

■ The Facts about Teen Dating Violence

Teen Dating Violence Defined

Teen dating violence, also referred to as dating violence or teen intimate partner violence, is violence committed by a person who is in, wants to be in or has been in a social relationship of a romantic or intimate nature with the victim. It occurs in both opposite- and same-sex relationships, between non-cohabitating, and sometimes cohabitating, partners. Dating violence which occurs between the ages of 11 and 14 is often referred to as “tween” dating violence. Teen dating violence includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. These forms of teen dating violence include many behaviors such as:

Physical Violence

- Shoving, hitting, pinching, grabbing and slapping, among other acts
- Physical intimidation (blocking doors, throwing objects)
- Use of weapons

Sexual Abuse

- Unwanted touching
- Forced sexual activities
- Pressure to have sex
- Threats to find someone who will do what he or she wants sexually
- Rape

Emotional Abuse

- Put-downs, insults, and rumors
- Humiliation
- Accusations
- Threats

- Possessiveness
- Overdependence
- Withdrawal of attention
- Threats to find another who will do what abuser wants sexually
- Isolation from friends or family

What We Know about Teen Dating Violence

Quantitative and qualitative research alike suggests teen dating violence can start as young as age 11 and carry through to the early 20s, when young adults have intimate relationships but do not cohabit.¹ While teen dating violence is not dissimilar from domestic violence, and often involves similar acts, a distinction is made because tweens, teens, and young adults face unique barriers to addressing the violence they are experiencing. Dependence on parents (for housing, clothes, other basic needs), education (required attendance, limited ability to switch schools even if their abuser attends the same one), and age (under 18 and legally a minor) all affect the ways in which a tween, teen, or young adult may seek help to stop violence. Because of barriers, it is not uncommon for tweens and teens to underreport their victimization.

Teen dating violence can start early; “One in four tweens (24%) say dating violence—physically hurting relationship partners—is a serious problem for their age.”² Surprisingly, many parents lack awareness of their tweens’ victimization. Only 24% of parents know of a child in their children’s peer group who has experienced emotional abuse by a partner, yet 40% of their

children know a peer who has experienced it.³

A national longitudinal study of adolescent teen dating violence found 32% of teens reported emotional abuse or physical violence in a relationship over the past 18 months; approximately 12% of this was physical violence.⁴ Additionally, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide have experienced physical dating violence.⁵

In a study of high school and college students, the prevalence of partner violence was found to increase with age.⁶ This suggests that, over time, individuals who date are increasingly likely to encounter a violent partner.

Teen Dating Violence and Technology

The use of technology is frequent in teen dating violence. Excessive text messaging, instant messaging or inappropriate postings to social networking sites, such as MySpace or Facebook, constitute teen dating violence.

“One in four teens in a relationship (25%) say they have been called names, harassed, or put down by their partner through cell phones [and] texting.”⁷ Additionally, 19% of teens in relationships say their partner has used a cellular device or the internet to spread rumors about them.⁸

The use of technology also involves fear and the threat of violence. Seventeen percent of teens reported “their partner has made them afraid not to respond to a cell phone call, email, IM or text message because of what he or she might do.”⁹ Additionally, “one in ten (10%) claim they have been threatened physically via email, IM, text, chat, etc.”¹⁰

Population Specific Statistics

While the statistics for dating violence in general studies are troubling, teen dating violence appears to vary by some key demographic factors:

- Of tweens (age 11-14) who have been in a dating relationship, 62% say they know peers who have been verbally abused by a

dating partner.¹¹

- Among adolescents aged 12 to 21, almost 3 in 10 have experienced violence in opposite-sex relationships.¹²
- Young women ages 16-24 experience the highest rates of relationship violence.¹³
- Teens identifying as lesbian, gay, and bisexual are as likely to experience violence in same-sex dating relationships as youths involved in opposite-sex dating.¹⁴
- Among rural teens, 15.8% report ever being hit, pushed, or threatened by a dating partner. For females, the odds of this violence occurring are 3.5 times that of males.¹⁵
- Race stratifies the experience of physical teen dating violence as well. The CDC (2006) found that among students experiencing physical dating violence, the prevalence among black females was 14.0% compared to 7.5% of whites and 9.2% for Hispanics. These rates are similar for males as well.¹⁶

Other Considerations

Studies on teen dating violence show that the prevalence of male victimization is equal to, if not slightly less, than that of female victimization. These statistics, however, can be misleading. As O’Keefe (2005) explains, “there are fundamental problems in asserting gender parity regarding relationship violence...much of the dating violence research overlooks whether female use of violence was in self-defense or in response to male physical or sexual violence.”¹⁷ Additionally, these data fail to account for the extent of injury, which is far more severe for females, as well as the higher rate of sexual violence experienced by female teens in dating relationships.¹⁸

Teen dating violence often looks much like adult domestic violence, yet it is starkly different because of the developmental timing. “When a teen is battered, critical development work may be interrupted. The stress and confusion of an abusive relationship can leave the victim with a diminished capacity to think, learn, and plan for

the future.”¹⁹ Research demonstrates an association between teen dating violence and lower grade point averages. Of self-reported grades, lower grades “were associated with higher levels of physical dating violence (PDV) victimization; 6.1% of students reporting mostly As reported PDV victimization compared with 13.7% of students receiving mostly Ds or Fs.”²⁰ These data suggest that dating violence may have an adverse effect on teens’ ability to perform in the classroom.

Teen dating violence occurs in unique ways. Because of co-attendance at a school, it may be especially hard for a victim to avoid an abuser. While class schedules can accommodate avoidance, hallways and locker location may present a problem.

Legal Protections and Teen Dating Violence

Victims over the age of 18 who have experienced illegal behaviors such as physical or sexual violence, threats of harm or death, or stalking can petition for a protection order in many states. It is important to note that in several states, domestic violence laws do not include jurisdiction over dating partners, unless they are cohabitating or have a child in common. For victims under age 18, legal protections can be limited, because not all states allow minors to secure protection orders. Many states have requirements regarding the minimum ages of the petitioner and respondent, as well as general laws about the age at which one can petition in the courts. Some states also require minors to apply for protection orders through a legal guardian or guardian ad litem. This may make it difficult or impossible for a minor to secure a protection order in certain jurisdictions.²¹

The Office on Violence Against Women’s Role

The Office on Violence Against Women was created in 1995 to implement the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and to lead the national effort to stop domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. The Office on Violence Against Women administers 19 grant programs to help states, tribes, and local communities transform the way in which criminal justice systems respond to violent crimes against women, hold offenders accountable for their violence, and strengthen services to victim-survivors.

References

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*Indicates research was released by the U.S. government.