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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES

Educators as Bystanders: Recognizing and Responding to Teen Dating Violence

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PART I: BACKGROUND

Turn on any teen TV show; stream any popular song. What do you see? Teenagers inundated with romance. As an educator, you see them holding hands in the hallway, talking about who's dating who this week and staring at their crush. Dating is a hallmark of the teenage experience. What many adults fail to notice or are ill-equipped to address is that 1 in 3 teens experience first love hand-in-hand with abuse (Davis, 2008). Teen Dating Violence is an epidemic among students.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines Teen Dating Violence as "physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional aggression within a dating relationship." Unfortunately, it occurs more often than we might like to believe. According to the CDC, 1.5 million high school students experience dating abuse annually, far exceeding rates of other types of youth violence (2006). Girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience three times the national rate of intimate partner violence (Breiding et al., 2014). Though Teen Dating Violence among our students is prevalent, only 33% of teens experiencing violence ask for help (Liz Claiborne, Inc. 2005).

Many young people do not seek help because they fail to recognize dating abuse when it occurs. According to Liz Claiborne, Inc.'s *College Dating Violence and Abuse Poll* (2011), 70% of respondents who experienced Teen Dating Violence viewed their relationships as healthy when they were in them. Other teens may recognize abuse in their relationships, but fear the social consequences of exposing themselves by seeking adult support. More than half of teens are unaware of domestic violence laws or Title IX policies that offer protection from retaliation; many doubt that adults can provide any meaningful help at all.

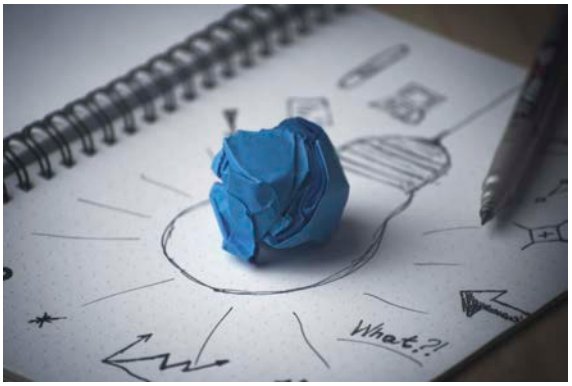
Unfortunately, students' misgivings about adults may not be misplaced. Eighty-two percent of parents believe that they would recognize signs of dating abuse in their child, yet 58% of parents could not correctly identify these warning signs when asked (Liz Claiborne,

Inc., 2009). For too many teens, disclosing abuse to adults has led to victim-blaming, minimization, and inaction. Thus teens are reluctant to disclose abuse or to seek help.

Dating abuse may seem like a social issue, but it has the power to reshape educational attainment and life outcomes for students who experience it. High school students who have been physically hurt by a partner earn grades of C or D twice as often as grades of A or B (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2010). Students who have experienced Teen Dating Violence are 25% more likely to drop out of high school than their non-abused peers (Diette et al., 2017). Over a lifetime, victims of dating abuse experience a 20% reduction in earnings, and are more likely than their non-abused peers to smoke, use drugs, become pregnant as a teenager, develop eating disorders, and consider or attempt suicide (Vagi et al., 2015).

Ultimately, Teen Dating Violence is an issue of equity. While teens of all genders, races, abilities, and sexual orientations can and do experience abuse, higher rates of victimization consistently pool around oppression. Teens with disabilities are twice as vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse by a romantic partner (Rand & Harrell, 2009). Sixty percent of Black girls will experience sexual assault before age 18 (Black Women's Blueprint, 2012). Forty-four percent of lesbians and 61% of bisexual women will be raped, physical assaulted, or stalked by an intimate partner, compared to 35% of heterosexual women (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2010). And 54% of trans and gender non-conforming teens will experience coercive control or physical harm at the hands of a partner (James et al., 2016). When abuse disproportionately affects teens on the basis of race, gender, ability, or sexual orientation, it becomes a barrier to full and equal access to education. Bridging this achievement gap demands a school-based response to Teen Dating Violence to support students experiencing abuse and to prevent further violence.

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



SCHOOL-WIDE INTERVENTIONS

Recognize "red flag" behaviors."

