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When Domestic Violence Starts Young: A Classroom Campaign and New Hot Line are Part of a Nationwide Push to Prevent Abuse

By Bonnie Miller Rubin (brubin@tribune.com), *Chicago Tribune*

Feb. 8 – Scrapping his usual lesson for the day, a South Shore high school teacher asked his students a question: Is it ever OK to be abusive with a boyfriend or girlfriend?

A 16-year-old boy spoke up. “If she does something to provoke you, then you have to put her in her place,” he said nonchalantly. “I’m not going to hit her in the face ... but I’m not going to run, either.”

With that, a candid discussion got under way that gave teacher Scott Steward an earful.

“A guy may need to get a little physical ... to know where his girlfriend is at all times,” one boy argued.

“It’s a way to show how he cares about you,” another said.

Until recently, most interventions for domestic abuse were geared to older perpetrators and victims. But increased awareness of violence among teens is sparking a flurry of initiatives for teens, including the lesson plan taught by Steward.

In a related program, the country’s first national abuse hot line for teens will open Thursday.

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surveyed 14,000 high school students as part of a 2005 study, 9.2 percent said they had been “hit, slapped or physically hurt” by their dating partners in the previous 12 months. Perhaps surprisingly, the incidence was about the same among girls and boys.

In Chicago, 15.4 percent of high school students reported being a victim, mirroring higher rates in some other big cities.

But experts said hitting isn't the only form of abuse. Today, a boy might send text messages to a girl's cell phone 30 times an hour to keep track of where she is and what she's doing.

Such examples underscore why experts believe efforts to prevent abuse and help victims must be tailored to the age group. Parents often are clueless about the technology used by teens, which can help conceal high-risk situations.

"The appetite for information is huge," said advocate Mariame Kaba. "But it has to be youth-centered ... or we won't make a dent in the problem."

Kaba works with a Rogers Park-based group called the Young Women's Action Team that is co-sponsoring a youth-led conference Saturday on teen dating violence.

Advising an abused teenager living at home is very different from advising a battered spouse, said Sheryl Cates, executive director of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, which will run the new phone line for teens.

For starters, most young victims don't confide in their parents, who probably aren't too keen on the boyfriend or girlfriend to begin with. Adults may insist that the relationship be ended--not so easy in high school, where "social status" and "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" often go hand in hand.

"Teens need to talk with someone who can relate to what they're going through ... where someone is supportive, non-judgmental and has no control over them," Cates said.

Nykia Carter, now 20, has more than a passing knowledge of the subject. In 2005, she was dating a 23-year-old man who seemed so loving – until Carter discovered that she was pregnant at age 18.

"I started seeing some control issues, like he needed to know where I was at all times ... but I tried to ignore it," Carter said.

In November 2005, she said, her partner became enraged at a perceived slight, beating her so severely that she went into premature labor and was admitted to St. Francis Hospital in Evanston.

Her daughter was born healthy in February, and Carter did not file charges ("I grew up without a dad and I didn't want that for my little girl"), though she did get an order of protection. When she has contact with the girl's father, she meets him in a public place.

What does she want young people to know?

"That it's never acceptable to place your hands on a woman, because you don't know your strength," said Carter, who is juggling motherhood with a full-time job and two online college courses. "And I would want girls who are in abusive relationships to

understand that even if he says he loves you, he doesn't ... because love should never cause physical pain."

Another initiative, called "Love Is Not Abuse," is playing out in classrooms like Steward's. The voluntary hourlong program, sponsored by Liz Claiborne Inc., has reached teens in 800 schools across the country since it began last year.

After his session with the students, Steward expressed dismay at how easily the teens seemed to accept everything from constant put-downs and name-calling to physical assaults. To teens inexperienced in dating, the intense attention can seem like love.

"It made me feel insignificant, like I haven't been doing enough," said Steward, who teaches in the School of Entrepreneurship, at 7627 S. Constance Ave. "It also made me realize ... why we must take time out of our day to have these discussions."

According to a survey being released Thursday, parents are generally unaware of the extent of the problem.

The survey, conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited and commissioned by Liz Claiborne, found that 20 percent of teens have sent e-mails and text messages up to 30 times an hour. Only 5 percent of parents thought their children engaged in such behavior.

Though that frequency might represent benign use of the technology, the survey also found:

- One in 5 respondents said he or she is "checked up on" 20 times an hour; 1 in 10 said it was more than 50 times an hour.
- Seventeen percent communicate via cell or texting 10 or more times an hour between midnight and 5 a.m.

Said Peter Picard, TRU's senior researcher: "The constant contact suggests someone really needing to control someone else in an extreme way. It's almost as if they're looking over your shoulder."

It also illuminates the digital divide between parents and their children. In an era of mobile technology, it's not enough to keep the computer out of a teen's bedroom.

"This is really about being in the dark relationship-wise, which is enabled by technology," Picard said. "We think [kids] are at home, nice and snug in their beds ... and now we see that others can find them, and they can find anybody any time of the day or night."

The new national hot line, also sponsored by Claiborne, will operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, beginning Thursday. The number is 866-331-9474.

Forty male and female “peer advocates” started training last month, learning to address issues such as how to get the teen’s class schedule changed without arousing suspicion. Volunteers can instantly connect callers to local services.

Diane Bedrosian is executive director of South Suburban Family Shelter in Homewood, one of the agencies that will field referrals. She is familiar with the issue, not just as a professional, but as a parent. Her daughter, now 29, was stalked for years by a high school boyfriend, Bedrosian said.

“Pounding on the door, he would plead, ‘Just let me in so we can talk. ... We can get married and have babies.’ He had a brother who committed suicide, and he would say, ‘If you break up with me, I don’t know what I’ll do,’” Bedrosian said.

Deciding to leave such a relationship is harder than it might look, she added.

“It may seem odd to adults, but there’s a lot of pressure to stay together ... you’ll have a date for Saturday nights, for prom. You may not be giving up kids or financial security like a spouse, but you’re giving up a lot.”

Resources

- National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 866-331-9474 (866-331-8453 for the deaf and hard of hearing)
- School curriculum: www.loveisnotabuse.com
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: www.ndvh.org
- Young Women’s Action Team: www.youngwomensactionteam.org
- South Suburban Family Shelter: www.ssfs1.org. For emergency assistance, call 708-335-3028; toll-free: 877-335-3020.

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