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Dealing with Dating Abuse

by Heather Boerner, 10.03.06

The violence started when Allison (not her real name) was 13. First, the boy she'd been dating for a year pressured her to get her to have sex with him. Then it got physical: He pinched her, grabbed her wrists, and threatened to push her off a concrete wall and into a basement. Allison now thinks the abuse - and the fact that no one believed her - led to suicidal depression when she was in high school.

"I've been dealing with depression for a long time, and I've been suicidal since I was 14," says Allison, now 21. "I really fear that [my ex-boyfriend] is going to kill someone one day."

Allison is far from alone. A May 2006 study released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that nearly 1.5 million high school students - girls and boys - have experienced physical violence in a dating relationship in the past year. The study also found that teens, like Allison, who experience violence in their relationships are more likely to consider suicide. Teens who experience physical violence while dating are also likely to engage in dangerous dieting behaviors, and use alcohol or other drugs.

"The important thing to take away from this study is not just the physical injury of dating violence, but also that dating violence affects teen health in a broader way," says Dr. Rita Noonan, a behavioral scientist in the Division of Violence Prevention in the CDC's Injury Center.

Health Effects

The study found that nearly nine percent of girls and nearly nine percent of boys ages 14-17 have been hit, punched, kicked, pinched, or otherwise physically hurt by a partner in the past 12 months. It also found

- Physical violence in relationships is more common among African-American teenagers

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"The important thing to take away from this study is not just the physical injury of dating violence, but also that dating violence affects teen health in a broader way."

than white or Latino teenagers.

- Physical abuse happens at similar rates among younger and older teenagers and among teenagers in different geographical areas.
- Teens who experience physical violence in their relationships have lower grades than those who don't.
- More than eight percent of teens who experience relationship violence have attempted suicide.
- More than one in four teens who are physically hurt by a partner have engaged in binge drinking.
- More than a third of teens who are physically hurt by a partner have gotten into physical fights with other people.

Choose Respect

To combat the problem of abuse in relationships, and to help people like Allison while they're still young, the CDC has created a program called [Choose Respect](#). Aimed at 11-14 year olds, it's designed to reach young people *before* they get in abusive relationships.

"We want to reach teens at a young age, hopefully before they've been in a violent relationship, and teach them how to have a healthy relationship," says Dr. Noonan. The program reaches out to friends of teens, the abusers themselves, and parents. According to Dr. Noonan, all have a role to play in diminishing dating violence.

[Choose Respect](#) offers downloadable podcasts, games, and quizzes designed to help teenagers figure out if they are in healthy or unhealthy relationships. It includes videos of teens who, like Allison, have experienced abuse from a partner.

Allison, who has volunteered at local shelters for victims of intimate partner abuse, is still angry about the abuse she suffered - and about the fact that her friends and family didn't believe she was being abused. She hopes the CDC's program helps teach both parents and teens that dating violence is real so they will support teens when they come forward.

"There are many instances of mental, physical, and sexual abuse in high school," says Allison. "We can do all the programs we want, but if we can't support someone when they come forward, we're really not doing anything."

Planned Parenthood health centers across the country are also working to combat teen dating abuse. Planned Parenthood of the Southern Finger Lakes (PPSFL) in Ithaca, NY, deals with the issue of teen dating violence through a rape crisis program that features counseling and education programs. Planned Parenthood of Central Washington (PPCW) focuses its teen dating violence prevention program on teens who are in potentially dangerous situations. And Planned Parenthood of Montana (PPM) holds peer-education workshops aimed at raising awareness of dating violence among middle-school students.

To find out what your local Planned Parenthood health center is doing about teen dating violence call 1-800-230-PLAN. Your call will automatically be connected to the Planned Parenthood health center nearest you.

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