

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIOLENCE IN TEEN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

It's a shocking fact that as many as one-third of all high school and college age young people experience violence in intimate or in dating relationships. As with adult partner violence, teen and young adult abusers generally engage in a pattern of repeated violence and coercion that escalates and increases in severity the longer the relationship continues. Teenaged abusers can and do perpetrate assaults that result in serious and life-threatening injury and death. Their abuse may also take the form of sexual harassment and date rape.

Violence in dating relationships is prevalent in all communities and is not unique to one class, race or culture. As with adult domestic violence, the vast majority of adolescent victims of dating violence are female. While the effects of victimization on young women are very similar to the effects on adult women, there are particular ways in which partner violence affects teens that are helpful to understand.

Peer Approval - Teens experience more reliance on peer approval and the need to conform to peer norms. If these norms characterize dating violence as "normal" behavior, then teens may think it is acceptable for abuse to occur in a relationship. The victim is unable to judge if the abuser's behavior is out of line or unacceptable.

She's been bruised, demeaned, put down, isolated, threatened, and intimidated. She feels trapped. She's afraid. She's only 16. And, even worse, she's not alone.

Gender Role Expectations - Teens may rely on perceived gender differences, often reinforced by the popular media, which emphasize stereotyped ideas of male dominance and female passivity. There may be an expectation that her status depends on her attachment to a male and on his status. Female socialization also can lead women to take primary or sole responsibility for problem-solving in a relationship.

Lack of Experience - Teens have less experience in dating and in sexual relationships which can lead to misunderstandings about appropriate behavior in intimate relationships, the inability to make good decisions and to trust themselves to take action on their behalf in a relationship. In addition, excessive jealousy and possessiveness by the abuser can be idealized by their partner as proof of love, and the abuser can use this rationalizing as proof of their love. Even though teens' relationships are more transient than adult relationships they are often felt to be just as intense, and teens' inexperience prevents them from putting the relationship into a larger context.

Little Contact with Adult Resources - Studies show most teens in relationships with violent partners have not spoken to any adult about the violence.

(Worcester, Nancy, 1993. A More Hidden Crime: Adolescent Battered Women, The Network News, July/August, p.7)