

# THE DEADLY DANGERS OF TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

BY MARIELENA ZUNIGA



One evening in October 1985, Mark Smith showed up at Vicki Crompton’s doorstep in Davenport, Iowa, to take her daughter, Jenny, on a date. He was tall, handsome, polite and charming—Jenny’s first real boyfriend. Only 14, Jenny hadn’t dated much and her mother had strict rules. She didn’t want Jenny dating boys over 16 and was relieved to learn that Mark was 16. She also wanted Jenny to see boys only at home or at school.

Mark seemed to comply with Vicki’s rules and the relationship was going well. Even Jenny’s friends called them “the ideal couple,” sharing a locker, eating lunch together at school and walking each other to class.

Then Vicki found out Mark’s real age (18), and she was furious. Vicki was even more distraught when Jenny asked her mother to take her to a doctor for birth control pills. Jenny eventually decided she was too young for sex and disclosed that Mark had become too possessive. “I want to be free, mom,” she said, “but I don’t want to hurt him.”

As Jenny became firmer in her resolve to break off the relationship, Mark became more controlling. Later, Vicki would learn about Mark’s abuse—how he would slap and shove Jenny and call her a slut.

In August 1986, 11 months after Jenny’s relationship with Mark began, Jenny called her mother at work, triumphant that she had finally cut ties with Mark and that he was no longer in her life.

But he was.

He continued to break into Jenny’s school locker, stalk her, and warn other boys to stay away from her. He even wrote her a note: “You’ll never make it to homecoming.”

On September 26, 1986, homecoming weekend, Mark broke into the Crompton home while Vicki was at work. He waited, butcher knife in hand. When

Jenny came in from school, he stabbed her 66 times.

Vicki remembers her shock and denial. “Dead? Not Jenny. I had just talked to her that morning. She was only 15. How could she be dead?” It was Vicki Crompton’s brutal entry into the world of teen dating violence—and it pushed her to act. Today, she travels across the United States educating the public about the issue. She also co-authored a book, *Saving Beauty from the Beast: How to Protect Your Daughter from an Unhealthy Relationship*.

“The big message that needs to get out there is that teen dating violence can happen to any girl and you’re not going to know about it,” Crompton says. “Parents need to educate themselves and stop saying that it’s not going to happen to my daughter, that we’re in a good school district and a good family. None of these excuses will work.”

### A hidden epidemic

While not all teen dating violence ends in murder, it is alarmingly prevalent. One in three girls will have an abusive dating experience by the time she graduates from high school. By this conservative figure, more than eight million girls per year in the United States alone will suffer at the hands of a violent boyfriend before she reaches the age of 18.

Many experts feel, however, that those numbers are grossly underestimated. The majority of teen dating violence victims tell no one about the abuse. Many fear no one will believe them, or they have tried to describe the event and no one listened. Or, they fear reporting crimes because they acted against their parents’ wishes, or may fear retaliation by perpetrators.

In other parts of the world, statistics are equally hard to come by, although a recent Internet survey by the Japanese government found that 50 percent of young men and women in that country had been subjected to physical or psychological violence in a relationship. Of those respondents, 55.5 percent talked to their friends when they suffered violent treatment.

Even more alarming is the increasing number of younger girls—or tweens—involved in teen dating violence. A survey commissioned by Liz Claiborne and <[www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org)> discovered that:

- 40 percent of the youngest tweens—those between the ages of 10 and 12—report that their friends are victims of verbal

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abuse in relationships, and nearly 1 in 10 say their friends have had sex.

- Only half of all tweens claim to know the warning signs of a bad/hurtful relationship.
- Adults are not aware. More than 75 percent of parents surveyed either believe that teen dating violence is not an issue or don't know whether it is.

“We were surprised at how many tweens or kids ages 11 and 12 are dealing with these issues,” says Jane Randel, vice president of corporate communications for Liz Claiborne, Inc., in New York City. “And one of the most startling and biggest issues from the survey was that the parents didn’t know.”

