

## Teen Dating Violence

- Approximately 1 in 5 high school girls reports being abused by a boyfriend.<sup>1</sup>
- 40 percent of teenage girls ages 14 to 17 report knowing someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend.<sup>2</sup>
- Physical aggression occurs in 1 in 3 teen dating relationships.<sup>3</sup>
- 12 percent of high school students (female and male) report experiencing some sort of dating violence.<sup>4</sup>
- Young women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest rates of relationship violence.<sup>5</sup>
- 50 percent to 80 percent of teens report knowing someone involved in violent a relationship.<sup>6</sup>

### What is teen dating violence?

- Teen dating violence is abusive and violent behavior in teen dating relationships.
- It reflects the perpetrator's desire to control and dominate the victim.
- It happens in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.
- It covers a wide range of behavior that includes verbal and emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and physical violence.

**Verbal or emotional abuse** includes name-calling, threats, screaming, yelling, ridiculing, criticizing, emotional blackmailing, and stalking.

**Sexual abuse** includes verbal sexual abuse such as sexual slurs or attacks on the victim's gender or sexual orientation, unwanted sexual touching and kissing, intimidation to force the victim to engage in any kind of sexual activity, and rape.

**Physical abuse** includes shoving, punching, slapping, pinching, hitting, kicking, hair pulling, choking, use of a weapon, and any other acts causing physical harm.

### Who are the victims of teen dating violence?

- Teens in all ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, and geographic regions experience dating violence.
- Both male and female teens may be victims, but boys usually inflict more serious physical injuries on girls than girls inflict on boys.

### Who is most at risk?

- Boys are more likely to be pinched, slapped, scratched, or kicked by dating partners.
- Girls are much more at risk for severe violence, sexual violence, and injuries requiring medical attention.
- Girls are more likely to be punched and forced to engage in unwanted sexual activity.
- Some girls become pregnant as the result of rape or because their boyfriends won't let them use contraceptives.
- Pregnant teens are at greater risk for physical assault by intimate partners.
- Girls experience more psychological abuse from dating partners than boys.
- Young women ages 16 to 24 years experience the highest rates of relationship violence.

### Who are the perpetrators?

- Both male and female teens commit dating violence, but boys initiate the violence more often, use greater force, and are more repeatedly abusive to their dating partners than girls.
- Almost three-quarters of perpetrators have also been victims of teen dating violence.

## The Dynamics and Impact of Teen Dating Violence

### What is the experience of victims?

- Dating violence may first emerge as occasional outbursts that both victims and perpetrators interpret as expressions of passion or attempts to improve their relationship.
- Many victims are threatened, criticized, and humiliated by dating partners, making them feel stupid, incapable, lazy, ugly, worthless, helpless, crazy, or trapped.
- In some relationships, dating violence may never move beyond emotional and verbal abuse. In other relationships, it may escalate from verbal abuse to physical and sexual violence, or involve a mix of physical, verbal, and emotional abuse from the start.
- Many victims experience more than one type of abuse.
- In some relationships the abuse only happens from time to time, while in others it continues day after day without a break.
- The abuse can be minor or involve serious violence that gets worse and more frightening over time.
- Girls are frequently pinched, slapped, grabbed, and shoved but may also be pressured to engage in sex or drug taking, or be raped.
- Perpetrators may use a variety of oppressive techniques to control victims—such as forcing partners to carry pagers or cell phones and to respond immediately about where they are and what they are doing when called.
- Sometimes a pattern emerges—tension builds up, violence erupts, the abuser calms down, for a while everything seems fine, then tension increases again, and the cycle is repeated.
- Victims may or may not see a pattern in the abuser's behavior.
- Some abusers never apologize for their behavior. Others promise to stop the violence, give their partners gifts, and beg for forgiveness; but even if the victim accepts the apologies, it is usually only a matter of time before the violence resumes.
- Abuse and violence are often linked (directly or indirectly) to alcohol or drug habits, but the fact that an abuser is drunk or high can never excuse the behavior.

