

# TEEN DATING VIOLENCE:

A Resource and Prevention Toolkit



*Alverno*  
COLLEGE

RESEARCH CENTER FOR  
WOMEN AND GIRLS

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# INTRODUCTION

## Who We Are

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. Our intention is for our publications to be used by educators, community organizations, businesses, and government officials to raise awareness, identify solutions, change attitudes and practices, and develop public policy both locally and nationally.

This publication provides an overview of teen dating violence, which has become a public health concern. We offer a glimpse into this complex issue, including factors that contribute to the problem and the effects of this violence. We also focus heavily on prevention and intervention strategies, including specific action items for adults concerned about teens and teenage friends—strategies that have been shown to be effective in reducing teen dating violence.

## Toolkit Objectives

1. Provide an overview of teen dating violence, including the multiple effects of such violence on teens and others.
2. Examine the influences on teen dating violence.
3. Discuss ways in which technology is increasingly being used in cases of teen dating violence.
4. Describe factors that prevent individuals from reporting relationship violence.
5. Provide a summary of the research on prevention and intervention efforts that work to reduce teen dating violence.
6. Outline steps that teens and adults can take in order to prevent teen dating violence or to intervene when there are signs of teen dating violence.

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## What is teen dating violence?

Teen dating violence is any emotional, psychological, physical, and/or sexual act that is abusive in nature.<sup>1,2</sup> This abusive behavior can be used, with or without intention or understanding, in a dating relationship that involves at least one teen. Acts of self-defense are not included in this definition.<sup>3</sup> Dating violence can occur as one discrete event or present as a pattern of behavior that occurs over the course of the relationship.<sup>4,5</sup> Dating violence can occur as early as the first date.<sup>5</sup>

Because teens describe dating in a wide variety of ways, ranging from “hanging out” to “having a relationship,”<sup>6</sup> it is important to establish a clear definition of teen dating. We define teen dating as any relationship that involves at least one adolescent up to age 19, regardless of the length of the relationship or the level of intimacy involved.

## Teen dating violence may include some or all of the following characteristics:

- ♦ **Emotional or psychological abuse.** Emotional or psychological abuse may be hard to detect.<sup>2</sup> It includes verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors such as name-calling, insults, threats, accusations, criticism, complaints, humiliation, threatening to leave or to self-injure,<sup>7</sup> and stalking.<sup>8</sup> It may include the use of social media to check up on, humiliate, or separate a person from his or her friends or family. This type of aggression can include behaviors between two partners or may involve third parties (e.g., spreading rumors).
- ♦ **Physical violence.** Physical violence includes pinching, hitting, shoving, kicking,<sup>9</sup> pushing, punching, slapping, choking, or physical restraint.<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ **Sexual abuse/violence.** Sexual abuse/violence includes attempted or forced sexual activity when a partner does not consent or is unable to do so,<sup>2</sup> abusive sexual contact, and verbal sexual harassment.

Many teens may not realize that these behaviors are abusive. When youth see a behavior occurring frequently in their environment, they may see the behavior as “normal” and fail to recognize it as violence.<sup>4</sup>

**Myth:** Some violence is normal and okay in relationships.

**Truth:** Although teens may witness violence and get the impression that it is “normal,” violence is an unhealthy response to anger, frustration, or jealousy.<sup>10</sup> Exposure to violence increases the likelihood that a teen will be a victim of more frequent and more severe dating violence in the future. <sup>3, 11-13</sup>

## What happens as a result of teen dating violence?

Teen dating violence can negatively impact teens in a variety of ways. Effects can be physical, psychological, and relational. Consequences range from minor to severe and can be prevented by working to stop teen dating violence from occurring in the first place (see Action Items).

