

HelpNet Works!

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*Your Employee Assistance Program
Newsletter*

CRAZY In Love

They met in summer school. Jane was 15 and shy, he was outgoing, 16 and flirted with all the girls. Almost immediately they became inseparable—but almost as quickly there were troubling signs. The first week they were together he began snapping at her and demanding she come to him at all different hours of the day and night (2:00 a.m.). She went to see him as commanded and found another girl at his house. He told her she didn't deserve better and would never find anyone who would treat her differently. One night after 4 months of dating, he hit and choked her. Jane confided in her parents and together they ended the relationship, despite the boy's pleas for forgiveness.

While Jane's story sounds like the stuff of headline news, controlling and obsessive relationships are alarmingly commonplace in everyday teenage life. And they are extremely damaging, even though they may not involve physical abuse.

According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 1 in 4 dating adolescents report being verbally, emotionally, sexually or physically abused. A 2006 survey by Liz Claiborne, Inc. (which funds programs against domestic abuse), more than 60% of teens said a boyfriend or girlfriend has made them feel bad or embarrassed about themselves. "Dating abuse is pervasive," says psychotherapist Jill Murray, Psy.D., author of *But He Never Hit Me: The Devastating Cost of Non-Physical Abuse to Girls and Women* (iUniverse). "And it's getting worse."

The problem is partly fueled by technology and accessibility it creates. "Technology has become a key tool for harassing and exerting control," says Murray. When the home phone is busy or the child isn't answering, he or she may be bombarded with e-mails and instant messages. And leaving the house no longer

offers sanctuary, since kids take their cell phones practically everywhere.

Look for warning signs in your child's relationships. Teens in this relationship may drop out of family activities, start getting lower grades, give up extracurriculars and stop going to a house of worship. Increasingly isolated teens are more easily intimidated, manipulated or coerced to drink, take drugs or have sex.

PARENTAL CONTROLS

There are steps you can take to prepare your child for their first serious relationship—and keep them from being overwhelmed by it.

1-Use songs, TV shows and movies as a springboard for discussion. When you see love portrayed as jealous and dominating, tell your child how healthy relationships foster mutual respect and trust, and share your own experience and beliefs. You can't assume your teen knows how to behave in a dating relationship if their only information comes from the media, locker rooms or slumber parties.

2-Tell your child about the unspoken rules of dating. It's not love if your child's boyfriend or girlfriend uses demeaning language, talks about your child disrespectfully to other people or doesn't allow your child to have opinions or make decisions. Remind your daughter or son that true love is about actions, not words.

3-Share your romantic experiences. Even if they act bored, deep down your kids want to hear about how you handled your relationships. You don't have to discuss your sexual history, but do tell about the times you got fed up with bad behavior or appreciated integrity.

4-Assert your parental authority. Abusers try to drive a wedge between you and your child, and they use verbal attacks—chastising, yelling and making demands—similar to those of a parent. Set curfews, limit computer and cell phone use at night, require attendance at family activities and enforce consequences if your wishes are ignored. For your child's sake, you need to be consistent and mean business. It shows that you care and he/she can count on you to protect him/her.

5-Monitor cell phones. Getting thousands of text messages in a month isn't unusual in out-of-control relationships. Examine phone bills carefully, including checking time notations—kids in a controlling relationship often set phones on vibrate and bring them into bed so they're always available. If you suspect a problem, take away your child's cell phone.

6-Consider calling the parents. The abuser's family might be defensive or unresponsive, but they might also share your concerns. Without using the word "abuse", tell them, "I think our kids see too much of each other. They're on an emotional roller coaster, and I'd like your help in slowing it down."

HAVING THE TALK

When you think there might be a problem, comment on abuse stories in the news or make general remarks about how jealous people can be, keeping the focus on a third party. That way, your child can share her attitudes by talking about the other person without feeling she's being judged—and you can make your points without it being about her. If she seems uncomfortable, ask if anything like that has ever happened to her.

When you need more information, avoid asking vague questions like "Is everything OK?" or "Does he respect you?" Instead ask about specific action: "Does he call you names?" "Does he check up on you all the time?" "Does he make most of the decisions?" And don't use the word "abuse." To teens it sounds evil and not like something their boyfriend or girlfriend would ever do.

When you know there is a problem, focus on your child and not the boyfriend or girlfriend. If you attack or criticize the love interest, it unites the two of them against you and may make the situation even worse. Avoid confrontational language. Instead, try to keep the tone supportive: "This is what I'm seeing that makes me worried about you."

THE BREAKUP

Follow these guidelines to make ending a bad relationship easier - and safer - for your child.

DO IT OVER THE PHONE. Face-to-face may be more cordial, but an abuser has lost that privilege. A call minimizes the opportunity for further abuse—verbal and physical—and give your child some control over the situation. Tell your child not to say or imply that they'll continue to be friends; the spurned person will try to find a way to resume the relationship.

PREPARE FOR A REACTION. Change your child's cell phone number, don't allow your child to pick up the home phone and

consider having your child stay with a friend or relative for a few days. Also ask your child's school to move his/her locker and allow the child to be picked up early.

CALL THE POLICE. If there is stalking or violence, file charges with the police and ask for a protective order.

If you need information or assistance with any type of problem, please call HelpNet to set up an appointment. We are always here to assist you or your family members when needed. HelpNet phone numbers are listed below.

☞ Where to go for help... HelpNet

Employee Assistance Program

Alpena/Kalkaska

1-800-334-6422

Battle Creek Office

269-660-3900 or 800-969-6162

Brighton/Howell

1-800-969-6162

Coldwater

1-800-969-6162

Flint

810-235-9550 or 800-230-0151

Grand Rapids

616-774-2346 or 866-746-0873

Greater Detroit Area

1-800-969-6162

Hillsdale

517-796-2163 or 866-245-3815

Jackson Office

517-796-2163 or 866-245-3815

Kalamazoo Office

269-372-4500 or 800-523-0591

Lansing Office

517-882-6071 or 1-800-852-6268

Saginaw Office

989-754-5599 and 800-334-6422