



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Dating violence may begin with emotional tactics

By Jane Sutter

Aah, young love. What adult doesn't remember their first kiss, the first time they held hands with their big crush, and sweet words whispered into another's ear?

While young love can certainly be beautiful and innocent, sometimes the reality turns dark and ugly.

According to a 2021 survey by the Centers for Disease Control, 8.5 percent of teens reported experiencing physical violence from a dating partner, such as being hit, injured with an object or weapon, or being slammed into something. Sexual violence was reported by 9.7 percent of teens, actions that include being forced to participate in a sexual act (such as touching or kissing or sexual intercourse) when the teen did not want to.

The CDC defines two other forms of dating violence: psychological abuse (such as name-calling, insulting, threatening) and stalking (repeated unwanted or threatening phone calls or text messages or showing up unwanted).

In Monroe County, New York, the annual Youth Risk Behavior Survey of about 19,000 teens conducted in the 2021-22 school year found that 3.9 percent reported they had been physically hurt by someone they were dating, "talking to" or going out with. And 9.8 percent reported that they were forced to have sexual intercourse or touch someone sexually or be touched by someone sexually. (The latter category, broken down by gender, shows 15 percent of females and 3 percent of males reported affirmatively).

Pattern of behavior

Lisa Nolan, director of prevention education for Willow Domestic Violence Center in Rochester, has a succinct definition for dating violence. "Dating violence and domestic violence are a pattern of behavior aimed at gaining and maintaining power



and control over someone else."

Nolan emphasized the words "pattern of behavior." Before physical violence happens, many other things happen first as the perpetrator tries to gain power and control. "These are folks who are just literally and truly doing everything possible to gain that power over somebody and to control them. Sometimes that's through coercion or threats or other things but the behavior boils down to power and control."

That can take a variety of forms, Nolan said, such as embarrassing or humiliating a partner with statements such as "you're not good enough, you're so lucky to have me. No one wants you the way that I do." The abuser blames the partner to minimize their own behavior, such as "if you didn't do this, I wouldn't have to do that."

Especially with teens, the abuse begins with emotional tactics, Nolan said. One big red flag is the level of intensity in a relationship, where a relationship is moving too fast. One partner may be texting the other constantly, to the point where he or she can't catch a break from it. And the plans

may be fast and intense such as "we're going to move in together, we're going to college together, all these giant plans, really, really fast."

Economic abuse

Nolan says "economic abuse" is one form of dating violence. While teens usually don't have access to a lot of money, this form of abuse is different. She noted that the job of a teen is to go to school.

"So when someone is interrupting their ability to do that or do that successfully, we see that as economic abuse because they are not able to do their job. 'I can't get up and go to school (today) because this person was keeping me up all night long, texting me, calling me, whatever, so now I'm exhausted and I can't get up in the morning.'"

Or the perpetrator may be keeping the partner out late, preventing him or her from studying, saying things like "Please hang out with me, I really need you, don't study for that test, you'll be fine."

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Consequently, a teen may not be able to do their best in school, they may be failing, “and that becomes part of the pattern. That’s what economic abuse looks like with young people (when) they’re not able to do their job,” Nolan continued.

Or a perpetrator may put pressure on the partner to quit extracurricular activities with statements such as “I don’t like lacrosse. I think you should quit that team. I’m not going to come to your games.” So the teen may quit the team to please the other.

“We see all that stuff happen typically long before we see things like physical or sexual abuse,” Nolan said.

Warning signs

There are other warning signs that parents can look for. (See the list from the American Academy of Pediatrics at the end of this article.)

However, many of these signs can be just a normal part of being a teenager, but if they happen suddenly or without explanation, there is cause for concern, according to the AAP. These signs include changes in attitude or mood, such as becoming anxious or depressed; acting out or being secretive; having “crying jags” or “getting hysterical”; and constantly thinking about the dating partner. There may be physical injuries, such as scratches or bruises. Teens may change friends and give up interests that previously had been important. They may begin using alcohol or drugs or

change their eating and sleeping habits.

For parents, it’s important for them to pay attention to what’s going on in the lives of their kids, so they can identify patterns of behavior earlier and perhaps stop physical violence before it happens, Nolan said.

And don’t think that physical violence is only perpetrated by males. Nolan said that sometimes in doing programs at all-boy schools, boys have told her that their girlfriends have pushed them or slapped them but the boys say, “That’s ok, that’s what girls do.”

Nolan noted that in media, if women are portrayed as being physically aggressive with a male, that’s acceptable but if the opposite occurs, it’s not. Males also can face a stigma of not being believed. “Who is going to believe that this dude is being shoved around by a woman? You mean to tell me you’re letting her do this to you?”

