

When Teen Dating Hurts

Parents often don't realize it, but their teenage daughters—and sometimes sons—are being punched, threatened, isolated and disparaged by their adolescent partners. In fact, one recent study indicates that teen girls face relationship violence three times more than adult women. Teen Research Unlimited questioned more than a thousand teens about dating abuse in a study commissioned by Liz Claiborne, Inc., released in February 2006. They found that:

- One in five teens report being hit, slapped or punched by a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- One third worry about their physical safety.
- A quarter say they've been isolated from their family and friends, and more than half say they've compromised their own beliefs to please a partner.
- Perhaps most shocking—many teens think this dating behavior is “normal.” Teens are often reluctant to tell anyone they are being abused. It is very confusing to be in love with someone who hurts you. They are torn between defending their partner and wanting protection from him. Like with adult victims, most teen victims only want the abuse to end, not the relationship.

According to the Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition, many teens simply do not define and identify the violence as being destructive or a problem in the relationship. Popular television shows and music videos continue to portray conflicts in relationships as exciting and flattering (e.g., he wouldn't be so upset if he didn't really care about me). Not surprisingly, 25 – 35% of adolescents equate jealousy and possessiveness with love. Looking at the continuum of violence issues, it becomes apparent how a range of forms of violence—physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual—are used by abusers to dominate their partners. The more subtle forms of sexual violence (unwanted touching, sexual name calling, unfaithfulness or threat of unfaithfulness) are clearly emotionally as well as sexually controlling. These need to be identified as violence issues which are related to, and can escalate into, unwanted sex, unprotected sex, hurtful sex and other forms of sexual assault.

Sexual violence from an intimate partner is particularly difficult for a teen victim to discuss because she may not want friends or family to know that she is sexually active. Another interesting point from the Claiborne research: technology enables teens to be in constant contact through instant messaging, text messaging and cell phones. The result, many victims don't see it as controlling when a boyfriend wants to know her whereabouts say, 10 times a day. They see it as normal.

Perhaps the biggest barrier for teens that are being abused is finding someone with whom they feel safe talking about the dating abuse. One quarter of these teens tell no one they are being battered. Of the teens who do reach out, they are more likely to talk with a peer (66%) than a parent (26%). Unfortunately, many teens do not have the knowledge or skills to prevent or react against violence in their lives or in their friends' lives. In fact, the opposite is much more likely, according to Nancy Worcester, PhD, Associate Professor of Women's Studies at the University

of Wisconsin at Madison and founder and coordinator of the Wisconsin Domestic Violence Training Project. Worcester's research indicates that when young women have told friends they were being hurt by their boyfriends, the response was that they were lucky to have boyfriends. There is enormous pressure not to break up, Worcester writes, and since many teens regard violence as a normal part of dating, they have no idea they deserve better. For many teen girls, extreme possessiveness, jealousy, dominance, and not being "allowed" to break up get wrongly identified as desirable, positive signs of caring, love and commitment, rather than strong warning signs that they are in an unhealthy, potentially dangerous relationship, Worcester notes. For this reason, it is crucial for teens to have accurate information about dating violence to help their peers. Working to prevent violence in young women's lives must be a high priority for all of us committed to helping young women achieve their full potential. The isolation and lowered self-esteem which are so often a consequence—not a cause—of violence will have ongoing implications for a young woman if they cause her to limit or eliminate career options or educational opportunities that could affect the rest of her life.

WARNING SIGNS

It's not always easy to recognize if a teen is in a violent relationship. Abusers are often charming in public, especially to parents—so pay attention to how he treats your daughter and less to how polite he may be to you. Here are some other signs to look for:

- She apologizes for his behavior and makes excuses for him.
- She loses interest in activities that she used to enjoy.
- She stops seeing friends and family members and becomes more and more isolated.
- When your daughter and her boyfriend are together, he calls her names and puts her down in front of other people.
- He acts extremely jealous of others who pay attention to her, especially other guys.
- He thinks or tells your daughter that you (her parents) don't like him.
- He controls her behavior, checking up on her constantly, calling and paging her, demanding to know who she has been with.
- She casually mentions his violent behavior, but laughs it off as a joke.
- She often has unexplained injuries, or the explanations she offers don't make sense.