Parents may feel they have a great relationship with their kids, or talk to their kids about drugs or sex or drinking—but they don’t necessarily think to talk about dating violence as something to look out for. They don’t think to talk about what a healthy relationship is and isn’t and what one should demand in a relationship.”

Despite the rising numbers, teen dating violence has only recently started to attract international attention. Part of the problem, say advocates, is that when people talk about domestic violence, they usually envision older perpetrators and victims. Society and family members also tend to minimize teen dating violence, chalking it up to fights between young lovers or the drama of puppy love.

“Too often parents and teachers do not take teen dating violence seriously,” says Anne K. Ream of Chicago, Illinois, recipient of Soroptimist’s 2008 finalist Making a Difference for Women Award. Ream is founder and director of The Voices and Faces Project <[www.voicesandfaces.org](http://www.voicesandfaces.org)>, a national non-profit survivor network created to give a voice and face to rape survivors, and provide a sense of solidarity to those who have lived through sexual violence.

“We often tend to minimize teens’ troubled behavior, acting as if by virtue of their age or relative inexperience they exist in a world where violence or stalking is ‘normal’ or inconsequential,” Ream adds. “The consequences for girls can be damaging and even deadly.”

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## Teen dating violence and technology

Today, an alarming number of teens are being controlled, abused and threatened through technology, says Juley Fulcher, director of policy programs at Washington, D.C.-based Break the Cycle <[www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org)>.

“Their lives are wired in so it’s everything from an abuser sending constant text messages to calling their partner’s cell phones and needing to know where they are at all times,” she says. “Sometimes an abuser gives his partner a cell phone saying, ‘I gave that to you and you need to answer every time and tell me where you are.’”

Anne K. Ream of Chicago, Illinois, founder of The Voices and Faces Project, agrees that in the new media world where teens increasingly communicate online, there are now “digital gray areas” where sexual violence or stalking is occurring with alarming frequency, areas that teens themselves do not usually see as wrong.

“When a boyfriend sends hundreds of text messages to his teen girlfriend in order to monitor where she is at every hour, or a fellow student requests that a teen girl puts inappropriate photos on MySpace, we need to see this for what it is,” adds Ream, recipient of the 2008 Soroptimist Making a Difference for Women Award. “This type of behavior is damaging to girls psychologically and can be an indicator of future sexual or physical violence.”

One teen dating abuse survivor recalls her boyfriend terrorizing her in a number of ways. “E-mail became one of his primary methods of control, especially when my parents refused to let us speak on the phone,” she shared in a study commissioned by Liz Claiborne, Inc., on teen dating violence. “He wanted to know where I was every second of every day.”—M.Z.

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### What is teen dating violence?

Abuse can cause injury and even death, but it doesn’t have to be physical, according to The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. The center defines teen dating violence as “a pattern of actual or threatened acts of physical, sexual, verbal and/or emotional abuse, perpetrated by an adolescent against a current or former dating partner. The abusive teen uses this pattern of violent and coercive behavior to gain power and maintain control over the dating partner.”

Teen dating violence is very similar to adult domestic violence because it’s about power and control, says Dr. Jill Murray, a California psychotherapist and author of *But I Love Him: Protecting Your Teen Daughter from Controlling, Abusive Dating Relationships*.

“It’s about who has the power, about who can beat the other one to the ground,” she explains. “But it’s also important to know that when people think of abuse, they think of physical abuse, but in a teen relationship the vast majority of abuse is verbal and emotional.”

Verbal abuse includes calling the girl names that include epithets about her mental state, alleged promiscuity and her appearance, Murray says. “The abuser also threatens to leave, to not have sex, or to find somebody else. Or, he tells the girl no one will ever want her and she’s lucky to have him. When he sees he can break the girl down with verbal abuse, he then tries to break the girl down emotionally and destroy her self-esteem.”

Tiffany,\* today a college student, shared her story about her emotionally abusive boyfriend in Crompton’s book. “He wasn’t physically beating or battering me at all. He just kept digging away at me relentlessly, calling me stupid and crazy and a whore. It was more subtle than physical abuse, but just as damaging ... like having black-and-blue marks inside you.”

