

A letter to parents on teen dating abuse:

Dear parents,

As a physician who specializes in care for adolescents, a researcher on teen dating abuse, and a parent of a teen, I am often asked by other parents to talk about the warning signs of dating abuse, what parents should be looking for, and how they can help their child navigate out of an unhealthy relationship. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to these questions.

A common characteristic of unhealthy and abusive relationships is the control that the abusive partner seeks to maintain in the relationship. This includes telling someone what to wear, where they can go, who they can hang out with, calling them names, humiliating them in front of others. Over time, the isolation from one's social network increases, as the abuser insists on spending time "just the two of us," and threatens to leave or cause harm if things do not go the way they want, "You must not love me." Creating this isolation and dissolution of one's social supports (loss of friends, disconnectedness from family) are hallmarks of controlling behaviors. In addition, abusers often monitor cell phones and emails, and for example, may threaten harm if the response to a text message is not instant. Parents are rarely aware of such controlling tactics as these occur insidiously over time, and an adolescent may themselves not recognize the controlling, possessive behaviors as unhealthy. "They must love me because they just want to spend time with me." While the following non-specific warning signs could indicate other concerning things such as depression or drug use, these should also raise a red flag for parents and adult caregivers about the possibility of an unhealthy relationship:

- no longer hanging out with his/her circle of friends
- wearing the same clothing
- distracted when spoken to
- constantly checking cell phone, gets extremely upset when asked to turn phone off
- withdrawn, quieter than usual
- angry, irritable when asked how they are doing
- making excuses for their boyfriend/girlfriend
- showering immediately after getting home
- unexplained scratches or bruises

Sexual coercion and violence are also not uncommon in teen dating abuse. Again, because of the emotional abuse and control, victims of sexual violence may be convinced that they are to blame for what has happened. "You'd do this if you loved me" or "If you don't have sex with me, I'll leave you" are common examples of sexual coercion. In some instances, girls in abusive relationships describe how their partners actively tried to get them pregnant. Rarely do teens disclose such sexual abuse to their parents as they may feel shameful, guilty, and scared. Parents need to be aware of the possibility of sexual abuse, and to ensure that they communicate with their child that they are never to blame if someone tries to make them do things sexually that they don't want to do. And certainly, that no one

ever has the right to put their hands on them, period. The physical and sexual violence can escalate quickly in these unhealthy relationships where the abusive partner has significant control over the other.

Perhaps the best advice for parents is to start talking about what constitutes a healthy, respectful relationship early on with your child. Sharing the warning signs of teen dating abuse with your child and saying, "If you know someone who's experiencing something like this, let's talk about it, let's talk about how you can be a good friend and help them stay safe." Please assure your child that they are not to blame for an unhealthy relationship, and that you are available to help them be safe and happy. Please avail yourself of the many good resources available on teen dating abuse for youth and adults.

Peace,

Liz Miller