

Teen Dating Violence: Prevention, Identification, and Intervention

Element One of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative focuses on activities that foster a safe school environment and prevent violence. Teen dating violence (TDV) threatens students' sense of safety and contributes to unsafe school environments.

One in three adolescents experience some form of abuse from a dating partner each year.¹ With nearly half of all incidents occurring on school grounds,² TDV should be a high priority for SS/HS project directors (PDs).

This prevention brief provides PDs with information, strategies, and resources for addressing TDV in schools. It covers important components of TDV, including:

- TDV statistics
- Survivor and perpetrator characteristics
- Signs of TDV
- School-based TDV prevention and intervention strategies that involve school personnel, students, community agencies, and families
- Resources for further exploration

Fast Facts on TDV

- Teenagers are at higher risk than adults for dating violence¹
- One in three adolescents report abuse of some kind from a dating partner each year¹
- Almost 10 percent of high school students report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past 12 months¹
- Approximately one in three adolescent girls in the United States is a survivor of physical, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner—a figure that far exceeds victimization rates for other types of violence affecting youth¹

Understanding TDV

TDV threatens the safe, supportive, health-promoting environments that SS/HS grantees strive to create in schools and can negatively impact students' learning. While teachers, administrators, and staff may believe their students are not at risk, the data make clear that any student can experience TDV. TDV survivors and perpetrators come from all races, genders, and

¹ Davis, A. (2008). *Interpersonal and physical dating violence among teens*. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency Focus. Retrieved from www.nccdcrc.org/nccd/pubs/2008_focus_teen_dating_violence.pdf

² National Research Center for Women and Families. (November 2004). American Youth Work Center. September 2008. Retrieved from www.center4research.org/v-dating.html

socioeconomic strata, and TDV happens just as frequently among same-sex couples as it does in boy-girl pairings.⁶

Some teenage dating relationships are violent only occasionally, whereas in others, violence is a frequent, fundamental part of the relationship.⁶ It is important to note that TDV is not always physical violence, though that's what often receives the most attention. TDV spans a continuum of emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive behaviors, including:

- Screaming and yelling
- Name calling, shaming, or embarrassing one's partner in front of friends or family members
- Controlling and isolating, such as making one's partner check in by text every hour, or not allowing one's partner to hang out with friends
- Threatening to harm one's partner or oneself
- Pushing, slapping, punching, and kicking
- Stalking
- Sexual assault
- Homicide

TDV is as serious a problem as adult intimate partner violence, and like abusive adult relationships, it is based on power and control. Many teenage abuse victims have adult partners, adding a further element of power and control to the relationship.

TDV has far-reaching consequences for survivors, and can affect a school's overall academic mission. Dating violence can have a negative effect on students' health, well-being, and academic performance:

- Teenagers who are survivors of TDV are more likely to be **depressed** and **do poorly in school**³
- They may engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as using **alcohol or other drugs**,⁶ and are more likely to have **eating disorders**⁴
- Some TDV survivors **think about or attempt suicide**^{5,9}
- In one study, high school girls who reported ever experiencing physical or sexual violence from a dating partner were four to six times more likely than their non-abused peers to have been **pregnant**⁶

³ Banyard, V. L., & Cross, C. (2008). Consequences of teen dating violence: Understanding intervening variables in ecological context. *Violence Against Women*, 14(9), 998–1013.

⁴ Ackard, D. M., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2002). Date violence and date rape among adolescents: Associations with disordered eating behaviors and psychological health. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 26(5), 455–473.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (May 19, 2006). Physical dating violence among high school students—United States, 2003. *MMWR*, 55(19), 532–535.

⁶ Silverman et al. (2001).

- Girls who experience both physical and sexual dating violence are three times more likely to have been **tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV**, and more than twice as likely to report an **STD diagnosis**⁷

Once school personnel are aware of the potential for and the signs of TDV, they can take steps to address the issue as part of SS/HS initiatives.

