

TEEN DATING ABUSE

# POSSESSION



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ALMOST  
ONE-THIRD  
OF TEEN  
RELATIONSHIPS  
INVOLVE ABUSE.  
HELP STUDENTS  
LEARN TO  
AVOID  
—OR BREAK FREE FROM—  
UNHEALTHY  
ENTANGLEMENTS.

## POSSESSION OBSESSION

Lauren McBride grew up in suburban Milwaukee, the eldest of three kids of a teacher and a school social worker. They made lots of time for their children. The proverbial “good girl,” McBride says that more than anything she didn’t want to disappoint her parents.

She stumbled into a verbally abusive relationship her senior year of high school. It soon turned violent, but she used lots of makeup to cover the bruises and gave her parents plausible excuses for them.

McBride says she wanted to end the relationship, but the boy threatened to show her parents photos of her in underwear and let them know she’d “taken his virginity.” “I had this terrible fear of letting my parents down—it consumed me,” she recalls. Only a choking incident that felt truly life-threatening compelled the teenager to confide everything to her mom. And it took legal restraining orders to solve the abuse problem, says McBride, now 25.

McBride’s experience is far from rare. In one recent national survey of teenagers who had been in relationships, 29 percent reported experiencing sexual or physical abuse or receiving threats of physical violence from partners. About 10 percent of students in grades nine to 12 consistently say they’ve been physically hurt on purpose by a dating partner during the past year, according to the ongoing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) youth risk surveys.

Kids who witness violence between their parents are at higher-than-average risk to be the abusers—and the abused. Perhaps surprisingly, girls and boys are equally

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likely to turn violent with dating partners. But girls suffer more severe injuries, says health scientist Andra Tharp of the CDC. Teens who use alcohol or drugs and have trouble managing anger are especially likely to strike out against boyfriends or girlfriends. “But dating violence can affect anyone at any time,” she says. “Nobody is exempt.”

The barrage of digital media—texting, tweeting, instant-messaging, Facebook posting, Skyping—keeps kids on a shorter-than-ever leash to abusive partners. “It keeps them connected 24/7—and controlled,” says Tammy Hall, a recently retired West Chester, Ohio, health teacher who taught dating-abuse prevention.

With awareness growing on many campuses, 11 states since 2007 have passed laws mandating that schools teach teens about partner abuse or at least draw greater attention to the problem. The new laws and increasing availability of curricula have prompted a surge in prevention programs over the past few years, mostly at middle schools and for the youngest high school students.

More than 11,000 schools and agencies (such as the Girl Scouts) have requested the free Love Is Not Abuse curriculum online in the past five years, says a Liz Claiborne Inc. spokesperson. The clothing company partnered with the Education Development Center to create the four-lesson program.

Love Is Not Abuse uses poetry, short stories, videos and student journaling to spark awareness of the differences between healthy and abusive dating. Kids discuss their own experiences of abuse and brainstorm how to help friends who may be in trouble. “It’s very engaging,” says Erin O’Malley, director of guidance at Park View High School in Sterling, Va. Digital abuse provokes the greatest passion—how to deal with girlfriends who text and demand answers at 4 a.m., or boyfriends who threaten to call you a slut on Facebook as a control tactic.

Students read aloud a “was it rape?” date scenario from the girl’s and the boy’s points of view in a different four-day program for ninth-grade students at Milford High School in Milford, Ohio. “Some say she asked

## PERSONAL STORIES

Anna Sanchez (not her real name), 19, wishes her school had taught that control can signal abuse rather than love. At age 13, she thought she’d fallen in love with a spirited, wonderful 16-year-old boy. But soon after they started dating, he lost his temper when he saw her at school in a low-cut blouse. He said she looked like a whore and ripped the blouse right down the middle. He insisted on driving her home from school, and that she stop spending time with friends.

Then the boy began to hit her, leaving ugly bruise marks, if he saw her conversing with boys. “He was always very remorseful afterward and begged me to forgive him.”

She decided to break up with her boyfriend after a violent encounter at his apartment. He was pushing her to have sex; she wanted to remain a virgin. “Suddenly, he smacked me so hard I fell down. He dragged me into the shower by my hair, turned on the hot water, threw me into the tub and

raped me,” says Sanchez. The boy also slashed her thighs with a razor, leaving scars that are still visible six years later, she says.

Sanchez’s parents were separated. Her mother was working two jobs to support the girl and a 2-year-old brother. Sanchez told her beleaguered mom nothing. When the young teenager tried to break up with her violent boyfriend, he said he’d kill her mother and little brother. “I knew he was in a position to do it because he was a gang member and sold drugs,” she says.

Control is often the hallmark of teen dating abuse, and fear is the deterrent to reporting violent partners, even if the surface details of young people’s lives look different.

Laura Hampikian was thrilled when a boy she met on MySpace wanted an exclusive relationship after they’d known each other for only a month. “My parents were going

for sex because she went back to his house and kissed him!” marvels teacher Kristi McKenney. The post-skit discussion sharpens awareness of the other gender’s perspective and ways to avoid sexual abuse, she says.

