

Toxic Relationships

#2709-EN-VID



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Introduction

As many as one out of three high school students has been touched by dating abuse. **Toxic Relationships** reaches young people just starting a relationship as well as those in a relationship that may have already turned toxic.

Teenage dating behavior is the training ground for adult relationships. Unchecked physical and emotional violence learned at an early age can too easily become domestic violence later on. In this thought provoking video, high school students discuss their own experiences with disrespect, jealousy, obsessive demands, isolating behaviors, power and control, blaming, and sexual abuse, as well as what a healthy relationship might look and feel like. Concluding with the early warning signs of toxic relationships - ones that could turn dangerous - this video encourages students to look for trust, respect, and acceptance from their friends and partners.

Program Summary

This video intertwines the comments of two groups of teens discussing the warning signs and ongoing pattern of abuse - possessiveness, verbal abuse, intimidation - emphasizing the need for recognition and speaking out. Teen peer counselors from San Diego City Schools, Karen Oster, a Life Skills teacher, Susan Hernand, a Transforming Communities Youth Trainer, and Teen CAT members contribute insights and observations to the discussion.

Teen CAT members from Novato, California work to reduce abuse in the community by changing beliefs and behaviors, knowledge and attitudes. They participate in chatrooms which field questions from teens ranging from "Should I really like him?" to "When he tells me I'm fat and ugly, why do I feel so bad?" The teens are trained to inform their peers in advance how to identify unhealthy behavior, acknowledge it and speak out.

Peer counselors from Kearny High School in San Diego, California tell viewers the key to breaking a toxic relationship is communicating how you feel - to the abuser, a friend, counselor, or support group. Karen Oster adds that what all teens really want is someone to listen. The teens, through discussion, identify what is healthy and what's not. They encourage viewers to end a relationship as soon as it is recognized as hurtful.

The video concludes with advice to those who might know of someone who is abused or in an unhealthy relationship. Be supportive, never judgemental. Listen. Remember, if a relationship ever involves physical violence, you must seek adult help.

Discussion

1. Why do teens think they have to act a certain way in order to be in a love relationship together? (The media perpetuates images of men and boys demanding services and compliance from scantily clothed women.) Or, as in fairy tales, does the princess only wake up, becomes aware, when she is kissed by the prince? How are these beliefs entering into relationships you have?
2. What can friends do for someone who tells them about an incident of abuse? (Listen to your friend. Praise the person for coming forward. Ask her if she is safe now. Give her a Hotline Number. Encourage her to save herself first - not to worry about the partner or embarrassment. Reassure her.)
3. Sometimes teen girls are abusive to teen boys. Often this behavior is in self-defense. However, when it is not, is it just as important that the boy being abused be offered support and assistance?
4. What can you do if a friend tells you that he is being abusive towards his girlfriend? (Praise him for coming forward, and ask him if he is ready to take steps toward ending his violence. Give him a Hotline Number or someone that he can call.)
5. What kind of person would be violent or abusive in an intimate relationship? (A male who is an abuser often does not fit our common stereotype of the bully or macho man. He may see it as the only way to communicate. There are all types of perpetrators - loudly aggressive, passive in public, gregarious, loners. Many perpetrators are attractive and popular to fellow students. Some are model students from model families. There is often a discrepancy between the abuser's public image and his private behavior.)
6. Are you affected by unhealthy relationships around you? What can you do if your parents, or other adults you respect are showing signs of an unhealthy relationship? (You have a chance to look at the way your parents or guardians behave in their relationships. Make choices for yourself that are respectful. You do not need to be a link in the chain of abuse. If you are in a relationship with a parent where you are suffering from abuse, remember you have the right to safety and justice. Ask for help. Don't stay isolated from the problem. Two people are stronger than one in ending relationship abuse and violence. Phone a Hotline - you can remain anonymous.)
7. If you tell the police, what happens afterward to the people involved? (Perpetrators face court conviction and time in jail. The journey of the survivor depends on her seeking professional support to cope with the trauma and transforming the wound of abuse into personal activism.)

Activities

Explore gender roles. Draw two boxes on the board or flip chart, labeling one male and one female. Ask the group to brainstorm all the words that come to mind when we think of a boy or man - for example, macho, strong, provider. Fill in the female box in the same way with associations from the group. How do we learn what it means to be a boy or girl growing up? How do these stereotypes influence our decisions about being in a relationship? What are the names individuals are called when they don't conform to their respective box? For example - creep, fag, bitch, etc. Explore the physical consequences for an individual who does not conform to the "the box." For example, taunted, beat up, raped, etc.

Ask the group to comment on which box seems to hold more power (ability or authority to control others). Describe how the male box could also be labeled "white people" or "straight people" and the female box could be labeled "people of color" or "gay/lesbian." Explain that those who fit the prevailing beliefs about what it is to be normal and successful learn to exploit differences in gender, culture or ethnicity for power and control.

What kinds of actions would support males and/or females to act outside of "the box?" Encourage participants to commit to no name calling or acting out towards boys/girls who they perceive as outside "the box."

Direct Actions

This is how you can intervene when a friend confides in you that she or he is in a troubled relationship -

Listen and believe.

Express your own concerns without passing judgement.

Pass on your knowledge about the different types of abuse – physical, emotional, verbal.

Be aware that violence can increase in frequency and severity over time.

Support them. Tell them they did not deserve or cause any kind of abuse.

Encourage them to confide in a trusted adult.

Confide in a trusted adult yourself if you see that the situation is potentially dangerous.

Work on a safety plan with your friend. For example, offer to walk her to and from school, and encourage her to tell other friends who can help.

Be there. Listen. Stay there.