### Why do some teen boys behave violently toward dating partners?

- Teen boys often associate physical strength and aggression with "masculinity" or "machismo."
- Many teen boys believe men have to dominate and control women to gain the respect of their peers and that they are entitled to demand sex from their girlfriends.

### Do all victims respond to dating violence in the same way?

In general:

- Girls are more likely to be upset, cry, and fight back.
- Boys are more likely to laugh at dating violence, take it less seriously than girls, or ignore it.

### Individual victim responses may include:

- Confusion about the violence and their relationship with the abuser.
- Anxiety about what will happen to them.
- Uneasiness about how to deal with the situation.
- Shame because they know it is not right.
- Self-blame, feeling they've done something to provoke the violence.
- Low self-esteem, feeling they don't deserve to be treated well.
- Fear of being seriously hurt or becoming pregnant.
- Depression, feeling despairing, tearful, helpless and hopeless, suicidal.
- Denial—a tendency to deny or minimize the violence.
- Defense of the abuser to protect him/her from blame.
- Use of alcohol or drugs to escape anxiety or pain.
- Feelings of loneliness or isolation—because the abuser has isolated the victim from friends and family and stopped her/him from having a normal social life.

**Why do many teens keep dating violence secret?**

- Very few teens tell their parents or other adults they are involved in abusive relationships. Some tell their friends; others tell no one.

**Victims may be secretive because they:**

- Fail to understand they are victims.
- Are embarrassed, ashamed, confused.
- Have been threatened by the abuser.
- Fear the abuser will take revenge if they say anything.
- Are concerned their parents will prevent them from seeing the abuser.
- Are concerned they will lose privileges, such as the use of a car or the freedom to go out as they please.

**What keeps teens in abusive dating relationships?**

Reasons vary but include:

- Continuing emotional attachment/feeling in love with or attracted to the abuser.
- Fear that the abuser will hurt or kill them if they leave.
- Lack of experience with healthy, non-abusive relationships.
- Confusing jealousy and possessiveness with romance.
- Social pressure to have and keep a boyfriend/girlfriend.
- Isolation or alienation from friends and family members.
- Feelings of low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

**Do programs designed to stop dating violence work?**

There is some evidence that intervention programs can be effective. One large study of 8th and 9th graders showed schools with "Safe Dates" programs resulted in substantial reductions in reports of sexual violence and marked decreases in reports of psychological dating abuse.

**Questions to Ask:****How can I tell if I'm a victim of teen dating violence?****Is my boyfriend/girlfriend:**

- Jealous and possessive?
- Controlling and bossy?
- Quick tempered, with a history of fighting?
- Violent toward me or other people?

**Does my dating partner:**

- Give me orders and make all the decisions?
- Check up on me all the time?
- Refuse to allow me normal contact with my family and friends?
- Try to humiliate me?
- Call me names and insult me?
- Accuse me of having no sense of humor?
- Accuse me of provocation?
- Force me to have sex when I don't want to?
- Use alcohol or drugs and pressure me to do the same?
- Pressure me to have unprotected sex?
- Like to wrestle with me "playfully" and hurt me?

**Has my dating partner:**

- Threatened to commit suicide if I leave the relationship or don't do what he/she wants?
- Attempted suicide because I wouldn't do what he/she wanted?

- Harassed or threatened me or a former dating partner?
- Refused to accept the relationship isn't working or is over?

#### **Why would I stay in an abusive relationship?**

- You may be convinced the bad behavior will stop because your partner apologizes, gives you gifts, and promises to behave better in future.
- You may have been taught to be forgiving or are forgiving by nature.
- You may not see the behavior as part of a pattern of abuse.
- You may not realize you are not responsible for the behavior.
- You may believe you are at fault and provoked the abuse.
- You may love your partner and not want to lose him/her.
- You may fear being left alone with no dating partner.
- You may know your partner was in the wrong, but are upset, frightened, and don't know what to do or where to turn.

