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Abuse Common among Dating Teens, Study Finds

1 in 4 girls have been pressured into sex

WASHINGTON – When Erika Eckstrom began dating her boyfriend at the start of her College freshman year at 18 things were great, but her situation deteriorated and she soon was friendless, isolated and the victim of domestic violence.

“Everything was great and when it started really getting bad I don’t know if it was denial, but I knew something was wrong, because I was without a support system,” said Eckstrom, now 20 and still in college in Washington but dating someone else.

Her story is apparently common among teenagers.

According to a study released Thursday, more than half of America’s teens know friends who have experienced physical, sexual or verbal abuse in their dating relationships.

Among those surveyed, 13 percent of teenage girls, admit to being physically injured or hit and one in four report being pressured to perform oral sex or engage in intercourse, according to the survey by the private research group Teenage Research Unlimited.

“There is a lot to be said about the cycle of violence and there’s a lot of research that shows that violence is a learned behavior,” said Jane Randel a vice president at Liz Claiborne Inc., the company that underwrote the study.

According to Randel, while research has shown that patterns of domestic violence among teens parallel those among adults, little is being done to educate America’s youth.

“Parents are very willing to talk to their kids about drugs and sex and things, but this is an issue that kind of goes right over,” she said.

Teens often don’t view abusive dating relationships as a domestic violence issue. “This is a teenage issue. Things that happen to adults when they are married with the kids, start when you are in high school,” said Eckstrom.

According to the study, teenage dating abuse extends across the nations’s suburbs, cities, regions and ethnic groups.

‘Love is not abuse’

The study, which used data collected from online surveys among 300,000 registered participants aged 13 to 18, showed only two-thirds of teens, boys and girls, say they would know what to do if a friend asked for help about an abusive relationship.

To help shed some light on the issue, Liz Claiborne, which has been involved in domestic abuse programs since 1991, is sponsoring a new curriculum in schools. The pilot program is a three day course developed by the non-profit Education Development Center (EDC). It will first be offered in nine schools representing a cross-section of the nation’s economy.

“The goal of getting the research and the curriculum for us is to try and reach out to these kids when they are first forming their relationships, before they get to be adults so that they understand the issue,” said Randel.

The “Love is Not Abuse Curriculum”, is aimed at 14-year-old 9th graders to help prevent growing incidence of physical and verbal abuse and sexual pressure within their age group.

The program, to be offered in either health or English classes, is also designed to help establish a support system for those teens in abusive relationships.

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