

Understanding

Teen Dating Abuse

Fact Sheet

2006

Unhealthy relationships can start early and last a lifetime. Dating abuse occurs when harmful behaviors are repeated, creating a pattern of violence. There are three common types of dating abuse.

- **Physical abuse** occurs when a teen is pinched, hit, shoved, or kicked.
- **Emotional abuse** means threatening a teen or harming his or her sense of self-worth. Examples include name calling, teasing, threats, bullying, or keeping a teen away from friends and family.
- **Sexual abuse** is forcing a teen to engage in a sex act. This includes fondling and rape.

Dating abuse often starts with teasing and name calling. These behaviors are often thought to be a “normal” part of a relationship. But these behaviors can lead to more serious abuse like physical assault and rape.



Why is dating abuse a public health problem?

Dating abuse is a serious problem in the United States. Many teens do not report abuse because they are afraid to tell friends and family.

- 72% of 8th and 9th graders reportedly “date”.¹
- 1 in 4 adolescents reports verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse each year.^{1,2}
- 1 in 11 high school students reports being physically hurt by someone they were dating.³



How does dating abuse affect health?

Dating abuse has a negative effect on health throughout life. Teens who are abused are more likely to do poorly in school. They often engage in unhealthy behaviors, like drug and alcohol use. The anger and stress that victims feel may lead to eating disorders and depression. Some abused teens even think about or attempt suicide. Abused teens often carry the patterns of violence into future relationships. Physically abused teens are three times more likely than their non-abused peers to experience violence during college.⁴ In adulthood, they are more likely to be involved in intimate partner violence.



Who is at risk for dating abuse?

Teens report dating abuse more often than other age groups. Among teens, boys often start the violence and use greater force. Girls are more likely than boys to be the victims of sexual abuse.

Studies show that people who abuse their dating partners are more depressed, have lower self-esteem, and are more aggressive than peers. Other “red flags” for dating abuse include:

- Use of threats or violence to solve problems
- Alcohol or drug use
- Inability to manage anger or frustration
- Poor social skills
- Association with violent friends
- Problems at school
- Lack of parental supervision, support, or discipline
- Witnessing abuse at home



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How can we prevent dating abuse?

The ultimate goal is to stop dating abuse before it starts. Strategies that promote healthy relationships are vital. During the preteen and teen years, young people are learning skills they need to form positive relationships with others. This is an ideal time to promote healthy relationships and prevent patterns of dating violence that can last into adulthood.

Prevention programs address the attitudes and behaviors linked with dating abuse. One example is Safe Dates, a school-based program that is designed to change gender norms and improve problem solving skills.

Community efforts such as parenting support and mentoring programs have also been shown to prevent violence.



How does CDC approach prevention?

CDC uses a 4-step approach to address public health problems like dating abuse.

Step 1: Define the problem

Before we can prevent dating abuse, we need to know how big the problem is, where it is, and whom it affects. CDC learns about a problem by gathering and studying data. These data are critical because they help decisions makers send resources where they are needed most.

Step 2: Identify risk and protective factors

It is not enough to know that dating abuse is affecting a certain group of people in a certain area. We also need to know why. CDC conducts and supports research to answer this question. We can then develop programs to reduce or get rid of risk factors.

Step 3: Develop and test prevention strategies

Using information gathered in research, CDC develops and evaluates strategies to prevent violence.

Step 4: Assure widespread adoption

In this final step, CDC shares the best prevention strategies. CDC may also provide funding or technical help so communities can adopt these strategies.

For a list of CDC activities, see *Preventing Violence Against Women: Program Activities Guide* (www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/vawguide.htm).



Where can I learn more?

Choose Respect Initiative

www.chooserespect.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

National Sexual Assault Online Hotline

1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

National Sexual Violence Resource Center

www.nsvrc.org

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center

www.safeyouth.org

Love Is Not Abuse

www.loveisnotabuse.com



References

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2. Avery-Leaf S, Cascardi M, O'Leary KD, Cano A. Efficacy of a dating violence prevention program on attitudes justifying aggression. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 1997;21:11-7.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Physical dating violence among high school students—United States, 2003. *MMWR* 2006;55:532-535.
4. Smith PH, White JW, Holland LJ. A longitudinal perspective on dating violence among adolescent and college-age women. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2003;93(7):1104-9.

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