Survivor Characteristics

Both girls and boys can be survivors of dating violence. While some data show that girls are more likely to be victimized, other research shows an equal proportion of girls and boys as both survivors and perpetrators.^{8,9} However, girls overwhelmingly experience more *severe* dating violence, including physical and sexual assault.¹²

While any student can experience TDV, some factors put teens at higher risk for being victimized, including:

- Family instability
- History of maltreatment
- Social disadvantage
- Dating at a younger age¹⁰
- (For girls) Witnessing community violence¹¹

Being abused by an adolescent dating partner can set students up for a lifetime of victimization. Teens who are TDV survivors in high school are at higher risk for dating violence during college and into their adult lives.¹² However, receiving intervention and counseling services as early as possible, such as those provided by schools in conjunction with community agencies, can help survivors overcome their abuse and live happy, productive, violence-free lives. Moreover, creating a safe school environment and building students' self-esteem can prevent TDV. SS/HS personnel can play a key role in planning and overseeing these activities.

⁷ Decker, M., Silverman, J. G., & Raj, A. (2005). Dating violence and sexually transmitted disease/HIV testing and diagnosis among adolescent females. *Pediatrics*, 116, 272–276.

⁸ Coker, L., McKeown, R. E., Sanderson, M., Davis, K. E., Valois, R. F., & Huebner, E. S. (2000). Severe dating violence and quality of life among South Carolina high school students. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 19, 220–227.

⁹ Wolitzky-Taylor, K. B., et al. (July 2008). Prevalence and correlates of dating violence in a national sample of adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47(7), 755–762.

¹⁰ Wekerle, C., & Wolfe, D. (1999). Dating violence in midadolescence: Theory, significance, and emerging prevention initiatives. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 19(4), 435–456.

¹¹ O'Keefe, M. (2005). *Teen dating violence: A review of risk factors and prevention efforts*. National Electronic Network on Violence Against Women. Retrieved from www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/AR_TeenDatingViolence.pdf

¹² Smith, P. H., White, J. W., & Holland, L. J. (2003). A longitudinal perspective on dating violence among adolescent and college-age women. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(7), 1104–1109.

Aggressor Characteristics

As with survivors, aggressors of TDV come from all walks of life. However, some circumstances make teenagers more likely to abuse their dating partners. Studies show that aggressors are more depressed and aggressive than their peers. Other factors that make a teenager more likely to be abusive include the following:

- Trauma symptoms
- Alcohol use
- A friend who is involved in dating violence
- Problem behaviors in other areas
- The belief that dating violence is acceptable
- Exposure to harsh parenting
- Exposure to inconsistent discipline
- A lack of parental supervision, monitoring, and warmth¹³

Patterns of dating violence start early and can carry into adult relationships, so it is crucial to provide services to those who are at risk or have histories of abusing dating partners. Intervening with young people who exhibit early warning signs of being aggressors may prevent them from ever harming a partner.

It is important to note that intervention and counseling services for aggressors may not exist. You may need to develop such programming in conjunction with local counseling services from the ground up.

What Schools Can Do: TDV Prevention and Intervention

Schools can be first responders for TDV. While only a third of TDV survivors ever tell anyone about their abuse,¹⁴ school personnel can learn to recognize the warning signs of TDV and can work on TDV prevention and intervention programming. SS/HS PDs can collaborate with schools and community agencies to create the infrastructure needed for a coordinated response to TDV.

¹³ Foshee, V. A., & Matthew, R. A. (2007). Adolescent dating abuse perpetration: A review of findings, methodological limitations, and suggestions for future research. *The Cambridge Handbook of Violent Behavior and Aggression* (pp. 431–449). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Liz Claiborne Inc. (February 2005). Survey on teens and dating, conducted by Teenage Research Unlimited. Retrieved from http://loveisnotabuse.com/web/guest/pressreleasescurrent/-/journal_content/56/10123/80219/DEFAULT

Teachers and other school staff who have daily contact with students may be the first to see the signs of TDV, which can go beyond the obvious cuts and bruises; often, an abrupt change in behavior and attitude are the first signs of victimization. Perhaps a formerly strong student's grades have slipped or the student has been frequently truant. The student may seem suddenly isolated from peers, or may be behaving uncharacteristically by lashing out at other students, starting fights, or having conflicts with teachers.

