

## **Not My Kids...**

It seems that every time we turn on the news or read the paper, another community is dealing with the difficult reality of teen dating violence and bullying. There is hazing on sports teams, a domestic violence homicide, a suicide attributed to bullying. But at least this isn't happening in our community, in our schools, in our teens' lives.

For many years, we've safely hidden behind this rhetoric, which has led many of us to believe a scary myth: It's not my issue – these are not my kids. But they are your kids. In fact, Massachusetts youth are witnessing and being victimized by bullying and dating violence at scary rates. According to the latest Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior survey, 1 in 5 high school students reported being the victim of bullying, and 1 in 10 reported being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner. Worse, approximately 2 in 3 teens report knowing friends or peers who have been physically, sexually or verbally abused by their dating partners but only 3% of teens in abusive relationships report the abuse to authority figures and 6% tell family members.

### **What does it look like?**

While statistics focus on physical and sexual violence in relationships, dating abuse is not always physical. Abuse is a pattern of power and control, and in teen relationships emotional abuse is often prevalent. Teens experiencing abuse are usually silent about their experience. Often, teens blame themselves or normalize abusive behaviors as typical. The controlling behaviors, such as demanding passwords to email accounts, constant texting and phone calls can initially be viewed as signs that their partner is taking an interest in their lives and showing how much they care. However, these behaviors are warning signs that a relationship is controlling and could ultimately become physically dangerous.

Dating abuse takes its toll on teens. Victims are at increased risk for depression and suicide, eating disorders, substance abuse, and self-injury. As teen victims become isolated from family and friends, they may begin to lose their trust in others and have lowered self-esteem.

Most teens experiencing dating violence remain silent about the issue. According to the Liz Claiborne Institute, over 60% of parents reported that dating violence is not an issue in their teen's life. However, 90% of teens that experience physical and sexual violence in their relationships reported that their parents were unaware of it. Over 80% of teens who were abused by their partners through technology reported that their parents remained unaware.

### **If you suspect you're a victim of dating abuse...**

If you think that you may be in an abusive dating relationship, tell someone you trust. If you are hurt, seek medical attention, and reach out to a friend, family member, or trusted adult for support. Keep a written record of abusive incidents in a place where your partner will not have access to it. It is often difficult to remember events in detail or in chronological order when you are explaining your situation to a third party. Contact the Needham Domestic Violence Committee for more information and resources.

Domestic violence advocates may be able to help you create a safety plan and understand your legal rights. Look up information online: Peers Against Violence ([www.reachma.org/pavenet](http://www.reachma.org/pavenet)) is a great resource for teens with questions. Most importantly, realize you are not alone in this, and that the abuse is not your fault.

### **What can we do?**

#### **Talk with the teens in your life**

The first step is to realize that this will not be a one time conversation with your teen. Multiple conversations around healthy relationships are required. Over 70% of boys and 65% of girls say that their parents have not had a conversation about healthy relationships with them in the last year. Know that this conversation may be difficult and uncomfortable, but it is necessary.

For parents with teens, it is important to continue conversations about dating relationships. Be candid and honest with your teens, drawing upon personal experience to illustrate healthy/unhealthy dating scenarios. If you suspect your teen is experiencing abuse, it is important to remain nonjudgmental and supportive. Let your teen know you are concerned for their safety and identify specific unhealthy behaviors you have noticed in the relationship. Note any changes in your teen's behavior and lifestyle. Ultimately, tell your teen that you love them and that they can come to you to talk if and when they want to.

If a teen discloses dating abuse to you, it is important to remain calm. Parents may experience a continuum of emotions when they realize their child is experiencing violence; however, it is important that the focus remain on your teen's disclosure and feelings, not your reactions. Give teens time to talk about their experience. Reinforce that you are concerned about their safety and reassure your teen that you believe them. In the meantime, encourage your teen to record abusive events and offer to connect them with local domestic violence resources for support.

#### **Know your resources**

Know you can access local domestic violence agencies for support in working with the teens in your life. REACH (an acronym for Refuge Education Advocacy and CHange) offers education and advocacy services through their youth program Peers Against Violence (PAVE). While providing individual support to teens experiencing abuse through counseling and psycho-educational groups, REACH also offers concerned parents avenues to talk about their teens. If you have questions or need support, contact our hotline at 1.800.899.4000 or the PAVE program at 781.891.0724x119.

When teens are exposed to this information at school, over two thirds report that it has helped them recognize what is acceptable behavior in a dating relationship and 75% percent report confidence in identifying whether or not a relationship is abusive.

*The Needham Domestic Violence Committee meets monthly and is a community-based interagency and interdisciplinary team formed to raise awareness of domestic violence. We provide school and community-based education and outreach, and information, resources and referral services. For more*

*information visit our website at [www.needhamma.gov/health/domesticviolence](http://www.needhamma.gov/health/domesticviolence) or call the Needham Public Health Department at 781-455-7523 ext 258 if you are interested in becoming a member.*