- ♦ **Psychological effects** include increased anger, low self-esteem, anxiety, frequent vague bodily complaints (e.g., headache), insomnia,<sup>14</sup> depression, panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and increased risk of developing substance dependency or abuse.<sup>14-18</sup> Both perpetrators and victims are at risk for an increase in suicidal thoughts and attempts.<sup>19</sup> Boys and girls both may experience these psychological effects; however, girls are more likely to suffer severe emotional trauma from victimization in a dating situation.<sup>20</sup>
- ♦ **Effects on victims' relationships** can be seen across a variety of contexts. The perpetrator may make it difficult for the victim to interact with friends or family.<sup>2</sup> The victim may stop talking to or confiding in parents or may act out toward them.<sup>2</sup> Relationships at school suffer as the teen may withdraw from school activities or display hostility toward authority figures.<sup>2</sup> Dating violence during the teen years may even predict marital violence later in life.<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ **Effects on perpetrators' relationships** are far-reaching as well. Perpetrators may become increasingly agitated toward parents, siblings, and friends. These teens may have sudden outbursts of anger and may resort to blaming others for their feelings or actions, causing a disruption in their relationships.<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ **Physical effects** depend on the type of violence committed. The injuries caused by physical violence can range from minor bruises to death.<sup>2,9</sup> In the case of sexual violence, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy can potentially result.<sup>2</sup>

Teen dating violence most obviously affects both of the partners involved in the relationship in negative ways, and if the behavior is not addressed it can continue into adulthood.<sup>7,10</sup> Dating violence also affects teenage peers, who may begin to use violence themselves as a way to solve problems if their peers are doing so.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, it is clear that the effects of dating violence for teens, friends, and family members can be profound. The complex effects of teen dating violence also highlight how important intervention and prevention efforts are to address the issue.

## How common is teen dating violence?

The exact number of teens in the United States who are affected by teen dating violence is unclear due to issues involved in reporting this type of violence<sup>1</sup> (see Reporting Challenges). The most common type of violence within teen relationships is emotional or psychological violence. Estimates are that between 20% and 80% of teens in relationships have been the victim of such violence.<sup>9,22,23</sup> Estimates are that between 9% and 23% of high schoolers have experienced physical violence or the threat of physical violence.<sup>24,25</sup> Based on self-reported data, between 26% and 46% of teenagers in relationships report perpetrating physical violence, while between 3% and 12% report inflicting sexual violence.<sup>24</sup>

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens are at increased risk for teen dating violence. Approximately 50% of lesbian and gay youth report dating violence.<sup>26</sup> Bisexual youth appear to experience higher rates of interpersonal violence than gay and lesbian youth, although the exact reason for this is not fully understood.<sup>27</sup>

Teen parents and teens who are pregnant are also at higher risk for teen dating violence. For instance, being pregnant as a teen increases the risk of being involved in dating violence by five times.<sup>5,28</sup> Teens also report a higher rate of dating violence within the first three months after delivery.<sup>27</sup> The younger the teen mother, the higher the risk of becoming a victim of homicide.<sup>27</sup>

Teens who date older partners (over 18 years of age) are another group at higher risk for dating violence. A study in 2007 found that more than 50% of teens involved in dating violence have a partner who is over the age of 18.<sup>28</sup>

**Myth:** Violence in lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships is not as serious because partners are of the same gender and may be similar in size and strength.

**Truth:** One out of two lesbian, gay, or bisexual teens experiences violence within intimate relationships.<sup>26</sup>

## Why do teens use violence in relationships?

This is a complex question. Some reasons given by teens for using physical violence were anger, use of alcohol or drugs, jealousy, getting their own way, and retaliation.<sup>23</sup> Teens also reported that boys' use of violence was most often motivated by control, to "show who was boss" in a relationship,<sup>23,29</sup> to intimidate girls, or was used as a response to being "provoked."<sup>30</sup>

**Myth:** I brought it on myself. I was "in his face." I knew what was coming, so I deserved a violent or aggressive response.

**Truth:** Teaching teens that no one deserves or brings violence or abuse upon themselves may help them avoid violence and long-term abusive relationships.<sup>31</sup>

## **Why does it matter?**

Once a teen has become violent in a relationship, there is evidence to suggest that this teen may become violent with the same partner in the future<sup>32</sup> and in other dating relationships.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, patterns of violent interaction may continue from adolescence into adulthood.<sup>34</sup> Without tools to change behaviors and learn more effective ways to communicate and interact, young people may not find healthy ways out of the cycle of violence.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, there appears to be a trend toward youth becoming involved in dating violence at progressively younger ages, including during the middle school years.<sup>1</sup>

Teen dating violence is also associated with other risky teen behaviors. For example, teens who are involved in dating violence are more likely to be involved in fighting, binge drinking, and sexual activity.<sup>9,22,36</sup>

At the most severe end of the spectrum, teen dating violence can lead to homicide. Seventeen percent of 12- to 17-year-old girls who were murdered between 1980 and 2008 were murdered by dating partners.<sup>37</sup>