TDV: Know the Signs

Training school staff to recognize the signs of TDV is a first step in helping survivors. You might notice a student hanging out only with his or her dating partner, becoming withdrawn from other peers, acting sad or angry, or suddenly skipping classes.

Here are some other common signs that a teenager is in an abusive relationship:

- Truancy
- Dropping out of school
- Decline in academic performance and failing grades
- Mood or personality changes (e.g., increased sadness, acting passive or withdrawn)
- Using alcohol and other drugs
- Pregnancy
- Emotional outbursts
- Isolation
- Physical injuries¹
- Noticeable weight change¹

SS/HS staff members may already be looking for some of these warning signs in students as part of their SS/HS work. Recognizing these as signs of TDV can be synergistic with ongoing SS/HS work.

Addressing TDV in schools begins with some simple changes that can be integrated into other SS/HS activities. According to [Break the Cycle](#), the leading, national nonprofit organization addressing TDV, schools can do three key things: create and enforce a policy, train school personnel, and educate students. Each strategy is described in more detail below.

Strategy 1: Create and Enforce a TDV Policy

As of 2011, only [14 states](#) had laws that urged or required school boards to develop curriculum on TDV.¹⁵ However, schools can develop their own policies as the first step in an effective, schoolwide response to TDV.

A comprehensive policy should inform school staff, students, parents, and community members of their responsibilities regarding TDV prevention and intervention,¹⁶ and include guidelines that address how staff should do the following:

- Respond to complaints of TDV
- Involve campus police and law enforcement
- Provide services and accommodations for survivors
- Enact appropriate consequences for abusive students
- Refer students to community-based organizations

These actions help educate students and staff about how TDV is handled in your school, and help create a normative environment in which TDV is not accepted.

(Detailed information on developing and implementing school TDV policies can be found in Break the Cycle's [School Policy Kit](#).)

Strategy 2: Train School Personnel

Teachers, staff, and administrators must feel confident in their ability to recognize the signs of TDV among students and believe that they have the skills to properly refer students for services. Regular training for teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, and school safety personnel can teach them the signs of TDV and where to turn if they think a student may be involved in an abusive dating relationship.

All school staff can be taught to recognize signs of TDV in students. You may want to work with school administrators to set aside time in an annual in-service to provide additional information on TDV. Similarly, you can reach out to new teachers or school staff during their orientation to make sure they have the information on TDV, the school's TDV policy, and any ongoing TDV programming.¹⁷

¹⁵ The National Conference of State Legislatures. (August 23, 2011). *Teen dating violence*. Retrieved from www.ncsl.org/?tabid=17582

¹⁶ Rhode Island Department of Education. (2008). *A guide to preventing bullying, teen dating violence, and sexual violence in Rhode Island schools*. Retrieved from www.ride.ri.gov/commissioner/edpolicy/documents/20080401_guidebullyingtdv_v1_kr.pdf

¹⁷ National Law Enforcement Museum. (2011). *Supporting children exposed to domestic violence: A facilitator's guide to creating a coordinated response in elementary schools*. Retrieved from www.nleomf.org/museum/education/programs-activities/domestic-violence-awareness-program/dvap-resources/FINAL_WEB_Facilitators_Guide.pdf

Training should include information on the appearance of TDV among different cultures and ethnicities and how relationship violence is viewed among each.¹⁸ For instance, some cultures may be more accepting than others to slapping a partner and not view that as TDV.

