



Know the Signs of Teen Dating Violence

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Published in Anton Media, February 2022

Recently, the distraught parents of a local eighth-grade girl contacted North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center because their daughter was severely depressed. They shared that in the past few months, she had been the subject of harassment and cyberbullying from her ex-boyfriend, who had spread false rumors through social media that she was pregnant. He'd also texted her calling her derogatory names, and he hinted that she "better watch her back."

To their surprise, the parents learned that the boyfriend had treated their daughter poorly before the breakup. Now, she had reached the point of expressing suicidal thoughts, saying that she just wanted to just disappear.

The high-risk Triage & Emergency team at the Guidance Center determined that the case was urgent and made an appointment to see the family the very next day. These therapists, who had received special training through the Guidance Center's Douglas S. Feldman Suicide Prevention Project, were able to work with the girl to help her realize that her boyfriend's tactics—isolating her from her friends and family, making her feel unworthy of any connections with others outside of the relationship and sharing damaging social media posts—were his way of making her feel worthless so he could control her.

Abusive behavior among teens and pre-teens is nothing new, but in the age of technology, abusers have a new tool that can spread their hurtful, hateful messages like wildfire. But whether it's through social media or in person, the problem is extremely damaging to its victims, and can even turn deadly.

February has been designated as Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month, which acknowledges how serious and widespread a problem this is.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among high school students who dated, 21% of females and 10% of males experienced physical and/or sexual dating violence. In addition, 1 in every 5 students between the ages of 11 and 14 say their friends are victims of dating violence, with nearly half experiencing verbal abuse.

Common warning signs of dating abuse include:

- Checking cell phones, emails or social networks without permission
- Extreme jealousy or insecurity
- Constant belittling or put-downs
- Explosive temper
- Isolation from family and friends
- Making false accusations
- Constant mood swings toward their significant other
- Physically inflicting pain or hurt in any way
- Possessiveness
- Telling someone what to do
- Repeatedly pressuring someone to have sex

How can parents try to prevent their child from becoming a victim of abusive dating behavior? Monitor your kids' social media usage. Discuss the importance of respect in a relationship. Share the warning signs with them. Most important, always let them know you are there to help, not to criticize; this will help them feel they can come to you for advice.

If you notice changes in your child's behavior, such as isolation, anxiety or depression, ask them directly what's going on. They need to know you are there to listen to them in a loving manner, without judgment.

Though demeaning, threatening behaviors are clearly unacceptable, it can be difficult to convince a teen that his or her partner is being abusive. It's important that young people who have experienced this kind of abuse receive mental health treatment to improve their feelings of self-worth and help them move forward. Through individual and group therapy, they develop the strength and tools to recognize that their relationship is toxic and to learn what a loving, respectful relationship is like.

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Island's leading children's mental health agency. To learn more, visit www.northshorechildguidance.org or call 516-626-1971.