## **How does teen dating violence compare to adult intimate partner violence?**

Teen dating violence is different from adult intimate partner violence in a few ways. First, teens are in a critical transitional developmental period. They are experiencing many changes physiologically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially<sup>38</sup> while at the same time they are not yet as experienced in complex decision making.<sup>39,40</sup> This may be a reason why teens are more likely than adults to have volatile relationships<sup>11</sup> and why violence is more likely to occur during the teen years than at other times of the lifespan.<sup>41</sup>

Second, teen dating violence is more likely to be bidirectional (regardless of the gender of the partners) than adult intimate partner violence.<sup>8</sup> This means that in teen relationships (whether heterosexual or same-sex), both partners may use violence and be on the receiving end of violence in the relationship.<sup>8</sup> In adult relationships, it is much more common to have one partner act as an aggressor.<sup>8</sup>

Third, boys and girls are both victims of as well as aggressors in teen dating violence.<sup>1,2,7,30</sup> Therefore, it is important to recognize that both boys and girls can be involved in teen dating violence in ways that might not fit societal stereotypes. Despite the fact that both boys and girls can be involved in perpetrating violence, it is important to note that violence used by boys and girls in teen relationships is not necessarily equal. Boys are more likely to cause severe physical injuries and to perpetrate sexual violence than girls, while girls are more likely to use psychological abuse or cause minor physical injury.<sup>30,42</sup> Moreover, girls are more likely to report severe emotions (e.g., fear) as a consequence of dating violence.<sup>42</sup>



## How can I tell if a teen is in trouble?

Warning signs that a teen *may* be a victim of dating violence:

- ♦ Teen shows concern or fear about upsetting or angering a dating partner<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen excuses partner's behavior or apologizes for partner<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen spends much of his or her time with the dating partner and little time with others<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen receives an excessive number of calls, e-mails, or texts from dating partner
- ♦ Teen has unexplained or suspicious "gifts," such as clothes or cash
- ♦ Teen has sudden changes in his or her interests and/or grades, or reduced interest in typical activities<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen shows signs of distress, including use of substances<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen's identity or social status seems to be dependent on having a boyfriend or a girlfriend
- ♦ Teen shows evidence of conduct problems in school or poor academic performance<sup>2,43,44</sup>
- ♦ Teen has unexplained bruises, marks, or injuries, or explanations for the injuries are questionable<sup>2,45</sup>
- ♦ Teen has several wounds in various stages of healing<sup>45</sup>

Warning signs that a teen *may* be aggressive in a dating relationship:

- ♦ Teen has the tendency to lose his/her temper quickly<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen has unpredictable mood<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen does not seem to be able to tolerate difficult feelings (e.g., anger, frustration, jealousy)<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen assigns blame to people close to him/her when in difficult situations<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen appears possessive or overprotective of dating partner or has a tendency to become jealous, demanding, or insecure in the relationship<sup>2</sup>
- ♦ Teen shows physically confrontational behavior or verbally abusive language toward dating partner<sup>2</sup>

## INFLUENCES ON TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

As stated earlier, dating violence that occurs in teen relationships can occur bidirectionally.<sup>8</sup> This makes it difficult for researchers to distinguish the factors that influence becoming a perpetrator or a victim of teen dating violence. The sections that follow outline influences on teen dating violence and differentiate between those that affect victimization and perpetration when possible.

### Societal and Cultural Influences

It can be common to focus on the characteristics of the two teens involved in dating violence in order to explain why the violence occurred, but it is important to recognize that abusive relationships are influenced

by environmental and social factors as well. For instance, gender roles appear to significantly impact dating relationships in several ways relevant to dating violence.

Gender roles are the expressions of attitudes and expectations based on a person's sex. They are constructed by the culture in which a person lives. Gender roles may include stereotypical ideas about how a woman or man should look or how a woman or man should act.<sup>46</sup>

**Myth:** A good boyfriend takes charge in a relationship. A good girlfriend does not express herself freely in front of her boyfriend.

