

American Bar Association

January 2006

Toolkit Designed by Teens Helps Lawyers Recognize Warning Signs of Teen Dating Violence

What can lawyers, judges and court personnel do to help teens who might be victims of teen dating violence? Quite a lot, according to a guide written primarily by teens as part of a multi-year project sponsored by the ABA Steering Committee on the Unmet Legal Needs of Children.

An important early part of the project was a national summit, attended by state teams composed of a high school teen, a high school faculty member and a state government representative. Participants helped to design elements of a toolkit, which include prevention recommendation tips, a wallet card with the National Domestic Violence Hotline number, a kit for teachers that features classroom activities for raising awareness of the issue, and a DVD highlighting teens' accounts of dating violence.

Lawyers and prosecutors for teen dating violence victims should, according to the prevention recommendation book, give teens immediate personal attention when they arrive for help; explain legal procedures in simple language; support the victim's right to have personal information discussed in closed court; and include a topic of "bullying" in training programs for lawyers. The prevention recommendation tips for judges and court personnel include such tips as ensuring that teen dating violence cases are heard in an official juvenile or family court; not assuming that only females are victims and only males are perpetrators; offering the teen the opportunity to speak; and supporting appropriate, quality training of social workers for kids who may need specific help.

The toolkit was released to prepare students and teachers for the first-ever nationally designated "Teen Dating Violence Prevention and Awareness Week," February 6-10, centered on the theme of "dating and violence should never be a couple." Elements of the toolkit are available on the Steering Committee's Web site.

The project was cosponsored by the ABA Center on Children and the Law and Commission on Domestic Violence along with several other nonprofit organizations. Funding came from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.