Risk factors and preventive factors

In a webinar on dating violence sponsored by the Children’s Safety Now Alliance, Kelly Premo, director of prevention for the South Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, presented a slide that listed risk factors that increase the likelihood that a person will become a perpetrator or a victim of violence.

Individual risk factors include aggressive behaviors/acceptance of violent behaviors; lack of concern for others; lack of impulse control or delayed gratification; adherence



to traditional gender role norms; hyper masculinity; prior sexual perpetration or victimization.

Relationship risk factors include family history of conflict and violence; childhood history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse; emotionally unsupportive family environment; poor parent-child relationships, particularly with fathers; involvement in a violent or abusive intimate relationship.

Premo emphasized that “risk factors don’t cause violence, and they don’t mean that a person is destined to experience or become a victim of violence.”

Protective factors, according to Premo, are families where there is the following: caregivers work through conflicts; emotional health and connectedness; empathy and concern for how one’s actions affect others; and academic achievement. Premo noted that income and academic achievement are two of the biggest predictors of success in life, and academic achievement is one of the biggest preventive factors.

In talking about risk factors, Nolan pointed out that she talks with adults on a daily basis who grew up in a violent home, were at-risk as teenagers, and they tell her they are healthy, in a stable relationship, etc. She stated that resiliency is a key factor to overcoming risk factors. “We have to look at the adult support that (teens) have in their lives,” whether it be a parent or a non-parent. Kids need stable, caring adults regardless of whether that person is a parent, Nolan emphasized. Access to resources, a support network, health care, housing, all those things matter as to how many risk factors that teens can overcome

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Helpful resources for dating violence:

Willow Domestic Violence Center

This agency offers a curriculum for grades 7 to 12. They also offer workshops on healthy relationships. To learn more or fill out a form to request a program, go to <https://willowcenterny.org/prevention/>

Willow offers 24-hour support for anyone in crisis and family and friends who want guidance. All options are staffed by humans.

Phone or text: 585-222-7233

Online chat: <https://willowcenterny.org/>

Centers for Disease Control

The CDC views teen dating violence as a public health problem. It offers a comprehensive evidence-based prevention model called Dating Matters®: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships. It includes strategies for kids, peers, parents, neighborhoods and schools. It focuses on teaching 11- to 14-year-olds healthy relationship skills before they start dating and reducing behaviors that increase the risk for dating violence, like substance abuse and sexual risk-taking. According to a co-leader of the Dating Matters initiative, the Archdiocese of Chicago offers the program in some of its schools. For more information, go to <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/datingmatters/index.html>

and thus choose a different path in life.

Talking to your kids

Kids often start thinking about relationships and being attracted to the opposite sex in middle school. But parents shouldn't wait until then to talk to their kids about healthy relationships, Nolan said. Parents can talk to their kids about healthy relationships with friends, "because really all the healthy relationship qualities that you should have with a friend are the same qualities that you should have with a dating partner."

Those kinds of conversations become a natural bridge to talking about relationships with the opposite sex, said Nolan, who is the mother of two adolescent males.

Parents also need to create a safe space for their children to talk to them. Some parents might mock their adolescents, especially younger ones, when they talk about being in love. "We have to say, 'That's great, tell me more about that. Tell me more about the relationship. Tell me more about what love means for you in this relationship. Why is this so good?'" Nolan said.

"Try to understand the relationship, because we have the hindsight as adults that that's not going to last and they'll move on from that relationship but it doesn't make it not real at that moment," Nolan continued. "Those relationships are the real-est things in those kids lives at that moment. So for us to treat it like it's not is a huge mistake because two dangerous things happen when we do that."

One, it closes the door on future conversations. An adolescent will think that if the parent doesn't believe the good stuff going on in the relationship, then if bad stuff happens, the parent won't believe that either.

The second thing that happens is if a parents writes off the relationship from the get-go, then they're not going to be paying attention to it, and the relationship could get bad in a few weeks and the parent will not see the pattern of behavior as mentioned previously. "So we have to start looking at those relationships from the get-go, even when it hurts your soul as a parent," Nolan said.

Nolan acknowledged how it can be difficult for parents to have conversations with their kids about relationships, especially if the parents didn't grow up having those types of conversations with their own parents. Her advice to parents is to own the awkward moment with their kid.

The following tips are all from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Warning signs of abuse:

Some of the following may be just part of being a teenager. But when these changes happen suddenly or without explanation, there is cause for concern.