**Truth:** These are stereotypical gender role beliefs that can contribute to an imbalance of power and control in intimate relationships.<sup>10,49</sup> Teens with rigid gender role beliefs are at a higher risk for teen dating violence than teens who believe boys and girls are equal.<sup>5</sup>

Traditional male gender roles are formed around ideas of independence, assertiveness, dominance, and exploration,<sup>47-49</sup> while female gender roles often include behavioral restraint and self-protection,<sup>48</sup> and passive, submissive, emotional,<sup>23</sup> or supportive roles. These gender roles have been found to be related to violence, including the types of violence seen within teen dating relationships. For instance, adolescent males who have rigid beliefs in what have been traditional "masculine" gender roles are more likely to perpetrate sexual and physical violence than are males who do not hold such beliefs.<sup>50</sup> These beliefs include the following: boys should have sex with as many different girls as possible; boys are always ready for sex; and if they don't get sex from their partner, boys should find someone else to have sex with. In another study, girls perceived tolerating abuse

as a way to win the affections of a male,<sup>31</sup> or believed that some women deserved abuse because they "did not know how to be quiet."<sup>31</sup>

These social roles also set up a dynamic in which a male, who has been given messages that he should assert himself sexually in a relationship, is now confronted with a female, who has been socialized to resist or refuse sexual advances from a male. It is no surprise that such a situation may cause confusion and anger for both teens involved. Interestingly, when groups have equal gender roles, they tolerate less aggression.<sup>51</sup>

Additionally, gender role expectations may affect the way teens and adults view relationship violence. Physical violence perpetrated by girls may be more likely to be excused while psychological aggression used by boys may be seen as a benevolent act, supporting the notion that male controlling behavior is caring, or that true love involves controlling behaviors.<sup>30,31</sup> These beliefs may contribute to common myths about dating violence, including beliefs that physical violence committed by girls and psychological violence committed by boys are not harmful. Indeed, studies have demonstrated that physical violence by females is seen as more socially acceptable than dating violence by males.<sup>23,52</sup>

**Myth:** I should have sex with my partner so he or she will stay with me, or I should have sex because everyone else is doing it.

**Truth:** Both males and females report having sex with their partner as a result of feeling they were expected to do so or to please the other person.<sup>23</sup> Open and clear communication about relationship and sexual expectations and boundaries is a component of healthy interpersonal interactions.<sup>53</sup>

Another societal factor that might be related to dating violence is the pervasiveness of violence in our culture. Exposure to violence through media has been reported to desensitize people to violence, increasing the likelihood that it is perceived as “normal.”<sup>54-57</sup>

## **Community Influences**

Exposure to any type of violence during childhood or adolescence is a strong risk factor for both the perpetration and victimization of teen dating violence,<sup>9,58</sup> which may be the reason that a high rate of community violence is a strong predictor of later violence perpetration in relationships.<sup>59</sup>

## **Peer Influences**

Spending time with peers who view teen dating violence as acceptable or who use violence within their own relationships increases the risk for victimization and perpetration of dating violence for other teens.<sup>21</sup>

## **Family Influences**

There are two factors that occur within the context of families that appear to increase the risk of both teen dating violence perpetration and victimization. The first factor is family interactions marked by conflict or violence. Regardless of whether the teen witnesses family violence or is a victim of the violence in some way, the risk for involvement in teen dating violence increases.<sup>3,14,21,33,60-64</sup> Child sexual abuse is a particularly strong predictor of teen dating violence perpetration.<sup>65,66</sup> It is important to understand, however, that not all children who have experienced or witnessed violence engage in teen dating violence (see Protective Factors). Similarly, some teens who have not been exposed to violence in their family of origin perpetrate or are victimized by violence in intimate relationships.

The second factor that appears to increase the risk for teen dating violence is neglectful behavior by parents, including low levels of parental supervision.<sup>14,33,67</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that those children who have been in Child Protective Services are at a higher risk for being involved in teen dating violence.<sup>68</sup>

## **Developmental Influences**

Teens are in a unique developmental stage when they begin to date. It is important to consider what is occurring during the teen years that may increase the risk for teen dating violence. For instance, it is often seen as socially important for teens to have a dating relationship, which may leave the teen vulnerable to staying in unhealthy situations for social capital.<sup>2,14</sup>

Additionally, teens have not had much relationship experience. They may not yet be prepared to deal with situations that require good conflict-resolution skills.<sup>2</sup>