#### **Points to Remember:**

- Whatever the pattern or nature of the abuse, it is a sign of an unhealthy relationship.
- In healthy, non-abusive relationships, partners do not hurt each other.
- You are not to blame for your dating partner's abuse.
- Abusers are solely responsible for their behavior, whatever their habits or weaknesses.
- Alcohol and drug abuse may partly explain partner abuse but can never excuse it or make it right.
- If you are a teen mother, it is especially important to seek help and advice to ensure the safety and welfare of your child or children.
- Teen dating violence can cause long-term emotional and physical harm. You should take it seriously.
- Victim services professionals are there to advise and assist you—they can help you find the support and services you need.

#### **Steps Victims Can Take:**

- Get help.
- Don't keep your worries to yourself—if you think you are in an abusive dating relationship, get help immediately.
- Go to an adult you trust, like your teacher, school principal, counselor, or work supervisor.
- Contact a local victim services counselor. If you are unhappy with the response you get or don't know where to go, telephone us at **1-800-FYI-CALL**.
- Some people working with teens have to inform parents or the police if a minor tells them about an abusive situation. If this possibility worries you, ask about confidentiality first.
- Focus on safety.
- Create your own safety plan with help from a victim services provider.
- Safety planning means knowing in advance what to do, where to get help, who to call, and how to escape danger. Ask yourself: where would you go for help? Who could you call? Who would help you? How would you escape a violent situation? What precautions can you take to make yourself safer?

#### **General precautions:**

- Discuss your concerns with those you trust—a friend, your parents, an older brother or sister, a counselor, a teacher.
- Let friends or family know when you are afraid or need special support.
- When you go out, say where you are going and when you'll be back.
- Know how to contact emergency services (police, victim services, etc.).
- Memorize key phone numbers for people to contact or places to go in emergencies.
- Keep spare change and calling cards for sudden phone calls.
- If you don't want the abuser to contact you, change your beeper, pager, or cell-phone number.
- Ask friends for their suggestions about safety.
- Talk to a victim services provider.

**School Safety:**

- Ask your teacher, school principal, counselor, or school security officer how you can stay safer in school.
- Stay around other kids before, during, and after school.
- Change your route to and from school.
- Travel to and from school with classmates.
- Learn more about Safety Planning.
- Ask about orders of protection. Discuss the pros and cons of orders of protection with a victim advocate. Court orders may help you stay safer by limiting contact between you and the abuser. If the abuser is a school student, the court may order a transfer to another school and/or treatment. If you are a minor, your parents may have to apply to the court for the order on your behalf.
- Keep a record of the abuse, such as a notebook or journal with details of abusive incidents. This record may be important if the abuse escalates and you want an order of protection, or if there is a criminal prosecution.

**Reporting to the police:**

- Some dating violence is criminal and you can file a report with the police, for example, if your dating partner rapes, physically assaults, or threatens to kill you.
- If you are worried about reporting to the police, discuss it with a victim services provider.

**How to Help a Friend****If you feel you can talk to your friend:**

- Express your concerns. Victims are often afraid other people won't understand or are too ashamed or embarrassed to talk about their situation.
- Be a good listener—you may be the only person in whom your friend confides.
- Offer your friendship and support unconditionally.
- Ask how you can help.
- Be sympathetic and supportive in whatever ways you can.
- Encourage your friend to seek help.
- Educate yourself about healthy relationships and dating violence.
- Collect information that will promote your friend's safety.
- Give your friend information about victim service providers.
- Avoid any direct confrontation with the abuser—this could be dangerous for you and your friend.

**Instead of passing judgment:**

- Understand that only the abuser is responsible for the violence.
- Remind yourself that your friend is not to blame.
- Remember that while you may hate the abuser for hurting your friend, your friend may not feel the same way.
- Accept that your friend may want the relationship to continue. There have probably been many good times as well as bad, and he/she may believe the abuser has changed or will change in the future.
- Remember that your friend does not have to hate her/his dating partner to be safe.

