

A large number of teens experience dating violence. Some estimate that 30% of students may experience such violence.^{1,2} A significant proportion of this abuse may occur during school hours and on school grounds. Of those high school students who reported dating violence in one study, about 40% said that the abuse happened on school grounds during the school day.^{1,2}

Teens involved in dating violence may become increasingly disengaged from school, resulting in poorer grades, higher risk for dropping out, and greater risk of suicide.^{3,4,5} It is clear that there can be profound effects of dating violence for teens and that intervention and prevention can help to address this increasing problem. Creating coherent school policies that address teen dating violence is a helpful step toward prevention.

WHAT WARNING SIGNS SHOULD I BE LOOKING FOR?

Teachers and other school officials have a unique opportunity to assess teens' potential engagement in dating violence because of the amount of contact that occurs between school employees and students. During your encounters with students, take note of any change in personality or in behavior, as this might signal that there is an issue. For instance, you may notice that a typically outgoing teen is now withdrawn and isolated or is spending time exclusively with a dating partner.⁶ Teen victims may become suddenly depressed, appear to be losing weight, or dress differently in an attempt to hide evidence of physical abuse.⁴ You may notice a sudden drop in academic performance, more absences, or a desire to drop out of school. Teens who perpetrate abuse may become more aggressive toward peers, faculty, and staff. They may seem to be in a bad mood more often or have emotional outbursts, or show a sudden drop in academic performance.⁶ Although none of these signs definitely indicates that teen dating violence is occurring, they do suggest a need for further evaluation.

WHAT CAN WE DO AT MY SCHOOL TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE? If your school does not have a dating violence prevention program, you may think of ways to start one. A comprehensive dating violence program should include training for staff and teachers in recognition, intervention, and prevention efforts that include multiple levels of intervention and multiple stakeholders, such as parents, coaches, bystanders, and community organizations. Teachers and staff should know the laws in their state that govern reporting and whether or not they are mandated by law to report.⁷

Aside from training teachers and staff members, implementing curriculum in the classroom that educates teens about dating violence has shown to be effective in reducing the incidence of violence in relationships.⁸ Specifically, programs that educate teens on healthy and unhealthy behavior in relationships, that provide education about the consequences of violence (including emotional, psychological, physical, and legal consequences for both the aggressor and the victim), and that show how gender-

role stereotypes can influence abusive behaviors have been particularly successful in reducing dating violence.^{1,6} Programs that help students develop healthy coping strategies have shown good success as well. In particular, showing teens how to cope with challenging emotions like anger, jealousy, and rejection, providing information on effective communication strategies, helping teens to set boundaries in relationships, and educating teens on verbal and nonverbal cues that communicate a partner is not ready to have sex can help teens behave more appropriately in difficult or uncertain circumstances.⁹

There are things you can do individually to encourage open communication and a sense of closeness with your students.⁶ Students who feel a connection to their teacher may be more likely to disclose dating violence. Discouraging disrespectful interactions can also help to create a more respectful environment in the school. Further, engaging bystanders to intervene in relationship behaviors that are inappropriate may decrease the escalation of physical and sexual violence. It is imperative that bystanders who report dating violence suspicions to school authorities remain anonymous.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I SUSPECT OR SEE THAT A TEEN IS INVOLVED IN A VIOLENT RELATIONSHIP? Because school employees have a substantial amount of contact with teens, it is possible you will witness dating violence. This puts you in a unique position to be the first to respond to an incident.⁶ Be sure you know your school's policy on handling such situations, as well as any legal obligations you have for reporting incidents of violence in your state.⁷ Aside from following school or state protocol for such incidents, it is important to convey empathy and support to the teen(s) involved. For victims of dating violence, it is essential that they understand that they are not to blame for the incident. You can also provide resources and options that can help the teen(s) stay safe, or you can provide referral resources to local agencies that specialize in working with this issue.⁷

The Alverno College Research Center for Women and Girls generates and applies scholarly research, develops curricula, and conducts program evaluation and outreach for the purpose of supporting, transforming and inspiring initiatives to improve the lives of women and girls in the state of Wisconsin and beyond. For the complete *Teen Dating Violence: A Resource and Prevention Toolkit*, with more extensive summaries of current research, resources for further reading, and action items for parents, teachers, and community members, please visit: Alverno.edu/research.