**Myth:** At least I have a boyfriend/girlfriend, which is better than not having anyone.

**Truth:** Being single is not shameful. An important developmental task of adolescence is to mature emotionally.<sup>10</sup> Adolescence is an opportune time to develop interests and positive social ties. Being in an abusive relationship is damaging to teens in many ways. It is better to be single than to be in an abusive relationship. Moreover, peer pressure to date or to be in a relationship may contribute to sexual coercion and victimization, especially in girls.<sup>12</sup>

## Individual Influences

Violence-tolerant attitudes are associated with a higher risk of perpetrating dating violence among teens.<sup>69-72</sup> Teens who hold the belief that violence does not cause negative consequences are more likely to perpetrate dating violence.<sup>9</sup>

Teens who have poor interpersonal skills,<sup>11,14</sup> who have problems expressing anger in a constructive manner,<sup>61</sup> or who lack empathy<sup>72</sup> are at a higher risk for perpetrating violence as well.

Alcohol and drug use significantly increases the likelihood of victimization and perpetration of teen dating violence.<sup>36,61,73,74</sup> Alcohol and drug use are also associated with severe types of violence, including physical assault, sexual assault, and rape.<sup>75</sup> One study estimates that 25% of unwanted sexual activity in teen relationships occurs when alcohol or drug use is involved.<sup>23</sup> Teens sometimes excuse violent behavior that occurs under the influence of alcohol or drugs.<sup>73</sup>

**Myth:** He/She/I was drinking or using drugs, so it doesn't count.

**Truth:** Abuse that is excused by intoxication is called "excuse making."<sup>76</sup> Overlooking violence because of alcohol or drug use is a common reason that victims give to explain perpetrators' actions, or that perpetrators use to justify their own use of violence.<sup>77</sup>

## Protective Factors

Just as there are factors that may increase the risk of being involved in teen dating violence, there are factors that significantly decrease the risk. Many of the protective factors that have been researched involve strong interpersonal connections between the teen and others. For instance, having a strong bond with parents<sup>61</sup> and strong, positive ties to the community<sup>78,79</sup> are protective factors. Skills that may help teens avoid dating violence include conflict negotiation and regulation of emotions.<sup>3,53</sup>

## SPECIAL FOCUS: TECHNOLOGY AND TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

Technology is increasingly used as a method for communication. There are a variety of technological tools used, including cell phones, voicemail, text messaging, instant messaging, social networking sites, blogs, e-mail, webcams, and websites. For many teens, cell phones are the major tool used to initiate a relationship with a dating partner. Blogging, tweeting, posting on social network sites, and "IM"-ing are also used to form new relationships.<sup>80</sup>

Unfortunately, as use of such technologies has increased, so have the rates for using these technologies to perpetrate aggression against acquaintances, friends, or romantic partners.<sup>81</sup> Electronic aggression among youth is considered a serious emerging public health concern.<sup>81</sup> Electronic aggression is defined as "any type of harassment, including teasing, telling lies, bullying, monitoring or controlling partner, making rude or mean comments, spreading rumors, or making threatening or aggressive comments, that occurs through e-mail, a chat room, instant messaging, a website, or text messaging."<sup>81</sup> Technology has also made monitoring another person's whereabouts easy through GPS monitoring systems. These systems can be downloaded onto the victim's phone or a small GPS device that can be attached anywhere on the victim's vehicle.<sup>80</sup>

In some instances, teens may feel that intrusive contact is a sign that the dating partner is demonstrating care, concern, and even love,<sup>82</sup> which may lead to acceptance of the behavior. On the other hand, unwanted contact can cause the victim to feel harassed or threatened or may lead the victim to change his or her routine.<sup>8</sup>

Although there are risks involved with the use of technology, it can also be positive. For instance, teens can use technology to build social relationships and for self-expression. With guidance and support, teenagers can use electronic tools as positive forms of communication.<sup>80</sup>

# REPORTING CHALLENGES

Teens rarely report dating violence to adults and even fewer cases are reported to law enforcement agencies,<sup>23</sup> which makes it difficult for researchers and helpers to know how common dating violence is in teenage populations. Estimates are that as few as 1 in 11 cases of teen dating violence are reported to adults.<sup>83</sup> Lack of reporting also means that teens may not get the help they need when they are involved in a difficult and frightening situation.