Recognizing "red flag" behaviors is the first step towards interrupting and preventing dating abuse. Educators must be prepared to address warning signs such as physical injuries or absenteeism in students, but more subtle indicators of abuse may exist. For example, when teenagers engage in public displays of affection, do both teens seem enthusiastic? Physical contact can be means of exercising control. Are you no longer seeing a student at their extracurricular activities or with their friend group? Teens at risk for dating violence

often experience greater social isolation. Not every teenager in trouble will show the same or any warning signs, but the best way to look out for student safety is to trust your instincts. If you find yourself worried about a particular student, it is likely with good cause.

Use Neutral Language to Communicate.

Adults who recognize risk factors for Teen Dating Violence must assume responsibility for addressing it. Still, as much as we might like to, we cannot ban a student from continuing to see an abusive partner without alienating them and removing ourselves as trusted adults to confide in. Neutral language encourages a student to communicate more openly. For example, name observable behaviors, such as "I saw her grab your arm." Then proceed with compassionate curiosity, such as "What's going on there?" This approach prevents students from disputing what we have witnessed, while communicating our willingness to hear their perspective.

Explain to the student why those behaviors concern you. Remind them that they deserve to be treated better. Provide them with resources and an open invitation to speak with you again. But remember, while we cannot force students to leave an abusive relationship, as Mandated Reporters, we also cannot keep their disclosures a secret. Mandated Reporting laws vary state-by-state, but many include child-on-child abuse as a reportable offense. Revisit your state's laws around Mandated Reporting and be upfront with your students about your responsibilities. Do not make any promises you cannot keep.

DISTRICT INTERVENTIONS

Develop Explicit TDV Policy

Policy is another cornerstone of a successful dating abuse prevention initiative. An explicit policy on Teen Dating Violence communicates to staff and students that these are issues the school district takes seriously. Research shows that effective and accessible policies ensure staff and students can recognize violations when they occur and know when and how to make a report. Furthermore, under Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, students are protected from discrimination based on sex, including dating violence, in any educational program receiving Federal funding. Schools are required to initiate a prompt, adequate, and impartial investigation of any complaint brought to school district personnel—even those that occur off-campus, such as on the school bus or online. Schools may also be required to provide accommodations for impacted students such as counseling services, tutoring, assignment extensions, and schedule changes, among others (Advocates for Youth, 2019).

Publicize Contact Information of the District Staff Responsible for Investigations.

Every school district must have an appointed Title IX coordinator to handle investigations and accommodations. Yet students and parents are often unaware of who their district's Title IX coordinator is, or even that the role exists (Advocates for Youth, 2019). Is your Title IX coordinator's contact information readily available online? Have students been

taught about the Title IX policy and introduced to the coordinator at school? Assemblies, first-year student orientations, and classroom visits provide opportunities for students to know their rights within the school and their responsibilities to one another—and if a student is already experiencing abuse, a way to let them know they do not have to cope alone.

Contact Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Centers for Added Support

School districts are not alone either. Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Centers across the country offer a range of support for new school-wide responses. Staff at these centers provide free, confidential counseling to survivors of abuse and their loved ones, and can sometimes travel to schools to meet with students in need. They can also help build district capacity through Mandated Reporter Trainings, ensuring all school personnel are on the same page about what constitutes abuse and how to report it. Some may even conduct Cultural Climate Assessments to identify ingrained attitudes and beliefs that may hinder prevention efforts.

Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Centers can help schools take a proactive stance against Teen Dating Violence through comprehensive prevention education. They are armed with curricula and trained presenters to promote empathy, active bystander skills, self-esteem, boundaries, and other protective factors in K-12 classrooms. Many offer their services free to school districts. Your local center can best describe how they can meet your school district's needs.

Conclusion

Too many students experience Teen Dating Violence. Educators are uniquely positioned to interrupt and prevent further violence. Everyday access to students' lives and established connections are powerful tools to help students reevaluate what they deserve from relationships. District-wide initiatives ensure that all students are held to the same standards of accountability and emphasize that students are not alone when coping with abuse. While Teen Dating Violence's impact on learning and achievement is dramatic, it is also reversible. With support from school districts and community resources, teenagers can bridge the achievement gap and lead the fulfilling lives they deserve.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Love is Respect
www.loveisrespect.org

National Sexual Violence Resource Center
www.nsvrc.org

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)
www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teen-dating-violence.html

Break the Cycle Dating Violence Model Policy
www.breakthecycle.org/sites/default/files/pdf/dc-model-school-policy.pdf

Break the Cycle Resource Manual for School Employees
www.breakthecycle.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ta-teacher-manual.pdf

Know Your IX
www.knowyourix.org

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