

# OVERVIEW

**T**his information packet has been developed by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV) as an introduction to the dynamics, prevalence and consequences of teen dating violence. The packet explores issues specific to teen dating violence, examines current provision of support services for teens and presents information about a variety of promising prevention and intervention strategies. While some awareness materials such as booklets, checklists and posters are included, the intent of packet contents is to examine some of the key dating violence issues currently facing teens and their advocates.

Though teen dating violence is a serious and prevalent threat to the welfare of youth, it has not received the same level of attention given to other forms of juvenile violence (Silverman, Raj, Mucci & Hathaway, 2001). Abuse in adolescent dating relationships has often been overshadowed by concerns about other threats to teen health and well-being – school violence, gang activity, abuse by family members, substance abuse, pregnancy, eating disorders, homelessness and suicide. Until recently, many communities have seen teen dating violence as neither prevalent nor sufficiently concerning. While extensive research, education, intervention and prevention efforts related to teen dating violence began in the 1980s and increased in the 1990s, teen dating violence has not, to date, received the same level of community or national response as other youth violence – particularly school violence and gang activity. These two forms of youth violence may have taken precedence over teen dating violence because of their perceived impact on the entire community. At the same time, teen dating violence has most often been considered less of a societal threat. Identified as the result of things such as a lack of experience in forming relationships, teen dating violence has rarely been viewed as a public problem worthy of large-scale studies, awareness campaigns or broad-based prevention efforts. Researchers, advocates and teens, however, continue to urge community members to recognize teen dating violence as prevalent, often closely tied to the high risk factors listed above, and potentially lethal.

**Dating violence... a pattern of actual or threatened acts of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, perpetrated by an adolescent against a current or former dating partner. Abuse may include insults, coercion, social sabotage, sexual harassment, threats and/or acts of physical or sexual abuse. The abusive teen uses this pattern of violent and coercive behavior, in a heterosexual or homosexual dating relationship, in order to gain power and maintain control over the dating partner.**

## DEFINITION OF DATING VIOLENCE

Dating violence occurs in the intimate relationships of persons ranging in age from pre-teen through adulthood. Information within this packet is

specific to the violence and abuse found in the dating relationships of teens between the ages of 13 and 18 and is defined, for the purposes of this information packet, as follows:

a pattern of actual or threatened acts of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, perpetrated by an adolescent against a current or former dating partner. Abuse may include insults, coercion, social sabotage, sexual harassment, threats and/or acts of physical or sexual abuse. The abusive teen uses this pattern of violent and coercive behavior, in a heterosexual or homosexual dating relationship, in order to gain power and maintain control over the dating partner.

While the above definition could be used to describe domestic violence, it is important to distinguish between the two by considering the unique perspectives and experiences of teen victims and their batterers. Youth advocates know that they must understand and honor teens' perceptions of their relationships as well as teens' impressions of the support networks currently in place to help them. In order to effectively address teen issues, advocates and community members must take into consideration the limited legal rights of adolescents and the very real reasons that teen victims may deny the violence in their relationships and hesitate to seek support from community agencies.

Though the consequences of dating violence are serious for teen victims and their need for safety and support may be clear to adults, it is often difficult for young people to recognize and respond to abuse within their intimate relationships. Recognizing that the person you love, who professes to love you, is controlling, abusive or violent may be difficult for adult survivors of domestic violence. For teens who are just beginning to navigate the complexities of intimate relationships, recognition of control and abuse is even more difficult. When abuse is recognized, teens are reluctant to seek support and protection from adults in the community. Seeking help from others is often fraught with doubt, fear and confusion for adult survivors. Interventions, moreover, may not be as safe, confidential, and resource-enhancing to the survivor as is necessary and/or helpful. Teens, whose life experiences and rights are limited, may find reaching out even more intimidating.

## DISCLOSURE AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Teen concerns about disclosure vary according to individual experiences. Some victims fear that friends and acquaintances will tell their abuser about disclosures, or that mutual friends and acquaintances will side with the abusive partner and retaliate against them. Many teens fear that they will lose the respect of peers and adults if the violence is discovered. Teens in same-sex relationships struggle with the knowledge that disclosure may lead to being "outed" to friends, family and others in the community (Gurwich, 2001). Above all, most teens do not want to acknowledge that their relationships are in any way different from those of their peers. Nor do they want to lose the status of having a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Teens considering disclosure to school staff also may have concerns about confidentiality. Young victims are aware that school personnel must weigh honoring their confidentiality against considerations for the teens' safety. Even if they believe that adults will hold disclosures in confidence, teens are aware that they will be encouraged to speak with a school or community counselor, making parental notification a possibility. They

may not want parents to know about the abuse – or their relationship – fearing that parents will insist on an end to that relationship, or on notification to medical and/or legal authorities. Teens may be particularly resistant to police involvement, believing that police will ignore them because of their age, take them into custody in dual arrests, force them to return to abusive families, or report their parents to Child Protective Services. Parenting teens may worry that Child Protective Services will remove their children. Finally, many teen victims are involved with adult batterers, who take advantage of the younger partner's inexperience or immaturity and lack of resources to prevent the survivor from accessing safety and support. Advocates' efforts to reach teens are most successful when they include an appreciation of the multiple reasons that teens are not aware of services or choose not to access them. A commitment to designing services tailored to the needs of individual teens is critical.

