

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

By Leslie Davis

You'd like to think that your teens will have a nice, fairytale romance for their first relationship -- that they'll be wooed with flowers, taken for walks in the park and treated with nothing but respect.

And while there's a very good chance that will be the scenario, you should be aware of the potential for teen dating violence – something one in three teens will experience in an intimate relationship.

Most parents don't want to think about this happening to their child. About 80 percent of parents believe teen dating violence is not an issue or don't know if it is an issue, according to a 2004 survey in *Women's Health*.

Unfortunately, the majority of parents are wrong. Here are some statistics you should know about teen dating violence, from Break the Cycle:

- Nearly 1.5 million high school students experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a single year.
- One in three teenage girls is a victim of physical, emotional or verbal abuse from someone they are dating – a figure that far exceeds victimization rates for other types of violence affecting youth.
- One in 10 high school students has been hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- 80 percent of girls who have been physically abused continue to date their abuser.
- Only 33 percent of teens who are in an abusive relationship ever tell anyone about the abuse.

Who Is Victimized

It's important to understand that it's not just girls who are the victims of dating violence. Both males and females are victimized, no matter their race, income level or sexual preference. The main difference is in the way that boys and girls are abusive:

- Girls are more likely to yell, threaten to hurt themselves, pinch, slap, scratch and kick.
- Boys injure girls more severely and frequently.

Girls ages 16 to 24 are the population most vulnerable to dating violence, at a rate of almost triple the national average, according to the U.S. Department of Justice:

- One-quarter of high school girls have been victims of physical or sexual abuse or date rape.
- One in four girls in a relationship reports going further sexually than they wanted as a result of pressure.
- Among female victims of intimate partner violence, a current or former boyfriend or girlfriend victimized 94 percent of those between the ages of 16 and 19.
- Between 1993 and 1999, 22 percent of all homicides against females ages 16 to 19 were committed by an intimate partner.

The Impact of Dating Violence

Now that you have an understanding of how serious the problem of teen dating violence is, you also need to be aware of the impact on victims. Teenagers who are victims of dating violence are more likely to continue to be abused in their adult relationships, and are unlikely to break the pattern of abusive relationships.

Teen dating violence also puts victims at increased risk for the following:

- Substance abuse
- Eating disorders
- Risky sexual behavior
- Pregnancy
- Suicide

Recognizing the Signs

If your teens have started dating, it's always a good idea to keep an eye out for signs of dating violence. Many teens will be too ashamed to tell you that they are being abused by someone they are dating, and may end up in more dangerous situations in the long run.

The following are some signs that your teen may be involved in a violent dating situation:

- Withdrawing from school or activities they used to enjoy
- Becoming isolated, hostile or secretive
- Apologizes for partner's behaviors
- Stops hanging out with friends
- Physical bruises, signs of injury or damaged personal property
- Changes in clothing or make-up
- Use of drugs or alcohol

If you recognize any of these signs, take action immediately before the situation gets worse.

What You Can Do

Parents often feel helpless once they realize that their child is the victim of teen dating violence. The most important thing to do is to talk to your teen about dating violence, something most parents admit to not doing.

The moment you think your teens may begin dating, inform them of the dangers of dating violence and what to do should they find themselves in an abusive situation. Encourage them to be open with you about their relationships and reassure them that you will not be judgmental about anything they tell you.

If you believe that your teen is a victim of dating violence, try talking to them about it. Find an appropriate time to start the conversation and act supportive, encouraging and caring as you elicit information. Don't be critical about anything your teen tells you because that may cause them to end the conversation and continue in their unhealthy relationship.

Depending on the severity of the abuse, you may need to take your teen to a doctor for a check-up and contact your local law enforcement officials. They may be in the best position to follow up on the abuse and take action. If you need help talking with your teen, please contact Hanover Township Youth and Family Services at (630) 483-5799.

Teen dating violence is a very real, and very serious, problem. During February, which has been designated National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month, take time to educate yourself and your teens about the threats and risks associated with teen dating violence and come up with proactive measures to avoid it. Keeping a dialogue open with your teens will give them a better chance of having that fairytale romance.