

Dating Violence: Tips For Parents

Romantic and sexual feelings develop during the teen years. Teenagers are starting to date and experiment with different types of relationships. It is fun and exciting to meet someone new, and sad and difficult to break up.

As a parent, you can help your teenager make good decisions about dating. With guidance and support, teens can learn about healthy relationships and get the strength and courage needed to leave those that are not.

Parents Need To Know What's Going On

- Learn the myths and facts about dating violence.
- Some teens who are abused don't talk about it.
- There are warning signs of abuse.
- Teach your teenager that respect is the most important thing in a dating relationship.
- Learn how to talk with your child about dating violence.

Myths and Facts

MYTH: "Teen dating violence is just another way of saying rape."

FACT: Abuse comes in many forms. Besides sexual violence, it also includes:

- Yelling, swearing, put-downs, and threats
- Being pushed around or hit
- Controlling, bossy, and bullying behavior

MYTH: "Oh, it's not that common."

FACTS:

- More than 1 in 10 teenagers experience physical violence in a dating relationship.
- When threats and emotional abuse are included, it's even higher.

MYTH: "It only happens to kids from bad homes."

FACT: Dating violence is not limited to families with a history of violence. It happens to teens from families of all cultures, income levels, and educational backgrounds.

MYTH: "It can't happen to my child."

FACTS:

- Boys, as well as girls, can be victims of dating violence.
- It can happen in any type of relationship— straight, gay, or lesbian.
- It can occur at any time in a relationship— those just starting or ones that have been going on for a while.

Why Teens Are Silent

There are many reasons why teens don't tell their parents or friends about the violence they are experiencing. They may:

- Feel embarrassed, ashamed, or afraid of getting hurt.
- Be convinced it is their fault and do not know that it is abuse.

- Feel afraid they will be forced to break up or of losing privileges.
- Feel certain that being in a relationship is the most important thing in their life.
- Confuse jealousy with love, and think this is how it should be.
- Be afraid of losing friends. They may think friends would not believe this is happening, and they may feel alone after having lost touch with friends.
- Know the abuser will act nice some of the time, and they are happy when this happens.
- Feel hopeful that things will get better and convinced that they can help or change their partner.

Warning Signs of Abuse

Some of the following may be just part of being a teenager. But, when these changes happen suddenly or without explanation, there is cause for concern.

School

- Failing grades
- Dropping out of school or school activities

Attitude/mood

- Difficulty making decisions
- Changes in personality, becoming anxious or depressed Acting out or being secretive
- Avoiding eye contact
- Having “crying jags” or getting “hysterical”
- Constantly thinking about dating partner

Physical appearance

- Bruises, scratches, or other injuries
- Sudden changes in clothes or make-up

Activities

- Avoiding friends or changing peer groups
- Giving up activities, interests, or family time that previously had been important
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

Pregnancy

- Some teenagers believe that having a baby will help make things better.
- Some girls are forced to have sex.

Abusive Behavior

It is important for you to recognize signs of an abusive relationship.

- Wanting to get serious quickly and refusing to take NO for an answer
- Acting jealous and possessive and wanting to pick partner's friends and activities
- Being controlling and bossy and making all the decisions, not taking opinions of others seriously, and always checking up on partner
- Using threats and "put-downs" when alone or with friends
- Using guilt trips like, "If you really loved me, you would ____."
- Blaming the victim for what is wrong, like saying, "It's because of you that I get so mad."
- Apologizing or giving excuses for violent behavior like, "I promise I'll never do it again," or "I was drinking and just didn't know that I ____."

Tips For Parents

Talk about healthy dating relationships and possible problems. It is never too early or too late to teach about respect. Respect for self and others is important in any relationship.

If you think your teenager already may be involved with an abusive partner:

- Give your teen a chance to talk. Listen quietly to the whole story.
- Tell your child that you are there to help, not to judge.
- If your teen does not want to talk with you, help find another trusted person for your child to talk with.
- Focus on your child's safety and self-esteem. Point out how unhappy your teenager seems to be while with this person and the possibility of danger or harm. Do not "put down" the abusive partner.
- Let your child know that abuse always gets worse. What may start as minor verbal or physical abuse is very likely to get worse if not stopped immediately.

If your teenager tries to break up with an abusive partner:

- Advise that the breakup be definite and final.
- Develop a safety plan with your teen ahead of time.
- Support your teenager's decision and be ready to help.
- Make sure your teen takes all necessary safety measures.
 - Avoid walking or riding alone, and always travel with another friend.
 - Consider changing class schedules.
 - Get help from the guidance counselor, school principal, or if necessary, the police.

What You Can Say

It is important for your teen to talk about dating violence, either with you or with another trusted adult. Many people who have been victims of dating violence have been able to change their lives after they began talking with others.

- "I care about what happens to you. I love you and I want to help."

- “If you feel afraid, it may be abuse. Sometimes people act in ways that are scary and make you feel threatened, even without using physical violence. Pay attention to what you are feeling.”
- “No one has the right to hit you. No one has the right to control you or what you do.”
- “The abuse is not your fault. You are not to blame, no matter how guilty ____ is trying to make you feel. This should not be happening to you.”
- “It is ____ who has a problem, not you. It is not your responsibility to help ____ change.”