Sexual abuse can also be part of teen dating violence. This can include everything from unwanted kissing or touching to date rape to not letting a girl use protection against sexually transmitted diseases. Experts point to an alarming 76 percent of high school students reporting one or more experiences of unwanted sexual activity in a dating relationship.

“I was a virgin and I wasn’t ready for sex,” shares Jayne,\* 15, in Crompton’s book. “But my boyfriend just pushed himself on me. And I was scared I’d be killed right then so I sort of allowed it.”

While girls are more likely to be victims, studies show that boys can also experience violence in a relationship before graduating from high school. “Girls

can be just as abusive and aggressive as boys can be,” Murray says.

“While boys use their hands as weapons—such as punching, pushing choking and strangling—girls use weapons, such as acrylic fingernails, baseball bats or golf clubs.”

**Harrassing phone calls, text messages and emails prevent many young girls from escaping their abusers.**



Photo credit: istockphoto.com



Experts point out, however, that while both young men and women may act abusively, the abuse of young women by men is more pervasive and usually more severe.

### Warning signs

How does one know if a girl—daughter, sister, friend—is involved in dating abuse? Crompton's own heartrending experience points to the following: Parents will notice that the boy has become every-

thing to the girl and they are joined at the hip. Girls may also drop out of school activities, their grades may suffer, or they may start to dress in "grungy" or "baggy" ways to comply with their boyfriends' demands of not dressing provocatively.

Experts also point to these signs: A teen may be spending more time than usual in her bedroom. She may have a change in her group of friends. She may have unusual marks on her neck or arms, or show signs of depression or aggressive behavior.

An abusive boyfriend also isolates a girl from her family and friends, makes her feel insecure, or makes himself look pathetic so she needs to rescue him all the time. These behaviors stem from the abuser's rigid, stereotyped ideas of male and female roles, Murray says. "An abuser may think that women are inferior to men and believe that a man has the right to discipline his girlfriend physically," she says. "This type of boyfriend believes that a girl ought to be submissive, dependent, respectful and quiet—that she should 'know her place.'"

### Healthy relationships

While dating is a normal part of the growing-up experience, many teens are unable to understand what constitutes a healthy relationship. Love is a behavior and when teens are in a relationship they need to look at that behavior, Murray explains.

"If he lies to you, can you say that's loving behavior? Or if he makes all the rules for you, is that loving behavior? Why is it right for him to call you names and make you feel bad about yourself? Is that loving behavior?" Murray asks.

Many girls have a hard time identifying an abusive relationship in the first place, adds Juley Fulcher, director of policy programs of the Washington, D.C.-based Break the Cycle <[www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org)>, a national nonprofit that works to engage, educate and empower young people to build lives and communities free from domestic violence. "They really don't know how relationships work and we commonly find that young people equate jealousy with love, but in reality, jealousy is a very strong warning sign of an abusive relationship."

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## Taking Action

**There are many ways for clubs to raise awareness about and prevent teen dating violence. Listed below are several activities taken from Soroptimist's new Teen Dating Violence model program kit. Visit [Soroptimist.org/members](http://Soroptimist.org/members) to download this informative resource.**

- **Projects Targeting Teens:** Clubs can serve as guest speakers at a local middle school and/or high school and conduct a class exercise on teen dating violence. The Teen Dating Violence Model Program Kit contains three exercises clubs can administer in schools to help teens recognize the signs of abuse and get help if needed.
- **Project Targeting Parents:** Clubs can help prevent teen dating violence by helping parents learn more about the issue and by providing them with the tools they need to talk about the topic with their teens. Clubs can present teen dating violence awareness workshops for parents that highlight warning signs and encourage them to seek help if they suspect their teen is in an abusive relationship.
- **Project Targeting School Personnel:** Outreach to school personnel is important given that teens spend the majority of their time in school. Since schools are mandated to create safe environments for students, they have the responsibility to take preventive action against teen dating violence. Clubs can meet with school administrators and give short presentations that introduce the topic of teen dating violence; explain how schools can help prevent it; and provide resources for taking action.
- **Project Targeting Teens, Parents and School Personnel:** In most communities, shopping malls are a central gathering place for the community—especially for teenagers. By conducting an awareness event at a local mall, clubs can target all three main audiences of the Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Awareness Campaign. Clubs can conduct awareness days at their local malls, where they can distribute flyers, bookmarks and other information about teen dating violence.

