues, or community members may need help. By learning to recognize the signs of IPV, responding with care, and referring individuals to the supports available across Nova Scotia, teachers



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can play an important role in creating safer schools and stronger communities.

For those interested in learning more about supporting students and families experiencing IPV, we recommend checking out the following resources:

- [The Learning Network: Supporting Children Exposed to IPV](#)
- [The VEGA Project: Best Practices for Responding to Children Exposed to IPV](#)

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