Jessica Wickiewicz was a pudgy 13-year-old and he was a hockey goalie with crystal-clear blue eyes. While other kids made fun of her, he said he thought she was beautiful.

They started dating in seventh grade. He started hitting her their senior year.

It began gradually. He’d yell at her, accuse her of flirting with other guys and harp on the shortness of her cheerleading skirt. Then he started punching her, kicking her and pulling her hair, ordering her around and cutting her off from her friends. Sometimes he’d force her to have sex. After some of the harshest blows, he’d go to her with apologies and flowers.

She blamed her bruises on the rigors of cheerleading and hid them under baggy jeans and sweatshirts. And she never told anyone. “My own mother didn’t know,” says Wickiewicz, of Garden City, now 28. “It was all a big secret.”

Even though it happened to Wickiewicz a decade ago, experts in domestic violence agree that teens are increasingly finding themselves in abusive, sometimes violent, dating relationships and the problem is bigger than most people know.

California-based psychotherapist Jill Murray views the problem as “epidemic.”

“We know that one in three girls will be in a physically abusive relationship by the time she graduates high school,” says Murray, who wrote “But I Love Him: Protecting Your Teen Daughter from Controlling, Abusive Dating Relationships” (Regan Books, $13). “We know that many, many more than that are in an emotionally or verbally abusive relationship. I don’t know of any disease that affects such a large number of people.”

It’s not clear what may have been happening three weeks ago when one teen relationship on Long Island ended violently, but it has raised questions and concerns. After his girlfriend dumped him over the phone, a 16-year-old boy drove to her Huntington Station home and asked her to go outside and talk. That’s when police say he flew into a rage, and as she leaned in to hug him goodbye, he pulled out a steak knife and stabbed her in the arm, back and shoulder.
She went to the hospital; he went to jail.

**Remaining in danger**

Part of the problem is that when people talk about domestic violence, they usually envision older perpetrators and victims. But those who study youth say that teens are engaging in verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse with their dating partners.

While girls are more likely to report abuse, they aren’t the only victims.

Studies show that one in five boys will experience some form of violence in a relationship before graduating from high school, but researchers point out that they are less likely than girls to report being hit or called names because they don’t see it as serious or hurtful or they want to save face.

Late last month, a Gallup Youth Survey of 13- to 17-year-olds reported that one in eight teens knows someone in an abusive relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

“Society and sometimes family members and friends tend to minimize it and chalk it up to fighting between young lovers and the drama of puppy love,” says Clarice Murphy, associate director of the Hauppauge-based Victims Information Bureau of Suffolk, whose staff speaks at schools about abusive teen relationships. The reality, she says, is that teens are being “terrorized and victimized” and no one knows about it.

Abuse doesn’t have to be hitting. Name-calling and put-downs are examples of verbal abuse. Emotional abuse can involve threatening, intimidating or isolating another. Physical abuse can run the gamut from pinching to pushing to punching.

Sexual abuse can include making unwanted sexual comments, contact or gestures, as well as forcing sex.

“It’s a pattern of behavior where one has more control and is using that to control another person,” says Karen Gillespie, who coordinates the school-based abuse prevention program of 180 Turning Lives Around, a nonprofit based in Hazlet, N.J. “It continues and will typically get worse over time.”

Why is this happening? Some say parents haven’t done enough to teach the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Others say it’s the result of TV, movies, video games and music that promote violence and objectify women.

“Our culture is so inundated with so many of these images that we’re numb to it,” says Mary Jo Fay, whose Web site, www.helpfromsurvivors.com, assists abuse victims trying to leave difficult relationships. “We are so bombarded with the graphic things that we don’t know how to recognize the subtle warning signs anymore.”
Stopping violent and controlling behavior is the goal of Helping Abusers Learn Together, a program for adult male abusers by Suffolk’s victim’s information bureau, which started a similar section for boys 13 to 17 in September. (While there is a mandated program for adult women, there are no plans right now to have one for girls.)

Director Anabel Lago-Pedrick says the program tries to connect how the abuse young males have witnessed or been subjected to at home carries over into their relationships. For many, “this is the first time they’ve ever been confronted with their behavior, and the first time they get to talk.”

These are complicated times for young people, says Stephanie Nilva, director of Breaking the Cycle New York, a local chapter of a national legal services organization that provides prevention and intervention to youths 12 to 22 involved in dating abuse and domestic violence. “Their identities aren’t really formed. They’re in their very first relationships and are exposed to many negative messages,” she says. “It can be very difficult for teens to identify what’s safe and healthy during a particularly confusing stage in their development.”

Even if a boyfriend or girlfriend is hurting them, Nilva says, many youths forego legal protection because they don’t want to involve the police or criminal court. Unless they’re married to or have a child with their abusers, they’re not eligible to use the family courts, Nilva says, where the victim controls whether to bring or drop the case, receives free legal counsel and faces a less rigid standard of proof. “Many teens don’t want to punish their abusers in the criminal system,” she adds, “so they simply remain in danger.”

