TEEN DATING VIOLENCE: FACING THE EPIDEMIC

BY ELIZABETH JOYCE

Alicia, a high school senior, began dating Mark, a classmate. Although Mark was known to have a temper, Alicia was happy to have a boyfriend and convinced that Mark cared about her. At first, it didn't bother her that he constantly checked on her and got angry when she spent time with other people. But one night when Alicia told Mark that she would spend the weekend with friends at the beach, he exploded in a rage. He grabbed her arm, threw her against the wall, and told her never to leave town without his permission. Stunned and terrified, Alicia wondered how someone she thought loved her could be so cruel.

Dating Violence: Dimensions of the Problem

Unfortunately, Alicia is not alone. Thousands of U.S. teens are victims of dating violence. Dating violence, "the perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried couple on the other member within the context of dating or courtship,"[1] encompasses sexual assault, physical violence, and verbal or emotional abuse.[2] The statistics tell a disturbing story:

- Almost 30 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 report that they or someone they know has experienced dating violence.
- Approximately 1 in 5 female high school students reports being abused by a boyfriend.[3]
- Thirty-three percent of teenage girls report having experienced physical violence at the hands of a dating partner.[4]
- Thirty-eight percent of date rape victims are between 14 and 17 years old.[5]
- Between 1993 and 1999, 22 percent of all homicides against females ages 16 to 19 were committed by an intimate partner.[6]
- The potential for violent behavior appears to escalate as a dating relationship becomes more serious.[7]

Despite these alarming trends, the threat posed by dating violence has attracted surprisingly little national attention.[8] Yet what is known about dating violence suggests that this urgent problem requires a closer look.

UNDERREPORTING

Teens are less likely than any other age group to report crimes against them.[9] The U.S. Department of Justice reports that people ages 12 to 19 report only 35.7 percent of crimes against them, as compared to 54 percent in the 20 to 34 and 35 to 49 age groups.[10] Teens are particularly unlikely to report violence they experience from people they are dating. The majority of teen dating violence victims in one major study told no one about their victimization. Only 22 percent told someone—always a peer—and less than 5 percent told a parent.[11]

The reasons teens are reluctant to report dating violence vary considerably.[12] They may fear that no one will believe them, either because they can't describe the event effectively or because they have tried and been ignored. They may fear reporting crimes that happened when they were acting against their parents' wishes. A girl who is raped by a boy her parents don't want her to see, for example, may dread the thought of reporting the crime. Fear of retaliation or intimidation by perpetrators or other teens also inhibits many adolescents from reporting crimes.[13]

Another deterrent to teens' reporting abuse is mandatory reporting laws that require adults to report crimes against minors. All states require that specified adults (e.g., teachers, counselors, social workers, mental health professionals, law enforcement officers) report child abuse or neglect. Some states, like California, require that all violence toward minors under the age of 18 be reported as child abuse.[14] Depending on the state and its laws, teens who confide in adults about dating violence may find that the crime must be reported, even if the teen is vehemently opposed. Because teens want confidentiality, they often resist seeking any help from adults.

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Protection Orders for Teens

Jurisdictions usually grant protection orders at civil hearings, but also sometimes during criminal proceedings. While states use protection orders primarily to protect victims of domestic violence, many have broadened the statutes to protect victims when the victim and the perpetrator have no familial relationship.

The criteria used by states to issue protection orders to teens differ widely. Some states may issue protection orders to teens under the following conditions:

- **Teen has a child in common with the abuser.**
- **Teen has had a past or present sexual relationship with the abuser and has a child in common with the abuser.**
- **Teen is pregnant, has a child in common with the abuser, or resides or previously resided with the abuser.**
- **Teen has formerly dated, resided with, or had a child in common with the abuser.**

States that allow teens to file without an adult may impose the following types of conditions on the filing:

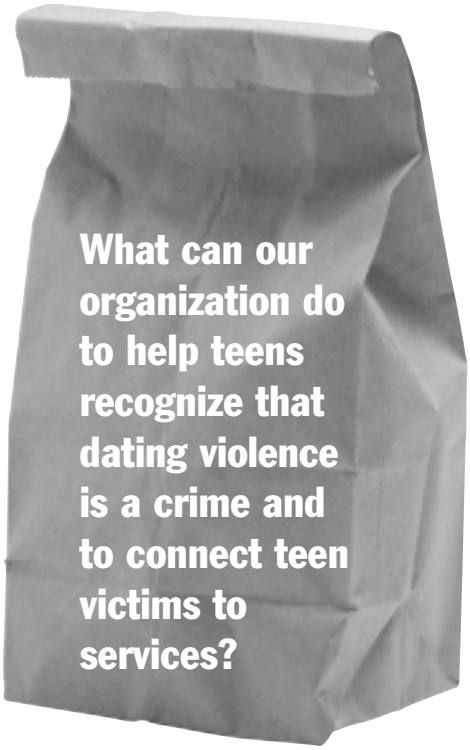
- **Only emancipated teens may apply.**
- **Teens must have an advocate to represent them at the hearing.**
- **Teens over 16 may file on their own, but under 16 must have a parent or guardian file on their behalf.**
- **Local jurisdictions determine whether teens may file on their own.**
- **Teens may file on their own if the abuser is an adult. If the abuser is a minor, victim must seek protection through the juvenile court.**