**Myth:** It will get better when...or if...

**Truth:** This type of justification for relationship violence is called *avoidance coping*. Holding this belief is a risk factor that females will stay in an abusive relationship.<sup>85</sup>

There are several factors that contribute to teens' reluctance to report dating violence. If a teen believes that relationship violence is normal, she or he may not perceive the violence as being something to report to others.<sup>2</sup> For instance, many teens see slapping or hitting as common and normal behaviors in a relationship.<sup>84</sup> This highlights how necessary it is to educate teens about dating violence and to define it as harmful.

Even when a teen understands that dating violence is harmful, the teen may not believe that seeking help from adults is an effective solution. Some teens fear adults will not believe their report or are afraid of disapproval or public embarrassment.<sup>26</sup> This may be particularly true if disclosure of dating violence might lead to discovery of the teen's sexual activity or other behaviors that the teen wants to keep from adults. Providing a safe environment is an important step to increase the likelihood that teens will report dating violence to adults. Teens are also concerned that police are unlikely to take their reports of dating violence seriously<sup>26</sup> and are therefore unlikely to report to law enforcement. Another reason teens are unlikely to report dating violence is because they fear that the violence in their relationship will escalate after the report.<sup>2,14</sup>

Because it is illegal for a teen and an adult to have an intimate relationship, reporting violence within this type of relationship can be difficult. A teen may be aware that the violence within their relationship qualifies as child abuse or that sexual acts qualify as statutory rape in the state in which the teen lives.<sup>1</sup> These reasons may lead to underreporting because teens may fear they will lose the relationship. The teen may want the violence to end but not the relationship.<sup>86</sup>

Teens who belong to cultural groups who have suffered discrimination based on race, economic class, or sexual orientation may grow to distrust people outside their social groups. This can deter reporting and help seeking in these groups.<sup>87</sup> Teens who are gay or lesbian face the potential threat of premature outings. For instance, perpetrators may threaten to expose the victim's sexual orientation to peers, family, and community to gain control of the victim and keep the individual from disclosing the violence.<sup>88</sup>

In Latino, Asian, and Native American populations, considerations about how the entire family may be perceived by others may be an important consideration in reporting the violence, and may result in

decreased likelihood of reporting the incident outside of the family. This may be especially true in cases of sexual abuse within a dating relationship, as a girl's virginity is often linked directly to family honor in these cultures.<sup>89</sup> Immigrants may not report violence for fear of being deported, even if they are in the United States legally. Being unfamiliar with community resources is another reporting deterrent for recent immigrants.<sup>89</sup>

When it comes to witnessing dating violence between peers, teens find it unacceptable to tell an adult about what they have witnessed.<sup>26</sup> Educating teens about what to do in such situations is crucial to reduce the acceptance of teen dating violence.

## SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION: WHAT CAN WE DO?

Prevention and intervention efforts are an important part of combating teen dating violence. School-based strategies that work to reduce the rates of teen dating violence have been heavily researched in recent years. The research has shown that targeting individuals before they begin dating or at the start of their dating career can produce long-term, positive effects,<sup>3</sup> which means that these strategies may be most effective when used before puberty.<sup>90</sup> All interventions and prevention efforts should be tailored to the specific target audience, as it appears there are differences in teens' experiences depending on age, race or ethnicity, and gender.<sup>3,12,91</sup>

Strategies that help teens develop positive coping skills appear to be very useful both for preventing teen dating violence and for intervening with at-risk youth.<sup>3,53,91,92</sup> Strategies that change the acceptability of violence as a way to solve problems may help to make violence within teen relationships less likely.<sup>93</sup> Thus, prevention and intervention efforts aimed at teens should target at least two things: beliefs and attitudes toward dating violence, and social skills used within relationships.

### Teens' Beliefs and Attitudes

Several strategies have been used to change teen attitudes associated with dating violence. As mentioned earlier, it is common for teens to believe that violence in a relationship is "normal" or that a partner who shows controlling behaviors or is aggressive is expressing care and love.<sup>7</sup> The following are suggested strategies to change harmful attitudes and beliefs:

- ♦ Educate teens on signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships.<sup>53-91</sup>

**Myth:** If my partner "loses it" or uses violence or aggression, it's really just a sign that he or she loves and cares about me.