**Being aware of the signs**

That’s why it’s critical that the people in a young person’s life become educated about the issue of teen dating violence, know the warning signs and are aware of how any sudden changes in behavior can indicate trouble, experts say.

Is the teen spending more time than usual in the bedroom? Spending less time with friends? Is there a change in their group of friends or their style of dress? Do you see any unusual marks on their necks or arms, signs of depression or aggressive behavior?

If any of these signs are present, it’s time for a talk, says Ellen deLara, who teaches social work at Syracuse University and co-authored “And Words Can Hurt Forever: How to Protect Adolescents from Bullying, Harassment and Emotional Violence” (Simon & Schuster, $25). Intervening is the best preventive measure for violence, she says. “Left to their own immature devices for navigating relationships,” she adds, “their solutions are often rash and impulsive.”

Parents and adults can’t do all the work; young people also need to know how to identify whether a prospective boyfriend or girlfriend could become abusive, says Mary Pender Greene, chief of social work services at the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services, which runs citywide teen dating violence workshops.
Some questions to ask might include: Does the person seem too good to be true? Come from a violent family? Get angry and throw things? Have a criminal record? Abuse drugs and alcohol? Hate their mother or father? Was he or she abusive in previous relationships? “As parents, it’s important to teach our children to interview prospective mates,” she says. “You want to know more than the fact that he’s [or she’s] cute.”

Ending a relationship can make both abuser and victim feel they’ve lost not only their partner but their entire social network. So it’s important to give teens room to discuss how they feel and talk to them about what’s healthy behavior and what’s not, says Maria Shields, an educator at the Hempstead-based Nassau County Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which offers school talks about dating violence, rape and sexual assault. “Kids are afraid to tell their parents because ... of how their parents are going to react. A lot of parents do more harm than good. They yell. They scream. So the kids keep it all in. They don’t want to hear a lecture. They don’t want to be punished.”

Wickiewicz, a resident hall manager at Adelphi University, says she broke up with her boyfriend when she was a sophomore in college, where she found help in a counseling and support group for victims of abuse and sexual assault. She says she now wishes she had also listened to friends, her mother and her own inner voice telling her to get away from her abusive ex. Today, she tries to pass along the lessons she learned by sharing her story with students.

“It’s just my way of trying to help,” she says.

And she’s happily dating a man she met in grade school – a testament that you can survive abuse and go on to find a healthy, loving relationship.

“... And while we can never forget it,” she adds, “we can move on.”

**STAY SAFE**

How can you protect yourself after a breakup? Break the Cycle, a group that raises awareness about violence in teen relationships, suggests the following if you are in an abusive relationship:

Tell people close to you about the violence and that you are no longer in the relationship. Ask them to look out for you and to get help if they think you are in danger.

Try not to be alone in isolated areas.

Find someone you feel comfortable talking to when you need extra support or are afraid you might go back to the abuser.

If possible, change locks in your home for which the abuser has keys.

Make an escape plan in case you are in danger and have to leave home suddenly.

Join a support group for victims of dating and domestic violence.

---

*Love Sick: When Teen Relationships become Abusive, Sometimes No One Else Knows*
Get a restraining order and give copies to the police, your school, your workplace or any other place you spend time. Keep a copy with you at all times, and call 911 if the abuser violates the order.

WARNING SIGNS

You may be in an abusive relationship if your partner ...

- Gets extremely jealous or possessive
- Accuses you of flirting or cheating
- Constantly checks up on you or makes you check in
- Tells you how to dress
- Tries to control what you do or who you see
- Tries to keep you from seeing or talking to friends or family
- Has big mood swings, being angry and loud one minute and sweet and apologetic the next
- Makes you feel nervous or like you’re walking on eggshells
- Puts you down and makes you feel as if you can’t do anything right or that nobody else would want to be with you
- Threatens to hurt you, your family or friends
- Threatens to commit suicide or hurt himself or herself because of you
- Threatens to hurt your pets or destroy your things
- Yells, grabs, pushes, shoves, shakes, punches, slaps, holds you down, throws things or hurts you in any way
- Breaks or throws things when you argue
- Pressures or forces you to have sex or go farther than you want to

SOURCE: Break the Cycle, a nonprofit organization that helps educate young people about domestic violence

CALL FOR HELP

- NYC 24-hour domestic violence hotline: 800-621-4673
- Victims Information Bureau of Suffolk’s 24-hour hotline: 631-360-3606
- Nassau County Coalition Against Domestic Violence’s 24-hour dating and domestic violence hotline: 516-542-0404; rape and sexual assault hotline: 516-222-2293

Copyright © 2005 Newsday, Inc.