Your training should also cover the infrastructure in place to address TDV and the procedures for referring suspected TDV cases. Only professional, qualified personnel are equipped to assess, support, and counsel survivors. In your school, these personnel may include social workers, nurses, and safety resource officers, or you may arrange with community partners, such as domestic violence or mental health organizations, to provide these services to students. Creating a flow chart can illustrate the lines of communication and responsibilities among school staff, as well as with community partners, if applicable.¹⁹

TDV Training Opportunities for School Personnel

Check with local domestic violence organizations, law enforcement agencies, and mental health providers to see if they offer trainings on TDV. The following resources are a great place to start researching training programs for school personnel:

- The National Center for Survivors of Crime publishes upcoming [conferences and trainings](#) on topics of domestic violence.
- The National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence provides customized [training and consultation](#).
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers two key resources:
 - [Break the Silence: Stop the Violence](#), a one-hour interactive training designed to help those working with youth understand the risk factors and warning signs of TDV
 - [Dating Matters](#), a free online course for educators set in a virtual school setting, describing what TDV is and how to prevent it
- Break the Cycle offers [training opportunities](#), including workshops, online curricula, technical assistance, and consultations for school staff to build their knowledge and employ tools to meet the needs of young people in abusive relationships.
- Hazelden provides [professional continuing education](#) in the form of online courses.

Finally, the National Center can help guide your TDV prevention and intervention activities as part of the technical assistance provided to SS/HS grantees.

¹⁸ The American Bar Association. (2006).

¹⁹ National Law Enforcement Museum. (2011).

Strategy 3: Educate Students

Since students are the survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders of TDV, educating them about the issue is key. School TDV educational curricula can raise teens' awareness of dating violence, teach them characteristics of healthy relationships, reinforce their right to safety, explain school TDV policies, and communicate resources they can turn to for help.

Working with School Staff, Students, Parents, and Community Agencies to Address TDV

In all TDV prevention and intervention endeavors, school staff, students, parents, and community agencies can work as partners to achieve the most effective, lasting change to the school environment and prevent TDV.

School Staff

School staff are on the front lines in terms of implementing TDV programming and policies. School personnel need to understand their responsibility to students' well-being and why TDV programming is important to the school as a whole. With proper training, school staff can be allies in creating TDV policy, educating students, and promoting a nonviolent school atmosphere.

School personnel can help with TDV prevention and intervention in many concrete ways. For example:

- 1. Create safe spaces.**

As a first step to engaging teachers and other school staff, help them create opportunities for students to communicate issues in a safe, comfortable environment. If one particular teacher or counselor has good rapport with students, work with him or her to set up "office hours" for one-on-one student meetings, which will provide an opportunity for students to discuss problems and seek help.

- 2. Deliver curricula.**

Teachers can incorporate TDV lessons into their regular classes. For instance, some schools have incorporated TDV modules into health classes. Research the TDV curricula available, see which have been successful, and choose the most appropriate one for your school and population. For instance, there are curricula focused on specific age groups (e.g., grades 9–12), as well as for specific gender, racial, or ethnic groups (e.g., Latino males).

- 3. Engage students.**

All staff can work to engage withdrawn students in a group. Getting these students to open up may present opportunities for them to find friends or problem-solve. Staff can also spearhead or support student TDV awareness clubs or organizations.

4. **Foster a safe, healthy environment.**

Staff can model and enforce appropriate behavior for students and create healthy social norms. Ignoring “playful” hitting, pinching, punching, and sexual innuendo among students can desensitize young people and make it appear that the school accepts abusive behaviors. To foster an environment in which abuse is not acceptable, personnel should encourage all students to treat themselves and others with respect at all times, and then model this behavior themselves.

It’s also important to recognize that school staff may have their own experiences with dating violence, which may color their views on and response to TDV. Providing support, resources, and counseling for them enables them to better help others.

Confidentiality Versus Mandating Reporting

It is crucial that school staff receive training about their responsibilities as mandated reporters for certain incidents of TDV.