**Truth:** Teens may see dramatic behaviors such as aggression and jealousy as signs of love, or a lack of these behaviors as a sign that a partner doesn't care about them.<sup>7,31</sup> Violence, aggression, coercion, and/or control are NOT healthy ways to express love and affection.<sup>10</sup>

- ♦ Provide education about the consequences of violence, including the emotional, psychological, physical, and legal consequences for both the aggressor and the victim.<sup>3,91,92,94</sup>
- ♦ Talk with teens about how gender role stereotypes can influence abusive behaviors.<sup>3,69,92</sup>

**Myth:** At least he/she doesn't hit me.

**Truth:** Psychological abuse such as swearing, yelling, verbal abuse, or other controlling or denigrating behaviors that undermine a person's self-respect or that instill fear in a dating partner are more common than physical violence, can be just as damaging as physical violence and can lead to physical violence in the future.<sup>4</sup>

## Positive Relationship Skills

Teens are in the process of learning how to interact within the context of intimate relationships. Many are experiencing new situations or confusing emotions and may not yet know how to deal with them. Because of this, strategies that promote healthy ways of handling emotions and interacting with others are particularly important at this age. The following are strategies that tend to reduce teen dating violence:

- ♦ Teach teens how to cope with challenging emotions like anger, jealousy, and rejection.<sup>3,23,91,92</sup>
- ♦ Provide information on effective communication strategies.<sup>3,53,91,92</sup>
- ♦ Teach teens to set boundaries in relationships.<sup>3,53</sup>
- ♦ Educate teens on verbal and nonverbal cues that communicate a partner is not ready to have sex.<sup>3,92</sup>

**Myth:** If someone has disrespected or embarrassed me, it is okay to use verbal aggression, to spread rumors, to tell secrets, or to use violence to get even with them.

**Truth:** These are aggressive and hurtful responses to anger and frustration.<sup>12</sup> Seeking community support and learning new skills in communication and problem solving help teens make positive social connections and reduce other risky behaviors associated with teen dating violence.<sup>95</sup>

It is encouraging that teens recognize that communication problems exist within their relationships and are interested in learning nonviolent conflict-resolution skills.<sup>30</sup>

## ACTION ITEMS FOR ADULTS CONCERNED ABOUT TEENS

In addition to the school-based interventions that focus on teens, it is important to note that prevention and intervention strategies are more effective if they include *multiple* stakeholders, including parents, educators, and the community.<sup>3,95</sup> This helps to ensure that the environment in which the teen lives is not tolerant of dating violence and that multiple influences on dating behavior are addressed to promote healthy relationships.



## **How to prevent teen dating violence**

- ♦ Understand the issues related to teen dating violence and learn how to recognize behaviors that are associated with teen dating violence.
- ♦ Talk about teen dating violence with children and teens before they begin dating. Teens will not typically volunteer information about dating violence, but if they are asked about it they tend to disclose.<sup>14</sup> In these conversations:
  - ♦ Define teen dating violence.
  - ♦ Explain how to recognize violent, controlling, and concerning behaviors.
  - ♦ Encourage teens to report dating violence. Many teens find it unacceptable to report on relationships between two other teens, and may be reluctant to do so.<sup>26</sup>
- ♦ Encourage teens to stand up for their peers if they witness problems and give them other resources for helping their peers.<sup>23</sup>
- ♦ Encourage schools and communities to educate teens, parents, and teachers about teen dating violence and to participate in prevention efforts.<sup>14</sup>
- ♦ Help teens learn to deal with challenging emotions such as anger, jealousy, and rejection.
- ♦ Model the behavior you would like to see teens adopt.
- ♦ Promote a sense of community.

## **What to do if you learn a teen has been the victim of teen dating violence**

- ♦ Perhaps one of the most important things that a parent, educator, or community member can do when dating violence is disclosed is to listen to the teen and to communicate that you believe him or her.<sup>96</sup>
- ♦ Understand that the teen may not feel comfortable talking about the situation with you. If that is the case, find another trusted adult that the teen is comfortable speaking with.<sup>97</sup>
- ♦ It is important to recognize that the teen may provide details about a particular incident that may be uncomfortable for you to hear. Try to take a nonjudgmental stance and focus your attention on working to resolve the issue at hand.<sup>96</sup>
- ♦ Contact local agencies that specialize in relationship violence (e.g., domestic violence shelters) or law enforcement, if necessary. If someone has threatened to hurt the teen or themselves, has a weapon, or has hurt animals or pets, these are indicators that the situation is serious and that law enforcement should be involved.
- ♦ Allow the teen as much decision-making power as is reasonable. Your job is to keep the teen safe, but providing the teen a sense of control over the situation is also good.<sup>96</sup>
- ♦ If the teen decides to end the abusive relationship, be supportive, and work with a trained professional to create a safety plan to follow after the breakup. Make sure that parents, teachers, and friends are aware of the safety plan as well.<sup>97</sup>
- ♦ If a teen has been victimized through electronic communication, suggested interventions include changing the teen's phone number or changing cell phone carriers, deleting social networking site profiles, blocking instant messaging sites, and changing screen names.<sup>82</sup>

