When sex is used as a weapon, or a way of controlling someone, or to satisfy one person’s sexual needs, it isn’t love. It isn’t even really sex—it’s sexual abuse, and people who use sex to manipulate, control, or harm other people aren’t boyfriends, or girlfriends, or lovers, they are perpetrators.

Knowing the difference between sex and sexual abuse isn’t always easy. Perpetrators of sexual abuse often try to make their victims feel ashamed or responsible for the abuse, or to convince them that the abuse is a form of love. Some perpetrators will engage children in sexual activities in such a playful way that the young child might like the attention and might not understand that the perpetrator’s behavior was sexually abusive. Following are some classic “red flags” of sexual abuse.

*Not her real name.

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1. Using Physical Force

If a person physically forces you to engage in sexual acts, watch sexual material (such as dirty movies or pictures), won’t let you leave, physically threatens you, or otherwise forces you against your will—it’s sexual abuse.

2. Using Emotional or Psychological Force

If a person who is in a position of power or trust—like a teacher, older relative, or boss—makes you feel like you have to engage in sexual acts or watch sexual material with them—it’s abuse.

My stepfather began touching himself and staring at me nearly every day. Every time, I just stayed still, clenched my teeth and waited until he was finished. I thought that if I ignored him he would eventually stop. I was wrong . . .

He would write me letters saying that I was the devil’s child and that I seduced him. He left sticky-notes in front of the computer with phrases like “You’re a whore” and, “You know you have fantasies about me.”

Tabitha,* 17-year-old sexual abuse survivor

3. The Old Bait and Switch

If a person starts out doing things that seem innocent and playful (tickling, a friendly hug) and then starts touching you or making you touch them in unwanted sexual ways—it’s abuse.

*Not her real name.
4. Secrecy

If a person engages in an unwanted sexual act with you and then pressures you to keep it a secret—or threatens you with harm if you tell—it's abuse.

5. Blaming the Victim

If a person forces you to engage in a sexual act and then says that it was your fault because you were drunk/high, “asked for it” by wearing certain clothes or looking a certain way, or were lying when you said you didn’t want to—it’s abuse.

Understanding Date Rape

Date rape (sometimes called acquaintance rape) is when somebody you know uses physical force, drugs or alcohol, or emotional pressure to make you engage in unwanted sexual activities.

There are steps you can take to lower your risk of date rape. For more info on staying safe—and on what to do if date rape occurs—check out the following resources from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

- Preventing Acquaintance Rape
  http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/preventingacquaintancerape.pdf

- What do I do now? A Survival Guide for Victims of Acquaintance Rape
  http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/acquaintancerapeguideforvictims.pdf