

Teen dating violence is a growing health concern as more information concerning its detrimental effects comes to light. Teens may not disclose dating violence to mental health professionals without direct questioning from the professional, so screening for dating violence is vital.¹ Reasons that teens do not disclose dating violence include: fear that adults may not believe them, fear of ending the relationship, and lack of recognition of abusive behaviors.² Additionally, teens may not use the word “dating” to describe their relationship. Terms such as “hanging out” or “friends with benefits” may be more common ways of describing teen relationships. Understanding the way teens communicate is necessary to aid in the accuracy of the screening process.¹

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF TEEN DATING

VIOLENCE? Teens who are victims of dating violence may exhibit sudden changes in personality.² For instance, they may become more isolated or participate less in social activities, show a sudden decline in academic performance, or skip school.³ They may also exhibit hostility toward parents, adults, and/or peers, or they may have uncharacteristic emotional outbursts.⁴ In some cases teens may begin using alcohol or engage in substance abuse to cope.⁵

Risk factors for dating violence perpetration include: rigid gender-role beliefs,⁶ poor interpersonal skills, aggressive attitudes, a belief that violence does not have consequences, and lack of empathy for others.^{7,8,9} Teens who perpetrate may also exhibit depression, hostility toward authority figures, antisocial behaviors, or declining academic performance, or they may have issues with drugs and alcohol. Both teens who are victims and those who are perpetrators have a higher risk of suicidal ideation.²

WHAT SHOULD I BE LOOKING FOR DURING THE SCREENING PROCESS?

Check the teen’s overall appearance. Clinicians should note if the teen recently changed the style or manner of dress. For example, some teens may wear unseasonably warm clothing to conceal bruises, marks, or injuries, or they may dress conservatively to prevent jealous outbursts from their dating partner.^{2,10}

Pay attention to teens’ responses to inquiries about their dating relationships. According to the American Bar Association (2006), if the teen becomes evasive, refuses to make eye contact, or answers in quick responses such as

“fine,” there may be reason for concern. Teens involved in dating violence may also make excuses for the dating partner’s behavior if they do disclose violence.¹⁰ The teen may give vague indications suggesting that the dating partner is controlling her/him, such as “He loves me so much he wants to be together all the time” or “She likes to know my location at all times.”¹⁰ The teen may not have a reasonable excuse as to why s/he is experiencing a sudden decline in academic performance or for the number of missed classes or days of school. The teen may inquire about changing schools without giving a believable or reasonable answer as to why.¹⁰ Although teen dating violence is not the only reason a teen might respond in such ways, it is important to get a clear picture of the dynamics that are occurring within the relationship to fully assess for dating violence.

WHAT ARE MY RESPONSIBILITIES REGARDING

SCREENING? Researchers conducted a study¹ of screening practices for teen dating violence and found disparity in the number of teens who experience dating violence and the number of clinicians who screen for it. While 65% of clinicians reported working with a teen involved in dating violence, only 21% screened for it. This study shows that the likelihood of mental health professionals encountering teen dating violence is high, and thus there is a need for consistent screening. Screening for teen dating violence is important to the health and well-being of teens and should become a regular feature in the mental health screening process. Knowing the warning signs of teen dating violence better equips clinicians for a successful intervention as well. Training programs and continuing education opportunities can provide this information and can also help with formulation of screening questions that are likely to elicit dialogue with teens about dating violence.¹

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.