School:

- Failing grades
- Dropping out of school or school activities

Attitude/mood:

- Difficulty making decisions
- Changes in personality, becoming anxious or depressed
- Acting out or being secretive
- Avoiding eye contact
- Having "crying jags" or getting "hysterical"
- Constantly thinking about dating partner

Physical appearance:

- Bruises, scratches or other injuries
- Sudden changes in clothes or make-up
- Activities
- Avoiding friends or changing peer groups
- Giving up activities, interests, or family time that previously had been important
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs

Pregnancy:

- Some teenagers believe that having a baby will help make things better
- Some girls are forced to have sex.

"Just say, 'Hey, this is really awkward and I don't really know how to talk about this with you, but it's really important and I want to talk about it together.' Be a vulnerable human and that's ultimately going to make you more trusting to your kids, and it's going to help them figure out how to have the awkward conversations (with a dating partner) when they have to walk away and do it alone."

If a teen does tell a parent about dating issues of control or violence happening, the most important thing a parent can do is to not "freak out" but to really listen to their child, Nolan said. "Just listen to them because in there you'll be able to identify some of the barriers the kid is experiencing

maybe from telling someone else or maybe breaking up from the relationship...as soon as you start going crazy and start giving advice, that's when you lose perspective on what's happening..."

In less extreme situations, parents can coach their child on how to talk to the dating partner. If the situation is more severe, parents should think through the options and consequences, if time permits, before contacting the dating partner's parents or the school or law enforcement. Nolan pointed out that "kids have a ton of barriers when it comes to dating violence," because they may be in the same class or school or on the same sports team or in the same church community as the partner. The partner may be at risk of violence in his or her home if parents are contacted or those parents may not care that this is happening.

Nolan said that the Title IX law requires schools to support students going through this type of situation, so parents should be aware that school officials can't say there is nothing they can do. Willow Domestic Violence Center staff can also offer guidance to parents or victims through its 24-hour phone and texting service, along with online chat on the website.

Jane Sutter is a freelance writer based in Rochester.

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- Pregnancy:
- Some teenagers believe that having a baby will help make things better
- Some girls are forced to have sex.

Tips for teens on how to recognize abusive behavior:

- Wanting to get serious quickly and refusing to take NO for an answer.
- Acting jealous and possessive and wanting to pick partner’s friends and activities.
- Being controlling and bossy and making all the decisions, not taking opinions of others seriously, and always checking up on partner.
- Using threats and “put-downs” when alone or with friends.

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- Using guilt trips like, “If you really love me, you would ...”
- Blaming the victim for what is wrong, like saying “It’s because of you that I get so mad.”
- Apologizing or giving excuses for violent behavior like “I promise I’ll never do it again,” or “I was drinking and just don’t know that I ...”

Tips for parents on how to talk about healthy dating relationships or possible problems.

- It is never too early or too late to teach about respect. Respect for self and others is important in any relationship.
- If you think your teenager already may be involved with an abusive partner: Give your teen a chance to talk. Listen quietly to the whole story.
- Tell your child that you are there to help, not to judge.
- If your teen does not want to talk with you, help find another trusted person for your child to talk with.
- Focus on your child’s safety and self-esteem. Point out how unhappy your teenager seems to be while with this person and the possibility of danger or harm. Do not “put down” the abusive partner.
- Let your child know that abuse always gets worse. What may start as minor verbal or physical abuse is very likely to get worse if not stopped immediately.
- If your teenager tries to break up with an abusive partner:**
- Advise that the breakup be definite and final.
- Develop a safety plan with your teen ahead of time.
- Support your teenager’s decision and be ready to help.
- Make sure your teen takes all necessary safety measures.

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5 FIVE WAYS

to protect your children from sexual abuse

Parents play the primary role in educating their children about sexual abuse. Here are 5 tips for teaching safety to the little ones God has entrusted to you.

1

Keep it practical. Teach your children the differences between safe touches and unsafe touches.

2

Tell your children that saying “no” is okay. Empower your children to say “no” if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable or touches them inappropriately.

3

Give your children a way to alert you. Tell your children they can use an excuse or share a special “code-word” with you to alert you about an unsafe person or situation.

4

Tell your children to report an unsafe touch.

Let your children know they should tell you if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe around any adult or peer. You can also identify other adults they can tell about unsafe touches.

5

Tell your children you trust them. If your child makes a report to you, believe him or her. Tell them it is not their fault and that you love them. Immediately bring the allegation to the attention of public authorities.



Promise to Protect

Pledge to Heal



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Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Tammy Sylvester

Diocesan Coordinator of Safe Environment Education and Compliance
585-328-3228
Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimsassistance@dor.org.

All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6