## A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

With the recent release of results from several large-scale studies, positive strides have been made in helping communities recognize that teen dating violence is a form of youth violence that merits national attention and response. The Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (1997-1999), for example, has revealed that approximately one in five adolescent girls in the ninth through twelfth grades have reported being physically and/or sexually hurt by a dating partner (Silverman, Raj, Mucci & Hathaway, 2001). Such studies are being used to validate the concerns of teens and their advocates and help them gain support for projects that will assist young victims and hold their abusers accountable. Advocacy has begun to involve collaborative efforts impacting legislative, criminal justice, academic and social systems. Innovative strategies are emerging nationwide as communities come to understand that, while educating young people about teen dating violence is important, effective teen prevention/intervention strategies must include diligent efforts to engage all segments of society (Wolfe, 2001).

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Information in this packet underscores the importance of including teens in the development of education, support, intervention and prevention work. It is imperative that policies and procedures designed to address teen dating violence validate and reflect the diversity within teen cultures. An increasing number of teen-driven projects are being created and implemented in order to educate communities, provide support to young victims and to effectively address the behavior of young batterers. Peer education programs and youth theater groups bring education and awareness to both teen and adult audiences. Young people are

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also taking part in the development of structured dating violence curricula. In addition to these traditional approaches, teens and their advocates are beginning to explore alternative avenues. Web sites are increasing in numbers and are designed to engage teens from diverse communities – as well as offering information about teen dating violence and appropriate dating dynamics. Other

mediums holding promise for future exploration – graphic novels, virtual simulation and role-playing games – are currently untapped as teen awareness resources. Many education/prevention options for teens and descriptions of promising programs are listed in the Resource section of this packet.

Today's growing awareness, along with increases in funding and other resources, promises innovative and effective responses to the needs of teens in abusive and violent dating relationships. Researchers, policymakers, advocates and youth continue to investigate the causes and trends of teen dating violence, take on the challenges inherent in creating here-and-now safety and support options for teens and explore more diverse and comprehensive approaches to education, prevention and intervention.

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## References

- Gurwich, Gunner (2001). *Teen dating violence among lesbian, bisexual and transgendered girls*, Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.girlscoalition.com/workfall01.html#teen>>
- Silverman, J., Raj, A., Mucci, L. & Hathaway, J. (2001). Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 286 (5) 572-579.
- Wolfe, D.A., (2001). Preventing Abuse in Adolescent Dating Relationships. *Research Bulletin of the Center for Research on Violence Against Women and Children*, 1 (3) 1-2. Retrieved online November 1, 2003 from <<http://www.uwo.ca/violence/html/pubs.html>>

## ENCLOSURES

The enclosed materials (reprinted with permission) provide research findings, examples of promising projects and referral materials that offer basic information on teen dating violence:

Family Violence Prevention Fund (2003). *In their own words; teens speak out*. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://endabuse.org/programs/display.php3?DocID=225>>

Rennison, C.M. (October, 2001). *Intimate partner violence and age of the victim, 1993-1999*. (Publication #NCJ187635). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>>

Packet of dating violence handouts (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, National Crime Prevention Council, Alternatives to Fear, SafePlace, Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence)

Liz Claiborne, Inc. (2000). *What you need to know about dating violence: A teen handbook*. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.lizclaiborne.com>>

Liz Claiborne, Inc. (2000). *A parent's guide to teen dating violence: 10 Questions to start the conversation*. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.lizclaiborne.com>>

Liz Claiborne, Inc. (2000). *A parent's handbook: How to talk to your children about developing healthy relationships*. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.lizclaiborne.com>>

**PLEASE NOTE:** If you are interested in further distributing these materials, you must obtain permission to reprint from the publisher.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional information on these and other teen-related issues is available through the following:

- Technical Assistance/Public Education Team of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence  
Telephone: 800-537-2238 and TTY: 800-553-2508

and other organizations comprising the Domestic Violence Resource Network (DVRN):

- Battered Women's Justice Project  
Telephone: 800-903-0111, Ext. 1 (Criminal Justice), Ext. 2 (Civil Justice), Ext. 3 (Defense);
- National Health Resource Center on Domestic Violence  
Telephone: 888-792-2873 and TTY: 800-595-4889;
- Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody  
Telephone: 800-52-PEACE (527-3223);
- Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women  
Telephone: 877-733-7623