

Teen Dating Violence: What Parents Need to Know

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Myths and Facts

Myth: “Oh, it’s not that serious.”

Fact: More than one in ten teenagers experience physical violence in a dating relationship.

Myth: “It only happens to kids from bad homes.”

Fact: Dating violence can happen in all types of homes, and in families of all cultures, income levels, and educational backgrounds. Teen dating violence is NOT limited to families with a history of violence.

Myth: “It can’t happen to my child!”

Fact: Boys, as well as girls, can be victims of dating violence. It can occur in any type of relationship -- straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Warning Signs of Being a Victim of Violence

Some of the following signs are just part of being a teenager. But, when these changes happen suddenly, or without an explanation, there may be cause for concern.

- Sudden changes in clothes or make-up.
- Bruises, scratches, or other injuries.
- Failing grades or dropping out of school activities.
- Avoiding friends.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- Sudden changes in mood or personality, becoming anxious or depressed, acting out, being secretive.
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits, avoiding eye contact, having ‘crying jags’ or getting ‘hysterical.’
- Constantly thinking about dating partner.
- Using alcohol or drugs.
- Pregnancy - some teenagers believe that having a baby will help make things better; some girls are forced to have sex.

Warning Signs of a Partner Who May Become Violent

- Wants to get serious quickly -- will not take NO for an answer.
- Is jealous and possessive -- wants to pick the partner's friends and activities.
- Is controlling and bossy -- makes all the decisions, does not take others' opinions seriously, uses put-downs when alone or with friends.
- Uses guilt trips -- "If you really loved me, you would . . ."
- Blames the victim for what is wrong -- "It's because of you that I get so mad."
- Apologizes for violent behavior -- "I promise I'll never do it again."

Why Teens Don't Tell Parents or Friends About the Violence

They are:

- afraid their parents will make them break up.
- embarrassed and ashamed.
- afraid of getting hurt.
- convinced that it is their fault or that their parents will blame them or will be disappointed.
- confused -- they may think this is what a relationship is all about.
- afraid of losing privileges like being able to stay out late or use the car.

They:

- have little or no experience with healthy dating relationships.
- believe being involved with someone is the most important thing in their life.
- confuse jealousy with love.
- do not realize they are being abused.
- do not think friends and others would believe this is happening.
- have lost touch with friends.
- know that the abuser acts nice -- sometimes.

Tips for Parents

Tip: It is never too early to teach self-respect. No one has the right to tell your teenager who to see, what to do, or what to wear. No one has the right to hit or control anyone else.

Tip: Give your teenager a chance to talk. Listen quietly to the whole story.

Tip: If you suspect that your teenager is already involved with an abusive partner:

- Tell your teenager you are there to help -- not to judge.
- If your teenager does not want to talk with you, help your teenager find another trusted person to talk with.
- Focus on your child -- do not put down the abusive partner. Point out how unhappy your teenager seems to be while with this person.

Tip: If your teenager tries to break up with an abusive partner, advise that the break be definite and final. Support your teenager's decision and be ready to help.

Tip: Take whatever safety measures are necessary:

- Have friends available so your teenager does not have to walk alone.
- Consider changing class schedules or getting help from the guidance counselor, school principal, or the police if necessary.

Tip: Ask for teen dating violence prevention and intervention programs in your teenager's school.

What You Can Say to Your Teen

- "I care about what happens to you. I love you and I want to help."
- "If you feel afraid, it may be abuse. Sometimes people behave in ways that are scary and make you feel threatened -- even without using physical violence. Pay attention to your gut feelings."
- "The abuse is not your fault. You are not to blame, no matter how guilty the person doing this to you is trying to make you feel. Your partner should not be doing this to you."
- "It is the abuser who has a problem, not you. It is not your responsibility to help this person change."
- "It is important to talk about this. Many people who have been victims of dating violence have been able to change their lives after they began talking to others. If you don't want to talk with me, find someone you trust and talk with that person."

Remember

The teen years are when sexual feelings develop. It is a time when dating starts and teenagers are experimenting with different types of relationships. These are the years when it is fun and exciting to meet someone new -- and sad and difficult to break up. But abuse has no place in a healthy relationship.

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