The Unique Challenges of Teen Dating Violence Advocacy

The month of February is dedicated to national awareness of teen dating violence. Teen dating violence presents unique challenges in the worlds of domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy. Violence against women and girls has many faces, and it is in adolescence that norms for relationships are set for the rest of one’s life. Violence in adolescence can lead to a multitude of difficulties throughout life, including vulnerability to further victimization. Though teen dating violence can resemble domestic violence and incorporate sexual violence, the age and life experience of the survivors requires a different approach in advocacy and prevention.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found in a 2013 survey that approximately 1 in 10 teens have experienced some sort of physical violence in their intimate relationships, and 1 in 10 have experienced unwanted sexual contact from an intimate partner. A 2011 survey found that 23% of women and 14% of men who had experienced intimate partner violence had first experienced it between the ages of 11 and 17. Adolescent survivors of violence are six times more likely than nonsurvivors to become pregnant or to contract a sexually transmitted infection. Girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rates of intimate partner violence. Because intimate partner violence often starts in adolescence, prevention and intervention for teens is very important in assuring safety and well-being not only when they are young but for the rest of their lives.

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges recently published a blog series outlining eight things that every judge should know about teen dating violence. Many of these principles are applicable to anyone who is working with teen survivors of violence. One of the primary things to understand regarding teen victims is that they are not adults and will not react to their situations in the same ways that adults would. While an adult may think to ask for help quickly, teens may not feel comfortable doing this. Teens will often feel more comfortable discussing their relationship
with their peers rather than a parent, counselor, or teacher. Teens have specific vulnerabilities that are unique to their age and development. Teens also may not have the same maturity level to appropriately plan ahead or control impulses in the same way as adults. Teens often do not have control over their environments and are more susceptible to negative influences and messages from peers and media. They often lack the power and resources to remove themselves from toxic environments and relationships.

It is also important to know that delinquency can sometimes follow from being victimized. Teens who have been exposed to violence are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems in school or with peers. Violence during adolescence can put survivors at higher risk of substance abuse, further violence, eating disorders, and risky sexual behavior. Schools will often try to resolve these behavioral issues with punitive measures. Punishment should not be the first recourse taken. Authority figures in a young person’s life should pursue restorative remedies before negatively affecting a teen’s future with punishments that may threaten his or her education and personal livelihood.

Understanding teen culture is vital. Social media and technology play a key role in intimate partner abuse and can be used as a very serious tool of control over the victim. Social media can provide the perfect environment for bullying, harassment, revenge porn, and cyberstalking that occurs away from the eyes of adults and authority figures. Teens also tend to think more in terms of the community that they are a part of and how their disclosure will affect their relationships with peers and family. A teen may not want to disclose to his or her parents out of fear of creating family conflict and may not want to disclose at school because of the bearing it would have on peer relationships.

Creating dialogues about healthy relationships is key to reducing teen dating violence. Organizations like loveisrespect provide resources for schools or community groups to discuss healthy relationships with the teens. These resources highlight important topics like setting physical and emotional boundaries, consent, conflict resolution, and building trust between partners. They provide quizzes that help you determine whether your relationship is healthy and if you are being a good partner. The CDC offers Dating Matters, a teen dating violence prevention campaign that
focuses on 11-14 year olds in high-risk communities. The CDC also provides a free online training for educators and community organizations on how to understand the risk factors of teen dating violence.

In Illinois, a number of highly dedicated organizations have devoted their time to help teens develop healthy relationships. Chicago-based domestic violence organization Between Friends has been working in schools and youth organizations with their teen violence prevention program REACH since 1995. The YWCA of Evanston has violence prevention programs for K-12 students that focus on equipping youth with the social and emotional skills to navigate relationships in a healthy way. A Long Walk Home uses performance and visual arts to empower teen girls to help each other and teach their communities about dating, domestic, and sexual violence. All of these organizations are members of the Shriver Center’s Ensuring Success in School (ESS) Coalition. The coalition is developing policies that ensure that K-12 survivors of domestic and sexual violence receive the support they need to stay safe, succeed academically, and finish school. One of the goals of the initiative is to create a model school policy for school personnel so that they support, not further harm, student survivors. The policy would include concrete procedural recommendations as well as ways to engage students that take into account their age, culture, and life experience. If we want to prevent teen dating violence then we must create environments in which teens feel safe and can trust the adults and authority figures in their lives.

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