At the Bronx School of Science Inquiry and Investigation in New York City, games that cue students to move to one part of the room if they think varied behaviors are OK—for example, a boyfriend hitting a girl once in a while—provoke discussion and teachable moments, notes counselor Angelica Ferreras.

Widely publicized celebrity abuse cases also attract avid teen interest, providing the grist for real-life lessons on healthy dating, teachers say.

Gender stereotypes are another way to raise kids’ awareness about dating abuse, says Ann Burke, who taught health to middle schoolers for 29 years and now does free workshops on teen dating violence for Rhode Island schools. She draws two large boxes—labeled male and female—then asks students to blurt out adjectives describing each gender. Adjectives that aren’t stereotypes are listed

through a divorce, and I wanted to prove I could stick with someone,” she recalls.

Her emotionally volatile boyfriend felt unloved at home and soon was texting or phoning 14-year-old Laura all day and into the night. “I’d hide the phone under the covers at 3 a.m. so my parents wouldn’t see.”

Laura’s boyfriend pressured her to stop hanging out with friends, so she soon had none, and to go much further sexually than she wanted. The Boise, Idaho, teen, feeling stifled and isolated, tried several times to break up with the boy but always relented when he threatened to commit suicide. “I confided in nobody. I didn’t recognize it as abuse,” she says now, at age 19.

After a miserable year and a half of feeling as if this teenage boy’s life was in her hands, she did end the relationship—online. He wrote back that he would kill himself (but did not).

## LGBT Students

LGBT teenagers have the same vulnerabilities to abusive dating as straight kids—and then some.

“There’s an added layer for these kids—the fear of being outed if they report abuse, because they might not be out to their parents or friends,” says Tonya Turner, senior staff attorney at Break the Cycle, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that assists young survivors of dating violence. Their need for secrecy could make them less likely than straight classmates to report an abusive situation, she adds.

Also, sometimes they’re in environments rife with the potential for abuse. For example, at schools with few out peers, LGBT teens may look for romantic partners in bars, where they can be easy targets for harassment by older, more savvy people, reports Connie Burk, executive director of the Seattle-based Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse. They’re also more likely than straight kids to be thrown out if parents discover their sexual orientation. A disproportionate number of homeless teens are LGBT kids who must resort to “survival sex,” she adds.

And if they find partners at school, students sometimes stay in relationships with abusive classmates “because, they say, ‘I don’t know anybody else in my school who’s gay,’” Burk points out.

Kids who are willing to report abusers often fear they won’t be believed, notes Turner. “If it’s two boys, adults will say, ‘Oh, it’s just two guys fighting. What can you do?’ And if it’s girls, we’ve heard adults respond, ‘How can a girl hurt another girl?’”

Adults’ own stereotypes can throw doubt on credibility if the physically abused partner of two young lesbians looks more masculine. “The taller, bigger one may not fight back—she may be passive,” says Turner. “But adults just don’t believe what’s really happening with these young women.”

Anna Sanchez was less fortunate. Her ordeal continued for three years. She survived the incident of rape and severe violence. But her injuries just got worse and worse. They continued through the early stages of an accidental pregnancy that ended in abortion. Of course, she had to involve her mom eventually. And she wound up attending four different high schools in efforts to get away. “He stalked me for years.”

Eventually, she had moved so many times that the violent boy lost track of her. Now a college student and happily married, she volunteers at an agency that presents workshops in high schools on teen dating violence.

“Doing this has given me a chance to heal,” says Sanchez. “By getting my story out and helping others understand abuse, hopefully it will give them the confidence to leave before they’re seriously hurt or killed.”

“It’s a cry for help, and they really want protection; they want adults to know.”

under “outside the box.” Then a discussion explores how valid the macho guy-passive girl images are. “The kids brainstorm the harmful effects of these aggressor-victim ideas, and it’s an easy transition to teaching about dating violence,” says Burke.

In Austin, Texas, public schools, students seen as high-risk because they’ve already been involved in or exposed to violence—at home or through relationships—meet in small groups for 24 weekly support and education sessions. They create skits, draw cartoons about their feelings and make collages. Students learn how to ask for consent, how to handle jealousy and how to end a relationship.

In a powerful theater game, one student acts as puppeteer, another as puppet. “They learn and discuss what it feels like to have someone leading you around, then what it feels like to be in control, because control is so much at the heart of dating abuse,” says program director Barri Rosenbluth, who manages Expect Respect, a youth project based at the SafePlace agency in Austin.

Dating abuse can shatter a teen’s self-esteem, research suggests. Victims are also more prone to binge drinking, drug use and eating disorders. Harmful effects even reverberate into adulthood: Teens entangled in violent dating relationships are more likely than others to be involved

## Mentoring Abused Students

Teens opening the eyes of younger teens to dating abuse—through popular media they all relate to, using a shared colloquial tongue that’s full of drama but, thankfully, free of preaching:

That’s the novel idea behind abuse-prevention materials for middle schoolers recently dreamed up by trained high school “peer leaders” in 11 U.S. cities.