In some states, no statutes prevent teens from filing, but judges tend to request that parents or guardians file the petitions. Other states consider on a case by case basis whether teens may file on their own; if the teen is allowed to file, the judge may appoint an attorney or guardian ad litem.

DENIAL

Despite the damage caused by dating violence, it is common for communities, schools, parents, and victims to deny or minimize the incidence and the seriousness of the problem. Nan Stein, Ed.D., senior research scientist at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, reports that schools often fail to acknowledge they have the problem. "When educators and policy makers consider interventions to curb youth violence," she said, "they usually overlook sexual and gender violence."[15] "Schools often don't want to offer dating violence prevention programs to their students," said Vangie Foshee, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of North Carolina School of Public Health, "because they believe the problem does not affect their students." Parents are equally unaware, according to *Violence Among Teenagers*, a 2002 study sponsored by Liz Claiborne, Inc., which found that only eight percent of parents know of any students at their children's schools who have been physically struck by someone they were dating.[16]

So it is not surprising that abused teens themselves often deny being victimized. "Oh, he didn't mean it," teen victims often tell David E. Mount, director of Youth and Street Outreach programs at Seton House, a crisis shelter for teens in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Mount often encounters dating violence victims in the street outreach program and the shelters run for teens by Seton House. The first



BROWN BAG TOPIC

"Brown bag" lunches are great opportunities for staff to discuss important practice issues. Focus on teen dating violence during your next brown bag lunch.

step in working with such teens, says Mount, is to help them recognize that they have been abused. He gets them to talk about themselves and describe what is happening. Sometimes they come to see that the abuse is not right and decide to accept some help. But usually, says Mount, "it takes a crisis for teen victims to face the problem and return for help."

VICTIM BLAMING

Even more than adults, teens may blame themselves when they are victims of violence. This tendency, often linked to feelings of powerlessness and isolation after being assaulted, can impede a victim's recovery from the crime.[17] Perpetrators commonly deny or excuse their actions by blaming the victims or citing the intensity of their own feelings at the time of the abuse, reports the Massachusetts Department of Education.[18] Abusers may accuse their partners of "provoking" them or cite alcohol use as an excuse to be violent.[19] Parents, too, often blame victims. "Why did you wear that outfit? Why were you drinking? Why did you go to that place?" they may ask when their teen is victimized. Teens, as a group, can be particularly harsh toward victims, notes Lisa Luna, former director of STARS (Students Taking Action for Respect) in Austin, Texas. "If the perpetrator is someone popular, like a star athlete, teens often ignore the abuse and look for reasons to blame the victim," Luna says.

UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Also complicating teens' response to dating violence is that significant numbers of teens begin dating without a real grasp of what constitutes a healthy relationship or an understanding of when certain "healthy" boundaries have been crossed. "Girls in abusive relationships often try to convince themselves that violence is not a problem," says Mavis Seehaus, supervisor of primary care social work and coordinator of the clinical health program at the Adolescent Health Center at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, where many abused teens seek health services. Seehaus adds that when teens come from communities with high levels of violence, as is common at Mount Sinai, it is particularly difficult to challenge their assumption that violence is the norm.

LIMITED LEGAL OPTIONS

Teens usually do not possess the same legal status, and therefore rights, as adults. Young dating violence victims may find that some options open to adult victims are not available to them. For example, adult victims may go to a domestic violence shelter, but shelters usually do not accept minors. Adults can seek a protective order against the abusers; sometimes teens have that option, but states vary dramatically in terms of criteria for filing and teens' eligibility to file on their own behalf [see box on page 3]. Even when protective orders are issued, they sometimes produce unintended consequences in the lives of victims. For example, when the abuser attends the same school as the victim, the school may respond to a protective order (requiring

an abuser to stay a certain number of feet away from the victim at all times) by transferring the abuser to another school. Without strong support from the school, the victim may be blamed for the transfer and ostracized by fellow students, particularly if the abuser is popular.[20]

Addressing the Problem

In recent years, an increasing number of organizations have begun responding to the challenge of teen dating violence. Although teen dating violence programs vary considerably, most fall roughly into two categories—**prevention and education or counseling and intervention**. The prevention and education programs, usually held in schools, seek to reduce teen dating violence and promote healthy relationships. They may teach conflict resolution, critical thinking, and communication. They often explore power and control, gender stereotypes and roles, gender-based violence in the media, sexual harassment, and nonviolent ways to deal with disappointment and anger.