Become an Activist

- Expand your awareness, learn all you can about teen relationship violence and abuse, then challenge your own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. As you experience your own personal changes, talk with peers – find out what they think and know about violence of any kind. Peer education is the answer.
- Notice each time your attitude or behavior is coming from "the box," a stereotype or label that you inherited from your parents, or the culture that promotes violence.
- Challenge and change the system that upholds attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that lead to violence and abuse against women and others. Join with other groups working for human rights and create alliances. Help break the isolation of teens and the wider community.
- Question attitudes. Let people around know that you know what you do not appreciate sexist or racist jokes. Never be afraid to let your opinion be heard.
- Call your friends on their behavior if they act abusive.
- Write to a magazine or advertiser if an image degrades women or children or portrays males in an unhealthy way.
- See the connection between violence against women and children to all forms of aggression.

Relationship Quiz

Are you going out with someone who ...

Is jealous and possessive, won't let you have friends, checks up on you, or won't accept breaking up?

Tries to control you by being bossy, giving orders, making all the decisions or not taking your opinion seriously?

Puts you down in front of friends or tells you that you would be nothing without him or her?

Is scary?

Makes you worry about reactions to things you say or do?

Threatens you, uses or owns weapons?

Is violent, has a history of fighting, loses his/her temper quickly, or brags about mistreating others?

Grabs, pushes, shoves, or hits you?

Pressures you for sex or is forceful or scary about sex?

Attempts to manipulate or guilt trip you by saying "If you really loved me, you would ...?"

Gets too serious about the relationship too fast?

Abuses drugs or alcohol and pressures you to use them?

Blames you when they mistreat you, says you provoke them, pressed their buttons, made them do it, led them on?

Has a history of bad relationships and blames the other person for all the problems?

Believes that he or she should be in control of the relationship?

Makes your family and friends uneasy and concerned for your safety?

If you answered yes to even one, you could be a victim of dating abuse. Both males and females can be victims of dating violence, as can partners in heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Abuse isn't just hitting. Abuse includes such behavior as: yelling, threatening, name-calling, saying "I'll kill myself if you leave me," obsessive phone calling or extreme possessiveness.

Dating Bill of Rights

I have the right to refuse a date without feeling guilty.

I can ask for a date without feeling rejected or inadequate if the answer is no.

I do not have to act macho.

I may choose not to act seductively.

If I don't want physical closeness, I have the right to say so.

I have the right to start a relationship slowly, to say, "I want to know you better before I become involved."

I have the right to be myself without changing to suit others.

I have the right to change a relationship when my feelings change. I can say, "We used to be close, but I want something else now."

If I am told a relationship is changing, I have the right not to blame or change myself to keep it going.

I have the right to an equal relationship with my partner.

I have the right not to dominate or be dominated.

I have the right to act one way with one person and a different way with someone else.

I have the right to change my goals whenever I want to.

Definitions

Verbal abuse - Interrupting, put-downs, name-calling, yelling, threatening, harassing - especially when a partner is trying to end the relationship - publicly scorning a particular person or groups of people in general, e.g. women or minorities.

Emotional abuse - Withholding affection because of some expectation of services that the other did not meet, the silent treatment, forbidding the other to see anyone else, accusing the other of cheating, possessive demanding, driving while drunk or under the influence of drugs with another person in the car, always dating younger girls or boys to feel more dominant, threatening suicide to manipulate the partner to remain in the relationship.

Sexual abuse - Uninvited touching or sexual advances, refusing to accept no for an answer, using pressure or manipulation in order to have sex.

Physical abuse - Pushing, shoving or physically harmful actions of any kind, using alcohol or drugs to release normal inhibitions and to become aggressive.

Economic abuse - You may have seen this type of behavior in some adult relationships - one person controlling the checkbook, having all the credit cards, and discouraging a partner's decision to be financially independent.

Resources

www.steponline.com

www.helpfteen.com

www.lacaaw.org/tapnet (Teen Abuse Prevention)

www.safenetwork.net/teens (Teen Abuse Page @Safenet)

www.meet.edu/peace (Peace It Together, Violence Prevention Site)

www.ncpc.org/teens (National Crime Prevention)

www.e-teen.net (Activist opportunities)

Non-Fiction

The Batterer, Donald G. Dutton, Ph.D., with Susan K. Golant, Basic Books, 1995

The Stalking of Kristin: A Father Investigates the Murder of His Daughter, George Lardner, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995

Preventing Teen Dating Violence: A Three-Session Curriculum for Teaching Adolescents, Austin Center for Battered Women, Austin, TX

Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence That's Tearing Our Lives Apart, Paul Kivel, Ballentine Books, 1992

Macho: Is That What You Really Want? Alternatives to Fear, Seattle, 1986. For boys, to help them find new ways of dealing with girls and coping with male friends.

Dating Violence: True Stories of Hurt and Hope, John Hicks, Millbrook Press, 1996. An insightful resource for teenagers unfortunate enough to be caught in an abusive relationship.

Coping with Dating Violence, Nancy M. Rue, Rosen Publishing, 1998.

Everything You Need to Know About Abusive Relationships, Nancy M. Rue, Rosen Publishing, 1996. Advises teen how to get help, whether they are victims or abusers.

Fiction

A Fighting Chance, Yvonne Lehman, Bethany House, 1997. A novel about an abusive relationship, showing teenagers how the decisions they make can affect their future.

Past Forgiving, Gloria Miklowitz, Simon & Schuster, 1995. An eye-opening novel for teenagers who are

unaware they may be in an abusive relationship.

If You Love Me, Maureen Wartski, Juniper, 1997. A novel about a young teenager caught in an abusive relationship.

Dreamland, Sarah Dessen, Viking Children's Books, 2000. A riveting novel for teens about a girl who finds herself in an abusive relationship.

The Woman Who Walked Into Doors, Roddy Doyle, a novel, Penguin Books, 1996.