

## **Tough love: Teenage date abuse**

By Jenny Deam  
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He seemed perfect. After all the teenage posers and players the 16-year-old girl had previously dated, being with this guy was like a fairy tale.

Within a week he said he loved her. She would slip out of class several times a day to call him because he wanted to hear her voice. He said he couldn't imagine life without her.

"In the beginning it was just awesome. Everyone wants a boyfriend or girlfriend so badly that once you have one you think you'd better not let go," says the girl, who attends a Denver-area private high school. Her name is being withheld for privacy and protection.

But two months later, her "great catch" inexplicably began screaming and cursing at her over an offhand comment. She could hear loud crashes on the other end of the phone as he threw things and pounded his head and fist against the wall. Just as suddenly, he begged for forgiveness.

She tried to please him even as their relationship grew more dangerous. Sometimes she wanted to break up but he vowed to kill himself if she did.

In the highly charged world of teenage romance such troubling behavior is apparently more widespread than many adults imagine:

According to a March survey of 13- to 18-year-olds, nearly one in three teenage girls in dating relationships say they have feared being physically hurt by a partner. Almost one in five admit being hit, slapped or shoved by a boyfriend.

Nevertheless, in the same online poll conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited marketing firm, many young people not only accept such behaviors but consider them normal and exciting:

Nearly half admitted doing something that conflicted with their personal values or beliefs to please a boyfriend or girlfriend. Some said they would "do almost anything" to hold onto a relationship.

One in four teens in a relationship said their boyfriend or girlfriend tried to prevent them from spending time with friends or family. But more than a quarter said it was OK and even flattering for someone to "act really jealous" or "be in charge."

As many as 60 percent of teens in relationships acknowledged their partner made them feel bad or embarrassed about themselves. And 7 percent said their boyfriend or girlfriend had threatened to kill them or commit suicide if they broke up.

The study was commissioned by Liz Clairborne Inc. as part of its ongoing Love Is Not Abuse campaign to stop domestic violence.

The findings horrify, but don't surprise, Cynthia Lackner, who has spent the past five years studying and trying to educate middle- and high-schoolers about what she calls teen dating abuse.

What most people don't realize, says Lackner, who has a master's in psychology, is abuse appears in many forms and crosses economic, cultural and racial lines. It can be physical, sexual or emotional.

In fact, she says emotional abuse is probably the most common type of abuse among teens who find the drama of tortured, unchecked emotions intoxicating.

Contrary to popular belief, says Lackner, who lives in Denver, teen abuse victims are not always the downtrodden or misfits. Often they belong to popular A-list cliques and feel their status is defined by the people they date.

The notion of teen dating abuse was off the radar for most people until 2001, when a groundbreaking Harvard University Public Health study reported that one in five Massachusetts high school girls had been physically or sexually abused by boyfriends.

Still, not everyone is buying the statistics or shares the alarm. "It would depend on what you call abuse," says William Strauss, author of numerous books about the current generation of teenagers he calls "millennials."

He is skeptical of the numbers, which he contends lump together minor and major transgressions. Statistics showing a decrease in teen pregnancy and arrests are better indicators of the real teenage landscape.

Strauss believes today's young people are actually more responsible than previous generations and crave civility in their relationships.

Lackner, on the other hand, argues that dating abuse, much like other social ills such as sexual harassment or date rape, tends to go underreported and is difficult to prove.

After reading the Harvard study, Lackner was so troubled she produced a local documentary and crisscrossed area schools talking to kids - and their parents -

about what love looks and feels like. "An immediate red flag should be when someone makes you feel that whatever you are is not enough," Lackner says.

Nearly four years ago she was hired by CHAI, a Jewish resource group for domestic violence victims, to establish classes for teens run by teens. It is thought to be the only peer program of its kind in the nation.

Often after class, boys and girls come forward to admit they have been abused or been an abuser. One girl said she slapped her boyfriend because her parents slapped her and she thought that was how anger was expressed.

The 16-year-old girl whose boyfriend threatened suicide spoke at one CHAI classes. "You could have heard a pin drop," Lackner says. "Everyone was just blown away that this was coming from one of them."

The girl, now 18, eventually broke up with her boyfriend. She now watches the relationships her younger sister enters very closely.

Sometimes, though, monitoring does not prevent abuse.

A suburban, divorced mother (who also asked her name not be used to protect her daughter) watched helplessly for four years as her child fell deeper under the spell of a destructive relationship.

Her daughter, beautiful and popular, became friends with a witty, charming boy she met at a church group when she was 12. Through her early teen years, she became more transfixed by him.

The girl's mother said she was troubled by the burgeoning relationship but figured the kids were so young it was harmless. Puppy love, she thought. She also thought it was important for her daughter to pick her own friends.

As the boy became more controlling instead of being angry, the girl was flattered. When the boy started calling her "Yo Dog" and "Yo (expletive)," the girl shrugged it off as "the way kids talk to each other."

Sometimes he would pin her to the couch supposedly as a joke. Once he reared back to strike her but stopped himself.

Finally the mother grew so alarmed she turned to a therapist who advised her not to intervene unless there was physical danger. The therapist said the girl needed to work it out. Too much parental interference could push the couple closer.

By the time her daughter was learning to drive, the boy had begun stalking her. The girl finally asked her mother for help. The mother threatened the boy with a restraining order. That was four years ago. Occasionally he still tries to call.

"It was so painful to sit there and know something is going on but not be able to help," the mother says. "I had to trust she would find the strength, and she did."

But she wishes she had intervened more quickly. "My advice to other parents is to start talking early about what healthy relationships look like. You also need to pay attention to their friends. When your kids are 12 or 13 and you don't like their friends, separate them. You don't have to give a lot of reasons. You're the parent."

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## **Indications of trouble**

### **Early warning signs that a date may become abusive:**

- Extreme jealousy
- Controlling behavior
- Quick involvement
- Unpredictable mood swings
- Alcohol and drug use
- Explosive anger
- Isolates you from friends and family
- Uses force during an argument
- Shows hypersensitivity
- Believes in rigid sex roles
- Blames others for his problems or feelings
- Cruel to animals or children
- Verbally abusive
- Abused former partners
- Threatens violence

### **Common clues that indicate a teenager may be experiencing dating violence:**

- Physical signs of injury
- Truancy, dropping out of school
- Failing grades
- Indecision
- Changes in mood or personality
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Pregnancy
- Emotional outburst
- Isolation

