

NBC News Transcripts

Today Show

June 9, 2005 Thursday, 7:00 AM EST

Jessica Aranoff of Break the Cycle Discusses Causes of and Solutions for Abuse in Teen Relationships

Reporters: Alexis Glick

Well, how well do you know your teen-age son or daughter's significant other? According to a new survey out today sponsored by Liz Claiborne, 13 percent of teen-age girls report they've been in a physically abusive relationship and 26 percent say they've experienced repeated verbal abuse. And while these statistics may surprise parents, for some young people, they are all too familiar.

Ms. ERIKA ECKSTROM (Abuse Victim): I was 18. I was kind of lost in college, and I met Greg. Everything got moving way too fast. I hated the dorms and I basically moved into his apartment. Everything was just beautiful. It was like a honeymoon when we started dating for the first couple of months. It just started off with this mental abuse. It was very verbal abuse. And then I remember the very first time that he actually physically hit me. The hard part for me was not the fact that he hit me, but the fact that he made me feel like I was nothing. Every time I looked in the mirror, I still wonder, am I fat? Am – am I fat because I remember he said that I was fat. Am I stupid? It was a giant secret. I didn't even tell any of my lesser friends or my best friend or my mother. I couldn't tell a soul. I was – I felt that it was my fault and that everything was the result of me being not worthy.

Ms. NICOLE AVEY (Abuse Victim): When I was 15, I went to summer school, and I met this guy. And we became a couple. Slowly, he became controlling and verbally abusive. And then finally, it led to him hitting me. It would be like just kind of like flicking of the head or – and then just one time it was actual – a hit in the face. And then he was choking me on the stairs. It made me feel very scared and alone and confused. Didn't know what to do. That's when I had realized I'd had enough. The next day, I told my mom and dad, and we went straight to the police after that.

GLICK: Jessica Aronoff is the executive director of Break The Cycle, which is dedicated to educating young people about domestic violence.

Good morning, Jessica.

Ms. JESSICA ARONOFF ("Break The Cycle"): Good morning, Alexis.

GLICK: Well, pretty telling tape there just looking at what they have to say. Now, the Liz Claiborne study suggested two things, which are pretty interesting. Thirteen percent of teen-age girls report being physically hurt or hit, and 26 percent of them are in repeated verbal abusive relationships. Why is it that young men and women are more susceptible to this abuse?

Ms. ARONOFF: Well, it's – you know, in – in many ways, it's not surprising that abuse would start at the same time that relationships start. Teen-agers start dating and start experimenting in relationships and so it's not surprising that the same abuse that we see in adult relationships starts around those same times. But teens tend to be also more susceptible because they don't really understand what's appropriate behavior in a relationship. They don't have clear expectations of what a relationship should be like, what is a healthy relationship look like and what can they expect and demand in a relationship in terms of respect and caring.

GLICK: And one of the things we always assume when we hear about any kind of abuse, whether it's sexual or verbal, that the woman is the one who's being abused. But it's not always the case, right?

Ms. ARONOFF: No, no, that's not always the case. Both men and women, and – and this – with teens, young men and young women, can be abusers as well as victims. And also, it's important to know that abuse happens in same-sex as well as heterosexual relationships.

GLICK: One of the things that we can all look back and think about in high school is the peer pressure.

Ms. ARONOFF: Uh-huh.

GLICK: And listening to those girls, that's when I felt like these girls are under so much pressure, they don't want to be the one in the relationship where the guy comes out and says, 'Well, she didn't do this or she wasn't that.' Is that the biggest part of the problem?

Ms. ARONOFF: I don't know if it's the biggest part of the problem, but it certainly plays a significant role. And it's one of the main ways that teen relationships look different than adult relationships in terms of the pressures that are on a young person who's experiencing abuse. They might not want to break out of the abusive relationship because they don't – there's so much pressure to be in a relationship, to belong, to not draw too much attention to themselves, to not stand out or not cause problems in any way. And so they don't want to ruffle feathers or draw attention to the fact that they're experiencing abuse.

GLICK: If you're a parent and you're watching this, of course you're really nervous, thinking, is this happening to my child?

Ms. ARONOFF: Uh-huh.

GLICK: How do I know if it's happening to my kid if they're not talking to me about it?

Ms. ARONOFF: Well, that's – that's a really complicated issue. And actually one of the very interesting findings from this Liz Claiborne study is that young people are not talking to people about – about this issue. And when they are talking to young people about it, they're often talking to their friends. But the study also shows friends aren't all that helpful.

GLICK: Right.

Ms. ARONOFF: And so the people they're choosing to talk to are the ones who are least likely to actually pra – provide them with practical help. And so it's important for parents to recognize some of these signs so that they don't wait for their child to come to them, because it's not going to happen if you wait.

GLICK: Be proactive...

Ms. ARONOFF: Exactly.

GLICK: ...talk to them about it. And so many of the things they see on television aren't necessarily the best of relationships. So it's important to communicate. And don't just say don't hang out with that person, right?

Ms. ARONOFF: Absolutely. One of the big mistakes that parents often make is they sort of lay down the law and they say, 'You can't see this person anymore.' And you know, teens are hard-wired to rebel against what their parents tell them to do. And so in many ways, that can be a very dangerous way of handling the situation because it can actually push the young person to be closer to the abuser, to stay more tightly entrenched in the abusive relationship. And so it's very important that parents approach – it's very important to bring it up and to say, 'I'm very concerned about this situation.' But to do so in a nonjudgmental way.

GLICK: Well, Jessica Aranoff, great advice for us. We'll certainly be using that and keep all that in mind. Thank you very much.

Ms. ARONOFF: thank you.

GLICK: If you'd like to learn more about abuse in teen-age relationships, logon to our Web site at today.msnbc.com.

We'll be back right after these messages.

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