

Keeping Your Teen Safe on a Date

Dating abuse is a serious issue that can touch the life of any teen. Adolescents of all races and income levels are at risk for being involved in an abusive relationship. Both males and females can be abused, and both males and females can be the abusers.

What is dating abuse? Dating abuse includes any behaviors that are used to control and manipulate a dating partner. These behaviors may include the following:

- 1) physically abusive behaviors such as hitting, shaking, throwing things, forcing unwanted sexual actions, choking and using a weapon
- 2) emotionally abusive behaviors such as ignoring a date's feelings, insulting a date's beliefs and values, isolating a date from others, displaying inappropriate anger, damaging personal property, humiliating a date in public or private, and threatening to hurt oneself.

What can parents do to prevent dating abuse? Here are some things you can do that may prevent your child from getting into an abusive dating relationship:

- 1) Model healthy relationships at home.
- 2) Talk with your teen, as early as possible, about healthy relationships and positive ways to resolve conflicts.
- 3) Emphasize that abuse isn't about love.
- 4) Reinforce the importance of getting help if he or she is ever concerned about a dating partner.
- 5) Keep communication channels open.

What are some of the warning signs of dating abuse?

Your child may be in an abusive dating relationship if he or she

- has a dating partner who is intensely jealous or possessive
- has unexplained marks on his or her body (bruises, scratches, burns)
- is always deferring to his or her partner's wishes
- is increasingly isolated from family and friends
- gets visibly upset after phone calls or dates with his or her dating partner
- is afraid to make his or her partner angry

What can you do to help?

If you know or suspect your child is in an abusive dating relationship, the most important thing to do is something: take the situation seriously, tell your child you believe and support him or her, help your teen to develop a safety plan, take legal action against the perpetrator, and encourage your child to seek professional help. In the end, the decision to end an abusive relationship resides with your teenager. If he or she is having difficulty leaving the relationship, you can still do all the things mentioned above, but it's even more important to express love, concern, and confidence and not to try and control your child.

(From "Safe Dates: A Guide For Parents of Teens", Hazelden Foundation, 2004)