



The Dibble Institute

Relationship Skills for Teens

Dating Violence Protocol for Educators

Teen Dating Violence

It is difficult to say how common dating violence is among teens because different studies and surveys ask about it in different ways and get very different results. Some studies only ask about physical abuse, while others include questions about psychological and emotional abuse and sexual violence. Some ask about dating violence over the lifetime, while others only ask about the current relationship or the past year. Past estimates of physical and sexual dating violence among high school students typically range from 10% to 25%, and estimates for college students range from 20 to 30%. Not surprisingly, even higher estimates are found when verbal threats and emotional abuse are considered.

One recent national survey found that about 1 in 10 female high-school students and about 1 in 11 male students said they had been hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year.

In another recent survey in Massachusetts, almost 1 in 5 female high-school students said they had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in a dating relationship, with 9% reporting only physical abuse, 4% only sexual abuse, and 5% both physical and sexual abuse.

Male and female adolescents both report being victims of physical violence in relationships. Many relationships involve mutual abuse, with both partners using violence against the other. However, it is clear that male and female adolescents use physical force for different reasons and with different results. Researchers have found that female teens suffer more from relationship violence, emotionally and physically. They are much more likely than males to have serious injuries and to report being terrified. In contrast, male victims seldom seem to fear violence by their dates or girlfriends, often saying that the attacks did not hurt and that they found the violence amusing.

Dating Violence Warning Signs

Teenagers generally do not tell people when they are involved in a violent relationship, so it is important for adults to be alert for signs that a teen may be involved in a relationship that is, or has the potential to become, abusive. Some of the following signs are just part of being a teenager. But, when these changes happen suddenly, or without an explanation, there may be cause for concern.

- Does the individual have unexplained bruises, scratches, or injuries?
- Do you see signs that the individual is afraid of his/her boyfriend or girlfriend?
- Does the boyfriend or girlfriend seem to try to control the individual's behavior, making all of the decisions, checking up on his/her behavior, demanding to know who the individual has been with, and acting jealous and possessive?
- Does the boyfriend or girlfriend lash out, criticize, or insult the individual?

- Does the individual apologize for the boyfriend or girlfriend's behavior to you and others? Has the individual casually mentioned the boyfriend or girlfriend's temper or violent behavior, but then laughed it off as a joke?
- Have you seen the boyfriend or girlfriend be abusive towards other people or things?
- Does the individual seem to have lost interest or to be giving up things that were once important? Has he/she lost interest in school or other activities?
- Has the individual's appearance or behavior suddenly changed?
- Has the individual stopped spending time with friends and family?
- Have you seen sudden changes in the individual's mood or personality? Is the individual becoming anxious or depressed, acting out, or being secretive? Is the individual avoiding eye contact, having 'crying jags' or getting 'hysterical'?
- Has the individual recently started using alcohol or drugs?

Responding to Students Involved in Dating Violence

Response to the Victim

If you suspect a student is in a violent relationship, ask him/her about the relationship. Be specific about why you are concerned. If the student chooses to talk with you, listen quietly, without judging. If the student does not want to discuss it with you, encourage him/her to talk with another trusted adult and provide the names of people and organizations that can help. This could be a parent, other relative, friend of the family, clergy member, teacher, school counselor, coach or even the police. A local domestic violence program or the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE) can tell you if there is a program or support group in your community.

If the student does open up to you, focus your response on his/her needs and feelings and your concern for his/her well-being. Do not criticize or attack the abusive partner. The student will need to make the actual decision to end the abusive relationship, not you. Ask, "What can I do to help you?" Encourage the student to talk with a counselor who specializes in teen dating violence, and continue to support the student by being caring, open and non-judgmental. Whether the student is ready to leave the abusive partner or not, it is important to encourage him or her to think about ways to stay safe, for example, by making sure friends are around so that he or she is not alone with the partner.

Response to the Abuser

If you suspect that a student is hurting someone in a dating relationship, it is important to talk with the student about your concerns. Before you talk with the student, have specific examples in mind. Listen to what the student has to say, but make it clear that the behavior is unacceptable and must stop. Do not let the student deny or minimize the violence or to make excuses. Help him/her to recognize that violence is not an acceptable way to solve problems. Offer to help him/her to locate community resources that can provide counseling. If the student's behavior is truly dangerous, you may have to make the difficult decision to report the teen's violence to law enforcement.

Information provided by the Dibble Institute with permission from the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center. For additional information, please visit www.safeyouth.org.

