

What Should I Tell Clients About Teen Dating Violence?

Question

One of my 14-year-old clients was raped and beaten by her boyfriend. I just saw her 2 months ago for a wellness check-up. Is there anything I can do to help prevent this nightmare for my clients in the future?

Response from Mary E. Muscari, PhD, RN, CRNP, APRN-BC,CS

has over 30 years of experience in children's healthcare, primarily with adolescents with behavioral problems, and is the author of the parenting series Not My Kid. Dr. Muscari is a professor and Director of Forensic Health at the University of Scranton, in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Dating violence constitutes a wide variety of behaviors that include psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Although nothing new, dating violence has developed some worrisome trends, with possessive dating behavior extending into even younger ages, and some teens believing that dating violence is acceptable. One in 3 teens has been or will be involved in an abusive relationship,^[1] and perpetration and victimization of dating violence are prevalent for both males and females.^[2] Females, however, are more likely to be victims.^[3]

Dating violence can create lifelong consequences. Adolescents involved with abusive partners report increased levels of depressed mood, substance abuse, antisocial conduct, and suicidal behavior.^[4] Victims report negative health problems, such as chronic pain and gastrointestinal disorders that may interfere with or limit daily functioning.^[5] Girls often experience depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.^[6]

The Spectrum of Dating Violence

The US Department of Justice defines dating violence as "the perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried couple on the other member within the context of dating or courtship."^[3] Abusers act out of their need to control another person. They desire power over the other person and may even believe they are entitled to it, no matter the cost.

Violent actions encompass more than physical harm. They also include behaviors that arouse fear, an important component in control, the key factor that establishes abuser

dominance in the relationship.^[7] Abusers may use verbal methods to humiliate, belittle, or threaten their partners, and/or physical methods that range from slapping and hair pulling to forcible sex and weapon use. They may threaten suicide, spy on the victim, or continuously break promises, particularly the promise to "change" after "making up." Abusers may isolate their victims from family and friends, increasing victim dependence on the abuser and decreasing the opportunities for intervention. Teen dating violence may also go overlooked because teens are inexperienced in dating relationships, sometimes viewing jealous possession as "true love."^[1,2]

Implications for Nurse Practitioners

Nurse practitioners (NPs) should assess all teens and preteens for potential offending and victimization patterns, and give closer attention to those who have been victims of child abuse and those who already exhibit interpersonal difficulties, as these clients seem to be at higher risk.^[2] Other risk factors/characteristics are found in the Table below.

Table. Characteristics of Perpetrators and Victims of Dating Violence^[8]

Perpetrators	Victims
Low self-esteem	
Low income	
Low academic achievement	
Aggressive or delinquent behavior	
Substance abuse	
Social isolation	
Family instability	
Emotional dependence	
History of witnessing/experiencing violence	History of physical abuse
Prior injury from same partner	
Family instability	
Male dominance in the family	

Teens who experience dating violence may exhibit changes in their mood or personality, emotional outbursts, and physical signs of injury. Their histories may be positive for failing grades, truancy or dropping out of school, indecisiveness, substance abuse, isolation, or pregnancy.^[1]

A person's tendency to control usually does not show early in the relationship. Thus, NPs should teach young clients about the warning signs of potentially abusive partners^[1,9]:

- Negative attitude toward the opposite sex or rigid sex roles;
- Animal cruelty;
- Quick involvement in a relationship;
- Unpredictable mood swings;
- Lack of respect for partner's work/activities;
- Self-centeredness;

- Possessiveness or extreme jealousy;
- Explosive anger;
- Blames others for own mistakes;
- Substance abuse;
- Refusal to take precautions for safe sex; and
- Forced sex.

NPs should also teach dating safety^[1]:

- Double-date or "mall" date for the first few dates;
- Know exact plans before leaving for a date, and make sure parents know these plans, as well as the time the teen is expected home;
- Avoid drugs and alcohol, which decrease reaction abilities;
- Carry a cell phone with a charged battery;
- Do not leave a party alone with someone you do not know;
- Assert yourself when necessary;
- Be straightforward in relationships;
- Trust your instincts; and
- If a situation arises, remain calm and remove yourself from the situation.

Interventions are warranted when clients are victims or perpetrators of dating violence. Victims should receive support, as well as care for injuries, and should be referred to an appropriate therapist and community support group. Most counties have Women's or Victims' Resource Centers. Victims may need assistance to end the relationship due to dependence and/or fear, and some may benefit from the interventions suggested in a recent Medscape article on stalking,^[10] such as keeping diaries and obtaining a restraining or protection from abuse order. Perpetrators should also be referred for counseling, as well as to programs for juvenile batterers. In some jurisdictions, NPs may also be required to report dating violence to law enforcement.

NPs can encourage schools to initiate prevention and education. In Massachusetts, the state Department of Education has established "Updated Guidelines for Schools on Addressing Teen Dating Violence." These guidelines contain a written policy chart detailing certain behaviors, their consequences, and the persons involved, as well as a restraining order checklist, teen safety plan, and a model for implementation.^[11]

Dating can be exciting, confusing, frustrating, and somewhat anxiety producing for young people who may feel awkward and insecure as a result of normal developmental concerns. However, dating should not be a frightening and painful experience that scars their future relationships. NPs are in a critical position to minimize dating violence and keep courtship an enjoyable experience for young clients.

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