

Safe Dates

• A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS OF TEENS •

Keeping Your Teen Safe on a Date

Dating abuse is a serious issue that can touch the life of any teen. Adolescents of all races and income levels are at risk for being involved in an abusive relationship. Both males and females can be abused, and both males and females can be the abusers.

In the United States, approximately 12 percent of heterosexual high school boys and girls report having been physically victimized by a dating partner in the previous year. This percentage is as high as 40 percent in some areas of the country.¹

What Is Dating Abuse?

Dating abuse includes any behaviors that are used to control and manipulate a dating partner. These behaviors may include the following:

- physically abusive behaviors such as hitting, shaking, throwing things, forcing unwanted sexual actions, choking, and using a weapon
- emotionally abusive behaviors such as ignoring a date's feelings, insulting a date's beliefs or values, isolating a date from others, displaying inappropriate anger, damaging personal property, humiliating a date in public or private, and threatening to hurt oneself

Parents and other caregivers can be a very important resource in preventing dating abuse and in helping teenagers remove themselves from abusive relationships.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007," *Surveillance Summaries*, MMWR 2008; 57 (No. SS-4). V. A. Foshee and R. Matthew, "Adolescent Dating Abuse Perpetration: A Review of Findings, Methodological Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Violent Behavior and Aggression*, ed. Daniel Flannery, Alexander Vazsonyi, and I. Waldman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

What Can You Do to Prevent Dating Abuse?

Here are some things you can do that may prevent your child from getting into an abusive dating relationship:

- Model healthy relationships at home.
- Talk with your teen, as early as possible, about healthy relationships and positive ways to resolve conflicts.
- Emphasize that abuse isn't about love.
- Reinforce the importance of getting help if he or she is ever concerned about a dating partner.
- Build your child's self-esteem.
- Keep communication channels open.

What Can You Do?

If you know or suspect your child is in an abusive dating relationship, the most important thing is to do *something*:

- Take the situation seriously. The consequences of teen dating abuse can be as serious as adult domestic abuse.
- Tell your child you believe and support him or her.
- Help your teen develop a safety plan to keep him or her safe from the partner's abuse.
- Practice tough love by setting boundaries or limits, and getting involved. Follow through on those limits.
- Take legal action against the abusive partner (check with your local domestic violence crisis center).
- Encourage your child to seek professional help at a local domestic violence crisis center.

In the end, the decision to end an abusive relationship resides with your teenager. If she or he is having difficulty leaving the relationship, you can still do all the things mentioned above, but it's even more important to express love, concern, and confidence and not to try to control your child.

Above all, seek help. You can do this by talking with

- your child's school principal or teachers
- your child's friends
- professionals such as those at a local domestic violence shelter or mental health service

What Are Some Warning Signs of Dating Abuse?

Your child may be in an abusive dating relationship if he or she

- has a dating partner who is intensely jealous or possessive
- has unexplained marks on his or her body (bruises, scratches, burns)
- is always deferring to his or her partner's wishes
- is increasingly isolated from family and friends
- gets visibly upset after phone calls or dates with his or her dating partner
- is afraid of making his or her partner angry