## Laws to protect teens

Teens usually don't have the same legal status and rights as adults, and so, don't have the same options open to them. Adult domestic violence victims, for example, may go to a shelter, but shelters as a rule do not accept unaccompanied minors. In the U.S., adults can also seek a protective order against abusers, but the criteria used by states to issue protection orders to teens differ widely.

According to the Dating Violence Resource Center, all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia do have laws against dating violence behaviors, but the specific term "dating violence" is almost never used in these laws. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) also never included the term "dating violence," even though it funds domestic violence programs. The reauthorized VAWA 2005, however, made additional provisions to cover dating violence and states that both adults and youth victims can be served under programs that cover domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking.

VAWA 2005 also created new programs and reauthorized existing programs to address violence experienced by youth. The Supporting Teens through Education and Protection program (STEP), for example, allocates funds to educate faculty, develop effective school policies about domestic and dating violence, and provide resources to teach students about the issue and provide appropriate referrals.

While opening up existing programs to allow services to teen victims is helpful, says Juley Fulcher, director of policy programs for Break the Cycle <[www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org)>, it doesn't provide the kind of targeted programming necessary to begin effectively addressing the broad problem of teen dating violence.

"Youth often slip through the cracks of the justice system because neither adult nor juvenile courts know how to deal with youth perpetrators and victims of domestic and dating violence," she says.

To view a state-by-state report card of state civil domestic violence restraining order laws and their impact on teens seeking protection from an abusive relationship, visit <[www.breakthecycle.org](http://www.breakthecycle.org)>.—M.Z.

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Murray concurs that a teen girl often thinks that the more jealous a boyfriend is, the more he loves her. "He also takes an interest in her clothes and makeup and a girl thinks that's great. Then he starts isolating her from friends and families and outside activities, with the design that all she will have in her life is him. She becomes so emotionally dependent on him, she feels there is no place to go, even if she wants to get out."

Leaving an abusive relationship is not easy, the experts say. It's especially hard to understand, Murray says, when most teens—unlike adult domestic violence victims—don't have children and are not financially dependent on their partners. Still, teens struggle with their own set of relationship dynamics.

"He's told her that nobody else will want her and she believes it now. He's isolated her and having a boyfriend is a big status symbol for girls so she's going to hang on with her toenails if she has to," Murray says. "And for teens, their relationships are very intense and quick and almost 100 percent of the time she's had sex with him. She's given up something very special to him and now she's just going to leave him?"

Teens may also be reluctant to leave a relationship because they have shame or embarrassment, blaming themselves when they are victims of violence. Or, teens may minimize or deny the abusers' behavior. "She often doesn't want to look at the situation the way it really is," Murray says. "She has a fantasy that her boyfriend is going to change, that she is the person who can rescue him and it's really not that bad."

When girls choose to stay in an abusive relationship, they experience myriad health-related issues. Teens who are abused are more likely to do poorly in school, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. They often engage in drug and alcohol use, and the anger and stress victims feel may lead to eating disorders and depression. Some abused teens even think about or attempt suicide. And, they often carry patterns of violence into future relationships.

## Finding Solutions

The solution, according to many groups, is prevention and education, as well as advocacy, counseling and intervention. On the education/awareness front, Soroptimist International of the Americas is offering a new model program kit for its clubs, centered around a public awareness campaign about how "teens have the right to be in safe and healthy relationships." The kit includes information for conducting classroom exercises, parent workshops, presentations to school administrators and a mall awareness day.