By law, teachers and other school personnel in all states and Washington, D.C., are mandated reporters of child maltreatment. They may be required to report to law enforcement officials any suspected cases of TDV that they witness or that students disclose to them. It is especially important for school counseling staff to know how to clarify with students the concept of “confidentiality” and what they are required to report to law enforcement.¹ All teachers and staff need to inform students of this mandate before they disclose anything, so that students have the choice of what information to share and with whom.

The circumstances under which a mandated reporter must file a report with authorities differ from state to state. All school employees should understand your state’s particular statutes governing what must be reported and to which authorities. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, has an online [state-by-state statute search](#) of Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect detailing the specific statutes of each state.

Students

Teenagers are often the first to know about abuse among their peers. In fact, research tells us that adolescents are much more likely to confide dating violence to a friend than to a parent, teacher, police officer, or other adult. While only 7 percent of teenagers say they would report abuse to the police, 86 percent said they would tell a friend.²⁰ In fact, 57 percent of teenagers

²⁰ Zwicker, T. J. (Fall 2002). Education Policy Brief: The imperative of developing teen dating violence prevention and intervention programs in secondary schools. *Southern California Review of Law and Women’s Studies*, 12(1).

can name a peer who has been physically, sexually, or verbally abusive in a relationship,²¹ and one in three has actually witnessed TDV.^{16,22}

Students are TDV's survivors and aggressors. They are also bystanders, friends, and siblings of those who have survived or perpetrated TDV. Students therefore must be engaged in TDV programming delivered at the *universal*, *selective*, and *indicated* levels of prevention.

Universal Prevention. Schools can deliver TDV curricula aimed at reaching all students. Teens can help plan, test, and implement TDV prevention campaigns. Because they are part of the peer group of survivors and aggressors, they understand what messages will resonate and how students will react to particular campaign components. They may also be more trusted than adults in delivering messages or helping students who are involved in TDV.

All students need to understand what an abusive relationship looks like. Because they are new at dating and may have harmful relationship role models, they may not have a clear sense of what constitutes a healthy dating relationship. Teaching them about respectful relationships and the warning signs of potentially abusive relationships can help them navigate this new territory. (Love Is Respect has developed a webpage, called [Is This Abuse?](#), to help teens understand if they are abusing or being abused by a dating partner.)

Selective. SS/HS personnel have sound experience working with students who are at high risk for a host of harmful behaviors. Knowing which students are at higher risk of being involved in a violent relationship can help you determine who may need intervention, education, and other services. You can work with staff on selective programming, and include well-trained peer leaders who can help these students address their issues and get them into the appropriate services.

School TDV programming can also empower and support peers of survivors and aggressors. Bystanders and other peers of those involved in TDV should be included as part of a health- and safety-promoting school community united against TDV. Knowing that a friend is involved in TDV can be scary and overwhelming for adolescents. They can be taught to understand that they cannot continue to be silent, passive witnesses, but instead can assist their friends in seeking help. They can also be taught the warning signs of TDV and where to turn if they suspect abuse. Keep in mind that bystanders may also need their own support services as they cope with friends' involvement in TDV.

Indicated Prevention. Survivors of TDV need to believe that school is a safe space where abuse is not tolerated, and to know what resources are available to help them. TDV prevention campaigns, campus groups, and other activities delivered by students in conjunction with school staff are all part of creating a safe environment in which survivors can find help.

²¹ Liz Claiborne Inc. (2005).

²² *Social control, verbal abuse, and violence among teenagers*. (December 2000). Survey commissioned by the Empower Program, sponsored by Liz Claiborne Inc. and conducted by Knowledge Networks.

Training teachers and other staff to recognize signs of TDV can help you identify survivors and aggressors early. You can also teach staff how to follow the proper procedures for referring survivors and aggressors to well-trained professionals (either school- or community-based) in a timely matter.

Programming should also focus on communicating to survivors where to turn if they want to discuss their abuse and get help.