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships, a program funded mostly by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, aims to prevent date violence and promote healthy relationships among 11- to 14-year-olds. Start Strong is testing innovative curricula in schools and investigating needed community policies. One unusual aspect of the program is a network of high school-age advisers, trained in the issue, who do workshops at middle schools and also develop creative teaching tools they believe will strike a responsive chord with younger teens.

“They’re the credible messengers. They’re the people a young teen is most likely to listen to,” insists Casey Corcoran, a former teacher who directs Start Strong in Boston.

How about using comic books, wildly popular with middle schoolers, to get the message across? In the Bronx, teen advisers wrote and drew their own, sharing it widely with younger kids. It has a day-in-the-life approach, following two young couples through a 24-hour period—one relationship is healthy, one is not. The cartoon-embellished comic shows healthy uses of texting, how a partner’s controlling behavior and guilt-tripping hurts kids, and the effects of physical aggression. It’s downloadable for free at [startstrongbronx.org](http://startstrongbronx.org).

The New York teen advisers also created a film called *Broken Harmonies*, which can be downloaded at the same website.

Music lyrics, whose unhealthy relationship messages can influence teenagers, are cleverly scrutinized in a “nutritional impact” label created by Boston teen advisers. Designed to look like the labels on food, it has columns on “amount per serving” and “intensity level.” The ingredients include healthy and unhealthy aspects of dating relationships. The healthy column includes items such as “trust” and “equality.” “Possession-obsession” and “relationship=sex” are among the unhealthy. There are numerical values on the charts, and a total at the bottom that reveals whether a song is encouraging healthy (or unhealthy) teen dating.

“Kids love music, and it’s not that we’re telling them not to listen, but to think critically about the songs. It’s a great touchstone for discussion about abuse,” says Corcoran. The label is downloadable without charge at [tinyurl.com/6gzjftz](http://tinyurl.com/6gzjftz).

in violent activities later on, notes Sharp of the CDC.

Last September, the CDC launched a \$7 million prevention program in Baltimore; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Chicago; and the Oakland-Hayward, Calif., metropolitan area. The five-year project includes teacher training and the testing of school curricula on dating violence. The CDC is

also testing the value of a bystander “helper” curriculum called Green Dot in 13 Kentucky high schools.

“There’s increased awareness that teen dating violence is a public-health issue,” says Sharp. “We want to learn more about what works in prevention, and the CDC wants to see schools doing prevention work, so that youth are safer.” ♦

# HOW TO HELP

Prompted by school prevention programs or just urgent, spontaneous discomfort, students sometimes confide their stories of dating abuse to teachers and counselors. Although this can be a tricky scenario for the listener, it also offers a chance to be of great help, say veteran educators.

Many times it's verbal abuse that can demolish a teen's self-esteem and precede violence or sexual assault. "I listen, I just listen," says Kristi McKenney, a ninth-grade health teacher in Milford, Ohio. "So many don't feel they have someone to talk to." Although she urges kids to see the school counselor, some resist. Often, though, they return and say, "I need help," because, she believes, they felt listened to earlier.

Students who have been sexually abused or beaten by partners "need to understand they're not at fault, they're not being judged. When they're confiding in you is not the time to say, 'Oh, you shouldn't have,' because it only makes them feel worse," notes Angelica Ferreras, counselor at the Bronx School of Science Inquiry and Investigation, a middle school in New York City.

Kids often think they're the only ones this has happened to and fear sticking out as a weirdo—anathema to adolescents. So it's good to let them know that other teens have been

through this experience, suggests Katie Eklund, a school psychologist in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Tammy Hall, a recently retired Ohio health teacher, has listened to boys who were physically assaulted by jealous girlfriends. "No matter what they say, you can't act shocked because then you've lost them," she says. "It's harder for guys to admit it because they're supposed to be macho."

In cases of potentially serious abuse, it's best to set the boundaries of confidentiality early on. Counselors typically offer students confidential support but let them know that if they're in danger of hurting themselves or others, or being hurt, there is a duty to report what students tell. Sometimes kids pull back if they hear their parents or even police will be told. But when teens reach the point of disclosure, many counselors agree with Eklund: "It's a cry for help, and they really want protection; they want adults to know."

Specific legal mandates on reporting abuse vary by state, so school employees should know how their state's laws apply to disclosures about dating abuse, suggests Tonya Turner, senior staff attorney at non-profit Break the Cycle in Los Angeles.

If teens make serious accusations against a classmate, counselors often call in the other student to gain his or her perspective. Parents are called in early too.

Some schools have "stay away" policies that require abusive students to keep a certain distance from victims—they're not put in the same classes or assigned nearby lockers, for example. "It can protect kids and help them move on from abusive relationships," says Barri Rosenbluth, program director at Expect Respect in Austin, Texas, which provides school prevention and counseling services on dating abuse.

## Who's Abused

One in 10 adolescents say they've been the victim of physical dating violence, according to the CDC.

## Discuss

Start talking about healthy relationships early. More than 70 percent of eighth- and ninth-graders say they are already dating.

**IN THE PORTFOLIO** *Tips for teaching students to recognize controlling behavior and abuse  
Ways educators can help student victims of dating violence  
Additional links and resources on preventing dating abuse*

[tolerance.org/possession-obsession](http://tolerance.org/possession-obsession)