In addition, Soroptimist has created a teen dating violence bookmark that lists characteristics of a healthy relationship on one side, dangerous traits on the other, along with prevention hotline



**Soroptimist's teen dating violence bookmark is available for purchase at [Soroptimist.org](http://Soroptimist.org). Read more about this and the model program kit on page 20 of this issue.**

numbers. Soroptimist club members are distributing the bookmarks to schools and other teen-centered locations. An in-depth white paper on teen dating violence is also posted on the Soroptimist website at Soroptimist.org. Read more about Soroptimist's efforts to raise awareness about teen dating violence on page 22.

Break the Cycle offers a variety of comprehensive services that reach young people from every direction in every stage of their dating lives. For example, the organization offers a prevention curriculum to schools, youth groups and after-school programs, among others. This year, Break the Cycle also plans on releasing "Ending Violence," an innovative interactive learning tool designed to help young people recognize the warning signs of abuse, build healthy relationships, and learn their legal responsibilities and rights.

"It's no big surprise that the most credible source of information at that age is going to be peers," Juley Fulcher says. "That's who young teens are likely to go to when they have relationship problems. Our goal is to educate and involve as many young people as we can in the fight against teen dating violence. So we offer programs that allow teens who are interested in doing more than learning about the issue to get involved, to do some prevention and education in their neighborhoods or talk to their friends."

A growing consensus among organizations is that boys and men need to be directly involved in the process of change. In addition to peer leadership training that promotes young men as allies in preventing teen dating violence, Break the Cycle offers a 22-week program for teen abusers. On an international level, the White Ribbon Campaign <www.whiteribbon.ca> works to raise awareness and educate young men and boys on the issue of violence against women.

"If you don't stop the behavior it will continue," Fulcher adds. "We have a term that is getting increasing use—serial batterers. They abuse in every relationship. People can do wonderful work getting a teen out

of an abusive relationship, but an abuser often goes on to abuse someone else and so we really need to think about abusive behaviors."

Mark Smith, Jenny Crompton's murderer, never did abuse another girl. He was eventually tried and convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life without parole. During his trial, Vicki was dumbfounded to learn that other teens had witnessed Jenny's abuse, the slapping and hitting, but called it "no big deal" and that "everybody did it."

Wishing someone had warned her, Vicki now warns others. She shares Jenny's story so other parents won't fall into the trap that "it can't happen to my daughter." But she also shares her daughter's story for another reason. Says Vicki: "I want people to know that Jenny Crompton lived."🌍

*\*Full names of teen dating violence victims were not used in Crompton's book.*

*Editor's Note: SIA makes every attempt to include international information in its feature articles. With this particular topic, no such informational was available—possibly due to the fact that it's just now starting to gain attention. This does not mean, however, that teen dating violence does not occur throughout the world. Wherever there is domestic violence, teen dating violence is sure to be part of the equation.*

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**In the next issue: Grandmothers raising grandchildren. Please email Editor Jessica Levinson <[jessica@soroptimist.org](mailto:jessica@soroptimist.org)> with relevant information.**

## Teen Dating Violence Fast Facts

- About one in three high school students have been or will be involved in an abusive relationship.

- Forty percent of teenage girls, ages 14 to 17, say they know someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend.

- In one study, from 30 to 50 percent of female high school students reported having already experienced teen dating violence.

- Teen dating violence most often takes place in the home of one of the partners.

- One in five or 20 percent of dating couples report some type of violence in their relationship.

- One in five college females will experience some form of dating violence.

- A survey of 500 young women, ages 15 to 24, found that 60 percent were currently involved in an ongoing abusive relationship and all participants had experienced violence in a dating relationship.

- A survey of adolescent and college students revealed that date rape accounted for 67 percent of sexual assaults.

- More than half of young women raped (68 percent) knew their rapist either as a boyfriend, friend or casual acquaintance.

- More than four in every 10 incidents of domestic violence involves non-married persons.

*Source—www.acadv.org, Bureau of Justice Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence, May 2000*