

## The Resource Center Newsletter

### Parents Have a Role in Ending Teen Dating Violence

February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month. As the mother of a son who recently graduated from college, I know how difficult it can be to discuss dating and healthy relationships with a teenager. As a long-time advocate against domestic violence, I also know how important it is for parents to have these conversations with their children starting at an early age. Unfortunately, there is a myth in our society shared by many adults that teens do not experience dating violence or, if they do, the violence is not very severe.

This may be one reason why nearly three in four parents with children under the age of 18 have never talked to their children about domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> The reality of teen dating violence, however, is that one in five high school girls and one in ten high school boys will be involved in an abusive relationship in the next 12 months,<sup>2</sup> and 58 percent of young women aged 18 to 22 know someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a dating partner.<sup>3</sup>

Teen dating violence is defined as a pattern of abuse against a teenaged dating partner, which includes verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, and digital abuse. Although the dynamics of teen dating violence are similar to adult domestic violence, the context in which it occurs, as well as the challenges of seeking and receiving services for it, make teen dating violence a unique problem. Teen dating violence can occur in any neighborhood, income level, or ethnic group, but young women aged 18 to 24 experience the highest per capita rate of intimate partner violence in our country.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GfK Public Affairs and Corporate Communications. (2013, September). NO MORE Study: Domestic violence and sexual assault survey of attitudes and experiences of teens and adults. New York, NY: Author. Available at: <http://nomore.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/VIEW-THE-FULL-DATA-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Vagi, K. J., Olsen, E. O. M., Basile, K. C., & Vivolo-Kantor, A. M. (2015). Teen dating violence (physical and sexual) among US high school students: findings from the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169 (5), 474-482. Available at: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2173573>

<sup>3</sup> GfK Public Affairs and Corporate Communications Group. (2013, January) NO MORE Study: Teens and Young Adults on Dating Violence and Sexual Assault. New York, NY: Author. Available at: [http://www.ncdsv.org/images/GfK\\_No\\_More\\_Study\\_Results\\_1-2013.pdf](http://www.ncdsv.org/images/GfK_No_More_Study_Results_1-2013.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Breiding, M.J., Chen J., & Black, M.C. (2014). Intimate Partner Violence in the United States — 2010. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at: [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc\\_nisvs\\_ipv\\_report\\_2013\\_v17\\_single\\_a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc_nisvs_ipv_report_2013_v17_single_a.pdf)

Teens may not recognize abuse when it happens in their relationships. They may not have access to information about the warning signs of an abusive relationship and may not have models of healthy dating relationships among their peers. Inexperienced in relationships, teens may confuse emotions like jealousy and obsession with true love. They may dismiss verbal and emotional abuse as just joking around and may not recognize the impact of social isolation. Teenage girls, in particular, may think that sexual coercion is a normal part of having a dating relationship. In addition, new technologies such as texting, instant messaging, and social media may become powerful tools with which to harass, stalk, and exploit a dating partner.

The ineffective responses of parents and other adults also can be a key factor. As adults, we may not take the problems or relationships of teenagers seriously. Parents and other adults are in a position to make a big difference in the lives of teenagers, but we need to be able to talk to our kids and listen. We need to be brave enough to initiate hard discussions.

Teens often do not know where or how to get help if they are having problems in their relationships. They may not know how to end a relationship or what services are available to them in the community. Teens may not want to talk to adults about the abuse in their relationships because they are embarrassed or afraid of how their parents will react. They may not trust the adults around them to keep information about their relationships private.

All of these barriers can be overcome simply by talking to the teens in your life. Let them know you care, that you are concerned about their safety, and that you want them to have healthy relationships with their dating partners. Let them know that help is available. Teens and young adults can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). They also can call loveisrespect at 1-866-331-9474 or text “loveis” to 22522 to connect with a trained peer advocate, or they can visit [www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org) to learn more. Teens parents who have experienced dating abuse also can call the Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody at 1-800-527-3223 or visit <https://rcdvcpc.org/> for information and referrals concerning issues they are experiencing in child custody or protection systems.

Awareness of teen dating violence is the first step in helping a teen in an unhealthy relationship. Teens need to know that information, safe options, and support are

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available for them. Teen dating violence is a complex issue with no simple solutions, but as parents, we all have a role to play in ending it.

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