## **What to do if you learn a teen has been abusive in a relationship**

- ♦ Talk to the teen and acknowledge that you have noticed abusive behaviors. This can be a teachable moment, so be sure to describe the specific behaviors you believe are inappropriate.<sup>96</sup>
- ♦ If you are not the teen's parent, alert the parent(s) to the problematic behavior.
- ♦ Use community resources to get the teen help. These can include mental health resources, school-based resources, and help from the larger community.
- ♦ Support the teen as he or she learns to behave in a more respectful and appropriate manner to others.<sup>96</sup>
- ♦ You may have to make the difficult decision to call law enforcement.<sup>96</sup> If the teen has threatened to hurt their partner or themselves, has a weapon, or has hurt animals or pets, these are indicators that the situation is serious and that law enforcement should be involved.

## **ACTION ITEMS FOR TEEN FRIENDS**

Teens are more likely to go to their friends for help with a violent relationship. If friends believe violence is acceptable, they may accidentally encourage this violent behavior.<sup>98</sup> It is important to understand that if a friend is disclosing information on dating violence, this can be difficult information to share. It is also important that all teens work to prevent dating violence from occurring in the first place.

### **How to prevent dating violence**

- ♦ Expect respect from others and show them respect as well.<sup>99</sup>
- ♦ Ask for or create school or community groups to address teen dating violence.<sup>99</sup> A good example is the Safe Dates program.<sup>58</sup>
- ♦ Educate people (including peers) about teen dating violence.<sup>99</sup>

### **What to do if a friend tells you he or she is the victim of dating violence**

- ♦ Listen attentively.<sup>100</sup>
- ♦ Believe what your friend is telling you.<sup>100</sup>
- ♦ Encourage your friend to report the violence to an adult.<sup>99</sup>
- ♦ Seek out advice in helping your friend from organizations that deal with teen dating violence.<sup>99</sup>
- ♦ Be prepared to tell an adult whom you trust about the violence.<sup>99</sup>

# FURTHER INFORMATION

## National Resources

- National Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
- The National TEEN Dating Abuse Helpline  
1-866-311-9474
- National Sexual Assault Hotline  
1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
- Victims of Crime Resource Center  
1-800-VICTIMS
- CDC's Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships  
[www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datingmatters](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datingmatters)
- Dating Matters: Understanding Teen Dating Violence Prevention  
[www.vetoviolence.org/datingmatters](http://www.vetoviolence.org/datingmatters)
- Electronic Dating Violence  
[http://www.cyberbullying.us/electronic\\_dating\\_violence\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://www.cyberbullying.us/electronic_dating_violence_fact_sheet.pdf)
- Love Is Respect  
[www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org)
- Mentors in Violence Prevention Program  
<http://www.mvprevention.org/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center  
[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)
- Teen Dating Violence Technical Assistance Center  
<http://www.breakthecycle.org>

## Area Resources

- American Indian Task Force  
(414) 651-6042
- City of Milwaukee Office of Violence Prevention  
<http://city.milwaukee.gov/staysafe>
- Healing Center  
<http://www.thehealingcenter.org/>
- Hmong American Women's Association  
<http://hawamke.com/>
- Latina Resource Center  
[http://www.umos.org/social\\_services/latina\\_resource\\_center.html](http://www.umos.org/social_services/latina_resource_center.html)
- Pathfinders  
<http://pathfindersmke.org/>
- Sojourner Family Peace Center  
<http://www.familypeacecenter.org/>
- Wisconsin Department of Children and Families  
<http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/default.htm>
- The Women's Center, Inc.  
<http://www.twcwaukesha.org/>

All websites referenced in the TDV Toolkit were confirmed as of 1/25/2013.

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All websites referenced in the TDV Toolkit were confirmed as of 1/25/2013.