



The Teen Years: Dating Relationships

In our society, most teens begin exploring relationships with the opposite sex while still in high school. This early “going-together” behavior, such as sitting together in the lunchroom or talking on the phone, is usually harmless. However, teens can be pressured by their friends, the media, or their family to behave in mature ways before they are ready. Then, these innocent friendships can become destructive.

Dating violence is a pattern of actual or threatened abusive acts between two people who are dating. Conservative estimates suggest that physical aggression happens in at least one in five dating relationships. Often the pattern of abusive behavior begins early in a young person’s life. A child who has witnessed family violence, has been exposed to severe physical punishment, or has aggressive friends may be more likely to be involved in an abusive dating relationship. Other factors include alcohol or drug use.

An often-overlooked aspect of relationship violence is in same-sex relationships. New findings suggest that violence in gay and lesbian relationships occurs just as often as in heterosexual relationships. These victims are less likely to be taken seriously or get protection when they seek help.

As a parent, you play an important role in helping your teen understand intimate relationships, and you can help in several ways:

- *Model respectful behavior.* Parents’ major contribution is to set an example of respectful behavior in their own partner relationship.
- *Delay “couples” dating until at least 16 years of age.* Many teens are actually relieved if parents convey the value that it is better to have good friendships and participate in group activities than to give in to pressure to have one partner.
- *Limit or discuss TV shows or movies that show abusive relationships.* Parents can watch shows with their teenager and discuss the story with their child, countering images that do not support their family’s values.
- *Encourage education programs that discourage dating violence.* Parents can encourage schools to educate students about relationship violence within the larger context of violence prevention. Appropriate support and intervention should be provided for both boys and girls.

If you are concerned about your teen’s dating relationship, you can talk with school counselors or community professionals, such as those at a rape crisis center, who specialize in working with people in abusive relationships.

The information contained in this summary is taken from the Teen Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).

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