



## Awareness can help prevent teen dating abuse

A recent Internet search on the topic "dating abuse" yielded over a million responses in less than a second--a good clue that this is a social problem of enormous interest. And there is reason to be concerned.

A study published in the October 2001 American Journal of Public Health revealed that among adolescents who were currently dating, as many as 59 percent reported having experienced physical violence on dates, and 96 percent reported having experienced psychological or emotional abuse.

As is true with domestic violence, there are no convenient stereotypes when it comes to dating abuse. Anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of dating abuse, regardless of ethnicity, economic or social status, experience with dating, or climate at home. Both boys and girls report being victims of dating abuse, and many relationships involve mutual abuse, where both partners emotionally or physically harm the other.

"I first got interested in dating violence in the early '90s, when I observed extremely disrespectful interactions between teens on a North Carolina beach," said Vangie Foshee, a public health researcher and professor at the University of North Carolina. Her alarm at this scene was the spark for "Safe Dates"--a nine-session prevention and intervention program for middle and high school students that she codeveloped. Through fun activities, role-playing, and discussion, Safe Dates helps students define dating abuse, identify its causes and consequences, and learn how to protect themselves, help their friends, and practice healthy relationship skills. It is a research-based curriculum and has been recognized as a model program by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

Prevention begins with awareness. Dating abuse occurs when one person in a relationship has power and control over the other person. It is important for both adolescents and adults to recognize the warning signs of an abusive relationship.

For instance, does one partner:

- Demonstrate extreme acts of jealousy?
- Demand to know where and with whom his or her partner is at all times?
- Blow disagreements out of proportion?
- Constantly threaten to break up or worry that the other will initiate a break up?
- Insult his or her partner in public?
- Become verbally or physically abusive?

¿Does the other partner:

- Frequently apologize or make excuses for his or her partner's behavior?
- Always worry about making the partner angry?
- Show signs of physical abuse, such as bruises or cuts?
- Give up things that used to be important, such as friends or activities?
- Become isolated from friends or family?
- Get pressured or manipulated into having sex?

When a relationship moves from flirting to hurting, it's time to get help and get out. Adolescents who recognize these warning signs in their own or in a friend's relationships should talk to a trusted adult so they can get the help they need. Parents who suspect their child is in an abusive dating relationship should seek guidance from a professional at a local domestic violence center or mental health service.



or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800-799-SAFE).

Adolescent females experience a greater incidence and degree of emotional and physical violence, which puts them at a higher risk for serious health concerns such as alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, pregnancy, and suicide.

The best time to talk about dating abuse is before teens begin dating. Parents can play an instrumental role in prevention by modeling healthy relationships at home and teaching their children that they have the right to be safe, to be heard, to say no, and to have their limits, values, and feelings respected. Along with these rights comes the responsibility to respect the limits and values of others, to communicate clearly and honestly, and to ask for help when help is needed.

Additionally, it is important to talk with young people about how alcohol and drugs make them more vulnerable to dating abuse, because mood-altering chemicals remove inhibitions and impair judgment. Adolescents should also be shown healthy ways to resolve conflicts and taught that abuse has nothing to do with love.

For more information on dating violence, visit the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center Web site ([www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens.asp](http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens.asp)) or contact 1-866-SAFEYOUTH. For information on the Safe Dates curriculum, published by Hazelden, call 1-800-328-9000.

*--Published October 18, 2004*

---

Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).