Counseling and intervention programs, which intervene directly in teens' lives, seek to offer teen victims support and options, as well as to change teens' behavior, their understanding of coercion and violence, and their capacity to solve problems without abusing others. These programs often focus on group and individual counseling for victims, perpetrators, or both. Some programs offer both education and counseling services.

The most successful approaches rely on traditional victim services principles:

- **Information:** Providing key information to increase victims' capacity to make wise choices.

Teen Dating Violence Increases Health Risks for Victims

A 2001 study by the Harvard School of Public Health found that female adolescent victims of dating violence are significantly more likely to engage in other behaviors that pose serious risks to their health. These victims are significantly likely to engage in substance abuse including binge drinking, cocaine use, heavy smoking, and risky sexual behaviors such as sexual intercourse before age 15 and having multiple recent sexual partners. Victims in high school were four to six times more likely than their non-abused peers to have been pregnant and eight to nine times more likely to have attempted suicide during the previous year.[25]

- **Accessibility:** Making services accessible to and appropriate for teens.
- **Empowerment:** Viewing teens as community resources, with real decision-making power, who can work with adults to regain control of their lives.
- **Collaboration:** Fostering community-wide collaboration to provide more multidisciplinary, comprehensive support for youth.

These efforts, slowly taking hold in communities throughout the country, suggest the varied approaches victim service providers can consider in planning their response to teen dating violence.

Information and Education

The vast majority of dating violence programs are prevention and education curricula designed to be presented in schools.[21] Safe Dates, launched at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill by Vangie Foshee, Ph.D., is the most extensively researched of these programs. Developed under a grant from the U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, the program has demonstrated that presenting students with information about dating violence can change their attitudes and behavior.

The Safe Dates curriculum features a student-performed play that presents a teen dating violence scenario and shows how to seek and give help for victims. Students also attend a series of educational sessions on defining caring relationships and dating abuse, why people abuse, how to help friends, overcoming gender stereotypes, and many other topics. Activities include discussions, role plays, scenario and case study analysis, games, decision-making exercises, writing exercises, and writing journals. The curriculum identifies specific skills that students should achieve after each session, such as identifying the harmful consequences of gender stereotyping, identifying situations that trigger their anger, or knowing how to protect themselves in a potential rape situation. Students take both pre-tests and post-tests to document their progress. The program (soon to be published)[22] also features a poster contest on dating violence.

A longitudinal study of the Safe Dates program—the first to assess the long-term effects of an adolescent dating violence prevention program—found that Safe Dates shows promise for preventing dating violence at least four years after the program. Adolescents who were exposed to Safe Dates in the eighth or ninth grade, as compared to those who were not, reported less psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence perpetration and less physical victimization at all four follow-up periods.[23]

Accessibility to Teens

A key strength of successful teen dating violence programs is that teens do not have to go out of their way to get the information they need. Rather, it comes to them. A glance at several education and counseling programs in different areas of the county—presented in schools, on the streets, and in a hospital clinic for adolescents—shows how programs make dating violence services accessible to teens:

- **Seton House—Virginia Beach, Virginia:** David Mount and a colleague load the Seton House street outreach van with clothes and food, and then ride through the streets, seeking homeless teens who might need supplies, shelter, or counseling. Mount comes back on specified nights several times a week, and he makes sure the teens know when he will be there and how to reach him.
- **Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center—New York, New York:** This facility—which draws teens because services are free and completely confidential—offers an integrated, three-tiered system for treating victims of teen dating violence and a host of other problems. When patients receive medical treatment, they also receive health education on typical adolescent health needs. Both physicians and health educators evaluate patients for signs of abuse. Teens who appear to be victims of abuse immediately visit a social worker before they leave the hospital, and the social workers encourage such patients to continue working with them.
- **Transition House—Cambridge, Massachusetts:** A domestic violence shelter director launched a dating violence program when she noticed that the children of many women once served by the shelter were seeking services as young (abused) adults. The Transition House dating violence program includes educational presentations, group and one-on-one counseling, and informal activities (such as basketball) involving counselors and both victims and perpetrators. The informal sessions increase the teens' accessibility to counselors.
- **Safe Place—Austin, Texas:** At middle schools in Austin, Texas, sixth grade students join a year-long dating violence support group run by Safe Place, an agency that serves victims of interpersonal violence. The groups—described as vehicles for learning about healthy relationships—take place during the school day, making it easy for students to attend. The group facilitator, working from an educational plan, guides the young teens through a course designed to help them identify more constructive ways to relate to others.