**Instead of asking why your friend doesn't end the relationship:**

- Understand that asking why may make your friend more embarrassed, ashamed, and self-blaming.
- Remember that your friend may be intimidated by the abuser or find it difficult to leave.
- Be aware that dating violence is about power and control, and most victims feel powerless within the relationship.
- Contact a local victim services counselor—if you are unhappy with the response you get or don't know where to go, telephone us at **1-800-FYI-CALL**.
- Remember that your friend may be in danger—abusers commonly resist victims' attempts to leave because it means they are losing control.

**Instead of deciding what's best for your friend:**

- Help your friend reach her/his own decision. Abuse makes victims feel powerless and helpless, and if you try to "take over" it may reinforce your friend's negative feelings and be unhelpful.
- Understand that the process of making choices is itself empowering and valuable.
- Empower your friend to reach the right decision by being understanding, supportive, and encouraging.
- Remember your friend has to live with her/his decisions—not you.
- Be patient.
- Understand that it takes courage for victims of dating violence to take action.
- Be aware that most victims who leave violent relationships go back to the abusive partner several times before ending the relationship permanently.

**Encourage your friend to get help from an adult:**

- Your friend's safety may depend on getting adult assistance and advice.
- You shouldn't try to handle dating violence problems alone. Your friend may be in serious danger.
- If your friend doesn't want to tell her/his parents, suggest a teacher, counselor, or victim service professional.
- People who work with teens can provide valuable help—but if your friend is a minor, she/he should be aware that the law may require them to inform her/his parents or the police about the abuse.
- Involving school personnel should make it easier hold the abuser accountable and stop the abuse.

**If you are worried but feel you can't talk to your friend:**

- Speak to an adult you trust—a teacher, school principal, counselor, school resource officer, parent, employer.
- Consult a local victim services provider.
- Call the police if you witness any violent episodes.
- If you don't know where to get assistance or are unhappy with the services you receive, phone us at **1-800-FYI-CALL**.

**How to Help Your Teen:**

- Try to control your emotions. It's normal to feel shocked, anxious, or angry when you learn about the dating violence, but your reaction may frighten your teen.
- Be encouraged that your teen is willing to confide in you.
- Remind yourself that teens have to become independent during adolescence.
- Be comforting and supportive.
- Educate yourself about dating violence.
- Understand that the abuser exerts power and control over the victim, and it may be hard for your teen to end the relationship.
- Be aware that it may take time and courage for your teenager to leave the abuser.
- Don't try to stop your teen from seeing the abuser; it may create mistrust and alienation without making your child any safer.
- Understand that teens rarely tell parents about dating violence, fearing they will question their judgment, try to take charge, or take away their privileges and independence.
- Tell your teen you are concerned about safety and discuss how she/he can stay safer.
- Help your teen explore her/his options and reach her/his own decisions.
- Help your teen recognize his/her strengths.
- Remind yourself and your teen that she/he is not to blame for the abuse.

**Endnotes**

- 1 Silverman et al., "Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy, and Suicidality," *JAMA*, (2001).
- 2 "Children Now," Kaiser Permanente poll, December 1995.
- 3 Avery-Leaf and Cascardi, "Dating Violence Education," *Preventing Violence in Relationships*, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2002), 82.
- 4 R. Gelles and Cornell C. Patrick, *Intimate Violence in Families*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 66.
- 5 C.M. Rennison and S. Welchans, "BJS Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence," USDOJ-OJP, NCJ 178247, (2000).
- 6 M. O'Keefe and L. Trester, "Victims of Dating Violence Among High School Students," *Violence Against Women*, 4, no. 2 (1998): 195-223.

**For additional information, please contact:****National Center for Victims of Crime**

2000 M Street, NW Suite 480

Washington, DC 20036

1-800-FYI-CALL

1-800-211-7996 TTY

[www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org) / [gethelp@ncvc.org](mailto:gethelp@ncvc.org)

**All rights reserved.**

Copyright © 2004 by the National Center for Victims of Crime. This information may be freely distributed, provided that it is distributed free of charge, reprinted in its entirety, and includes this copyright notice.