Working with Parents and Guardians

Parents arguably spend more time with their teenagers than any other adults and should be poised to recognize TDV. However, the majority of parents (81 percent) admit that they think TDV is a non-issue or don't know if it's a problem, and more than half (54 percent) say they've never spoken with their children about TDV.²³

Schools can work in partnership with parents to look for warning signs and educate teens about dating violence. To engage parents, consider the following strategies:

1. **Sponsoring TDV awareness workshops for parents and guardians**

The workshops should include information on recognizing the signs of TDV, what parents can do to help their kids, ways of preventing TDV, and services available if parents and guardians or their children need help. Schools can then reinforce these messages with written materials sent home to all families, which will reach those parents who do not attend school events.

2. **Communicating TDV policies**

Let parents know your district's policy on TDV, and what their responsibilities in addressing TDV are. Be sure to provide a contact person at the school who can work with parents who need more information or help with their children.

3. **Asking them to reiterate TDV messages**

You can engage parents in developing and reinforcing the TDV messages that are delivered in schools to ensure that students are hearing the same message both in school and at home. Encourage parents to talk with their kids about the characteristics of healthy vs. unhealthy relationships and to maintain an open line of communication with their adolescents.

Community Agencies and Groups

Schools do not have to create and administer TDV programming in isolation. Many community agencies have years of experience with TDV intervention and prevention and can be partners in

²³ *Social control, verbal abuse, and violence among teenagers.* (2000).

this work. Consider partners in community mental health, law enforcement, crisis centers, domestic violence counseling and advocacy, social services, and health care.

When thinking of ways to work with your SS/HS community partners, think about who can help you with the following tasks:

- Training staff on TDV prevention and intervention
- Helping to create and refine schoolwide TDV policy
- Providing effective TDV prevention and education curricula for students and parents
- Leading peer TDV prevention groups
- Educating community members about TDV
- Advocating for and counseling students who have experienced abuse
- Providing safety planning and crisis intervention to students in danger from a partner

To ensure that your messages and counseling related to TDV are culturally and linguistically appropriate, consider community partners who have experience working with diverse populations of teenagers. For instance, there may be partners with experience in working with male abusers, or those who have worked with specific racial and gender groups, such as Asian female survivors.

Conclusion

TDV must be addressed on many levels, from the individual to the community, and include students, schools, parents, and community organizations as partners, working together to implement effective prevention and intervention strategies.

SS/HS grantees have experience in influencing such wide-reaching change through working in conjunction with diverse partners, and are therefore well-suited to address TDV.

SS/HS programming to increase students' protective factors and decrease their risk factors for violence can help prevent TDV. Advocating for education, strengthening support systems, building self-esteem, and promoting a positive school culture can help young people engage in healthy relationships, resist violent partners, advocate for peers, and seek help when needed.

Resources and Publications for Further Exploration

Resources

- [Break the Cycle](#)
- [Choose Respect](#)
- [Adolescent Violence Prevention: Knowledge Path](#)
- [Dating Matters: Understanding Teen Dating Violence Prevention](#)
- [Progressive Youth Connection](#)
- [Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships](#)

- LevelsRespect.org
- [The Children's Safety Network's Resources on Intimate Partner Violence](#)
- [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Teen Dating Violence Resources](#)
- [The American Bar Association's Teen Dating Violence Resources](#)

Publications

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
 - [Understanding Teen Dating Violence](#)
 - [Physical Dating Violence Among High School Students—United States, 2003](#)
- The National Bar Association: [Teen Dating Violence: Prevention Recommendations](#)
- National Criminal Justice Reference Service: [Experimental Evaluation of Gender Violence/Harassment Prevention Programs in Middle Schools](#)
- National Institute of Justice: [Teen Dating Violence: A Closer Look at Adolescent Romantic Relationships](#)
- Children's Safety Network:
 - [Preventing Sexual Assault Among Teens](#)
 - [Focus on Intentional Injuries Occurring at School: A special issue of the CSN Newsletter](#)