Empowerment

Effective teen dating violence programs promote the capacity of teens—both victims and perpetrators—to reduce the violence in their lives. These programs empower teens to learn new behavior patterns and develop the skills to make better choices.

At Transition House, counselors help teens to recognize dysfunctional behaviors and find ways to correct them. "We try to break down the problems into small tasks that they can handle and focus on their behavior and its consequences," says counselor Wenimo Poweigha, who works mostly with perpetrators. "I tell them,

"Effective teen dating violence programs...empower teens to learn new behavior patterns and develop the skills to make better choices."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The programs featured in this article represent a snapshot of current approaches to the dating violence problem.

For an extensive list of dating violence programs and further resources, see the University of Calgary Web site at *www.ucalgary.ca/resolve/violenceprevention* and the Review of Teen Dating Violence Prevention by Heather Meyer, Ph.D. and Nan Stein, Ed.D., at *www.vawprevention.org/research/teendating.shtml.*

'Think down the road. What's going to happen if you keep hitting your girlfriend? Will that get you where you want to be?'" Poweigha negotiates manageable goals (such as not yelling at their girlfriends for a week) with the teens and then holds them accountable for meeting the targets they agree on. "Sometimes," he says, "they come back after a week and tell me that things are better." "It's slow going, and it often doesn't work," Poweigha says. "But such small victories show teens they can change if they work at it."

Mount Sinai's teen-focused adolescent health program operates under similar principles, reports Mavis Seehaus. The program takes a youth development approach, offering teens information and services, and encouraging them to make responsible choices. "Rather than viewing teens' problems as 'pathologies,'" says Seehaus, "we support their efforts to make good use of the services we offer. Our teen-friendly staff is carefully trained to offer choices, resources, and opportunities so that teens can take the best steps for themselves."

PEER EDUCATION

Peer-to-peer education programs provide a particularly effective mechanism to empower teens. Teens have played a key role in planning and presenting the curriculum of the STARS (Students Taking Action for Respect) program of Austin, Texas—which focuses on club/date rape drugs, acquaintance rape, sexual harassment, and dating violence. "Because teens are much more likely to listen to other teens than adults," said former director Lisa Luna, "the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) included teens in all phases of planning and presenting the STARS program." Luna held focus groups to explore how teens think about dating and to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding. Luna assembled a youth advisory board to advise and work with a coalition of adult groups. Teens also write and present the curriculum.

STARS empowers teens not only through the teen presenters, but also by

using teens in many different roles. Those who might not enjoy presenting classes can write articles for the school newspaper, design posters, take photos, or act in plays. The program strives to include all teens—not just star students. Although STARS requires specific commitments of time and effort from teens, the program has an abundance of volunteers. By enabling teens to address a problem that affects their age group, STARS showcases both victim and youth empowerment.

Collaboration

Joining forces with other agencies and community groups dramatically increases the impact and capacity of dating violence programs. Some of the most powerful partners, of course, are schools. To enhance the likelihood that schools can host dating violence programs, experts recommend tailoring teen dating violence programs to the required curriculum. For example, Safe Dates appealed to many pilot schools, said Vangie Foshee, because the program fulfills some of North Carolina's health education requirements. Nan Stein recommends that before approaching a school as a potential partner, "dating violence program administrators should check out the state's education department Web site to gather information on tests and curriculum standards."[24]

Teen dating violence programs entered into other types of community partnerships. For example, Transition House recently teamed up with City Year, an AmeriCorps service program for young adults in the Boston metropolitan area. Transition House is training the City Year volunteers to present the dating violence curriculum in public and private schools and to help the counselors work with the teens.

Likewise, Seton House has a thriving network of partners—civic leagues, churches, the Tidewater AIDS Crisis Task Force, and all other social service agencies. In his street outreach, David Mount makes a point of working closely with police, who recognize Seton House's success in sheltering runaways. Seton House relies on its strong ties throughout the community to effectively serve and protect teens.

A Promising Start

These constantly evolving approaches represent solid progress in tackling a complex and little-understood problem. By emphasizing information and education, accessibility to teens, teen empowerment, and community-wide collaboration, programs are removing obstacles that keep teen dating violence victims from seeking help. These programs help teens and adults to confront aggression, change attitudes, and learn new ways to handle relationships. They squarely challenge the current grim statistics, suggesting that through foresight, planning, and commitment, adults and teens can protect young lives.

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