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## Know! The Not-So-Innocent Side of Teen Romance

The month of February is known as a time of “love,” where secret-admirers and Valentines of all ages express their affection for one another through candy hearts, red roses and love letters. In sharp contrast however, February has also become known as **Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month**; to focus attention on abuse in young people’s relationships and provide information to help prevent it.

Are you among the 81% of moms and dads who don’t think dating violence is an issue among our teens and tweens? The fact is, **one in three girls** in the U.S. will become a victim of physical, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner. **Young ladies between the ages of 16 and 24** experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence, **but even our middle school children are at risk**, with abusive behaviors often beginning as early as 12-years-old.

Violent relationships in adolescence place youth at a greater likelihood for making other hazardous life-choices as well, which oftentimes lead to substance abuse, eating disorders and risky sexual behaviors. Furthermore, a teen subjected to dating abuse in high school is at increased risk for becoming a victim again in college.

It is critical to know that this is as much an issue for sons as it is for daughters. First of all, young men are not immune to becoming victims of dating abuse. And young men - as well as young women - need to learn what a healthy relationship is, and what it is not (and it is up to us to define that for them).

It is easy to assume our child would come to us, but they may not. The far majority of teen dating violence victims, 77%, keep it quiet and do not tell a single person. For the other 33%, that “someone” they do tell is not always mom or dad or even an adult.

One of the reasons victims give for not telling an adult is that they fear they will not be believed or taken seriously. As the parent, we want to take steps to build trust and encourage communication, including:

- Talking with your child about healthy “romantic” relationships, before there is an issue
- If your child comes to you with a “boyfriend/girlfriend” problem, take them seriously and believe them
- Listen attentively, be supportive and understanding
- Do NOT be judgmental and do NOT put down their partner
- Avoid telling them what to do, but rather guide them in the right direction (unless they are in danger, in which case you should take immediate action, including contacting local law enforcement)
- Additionally, you can refer your son or daughter to [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org) for helpful and relatable teen dating tips and information

As for parents, we are not guaranteed the opportunity of being able to step in if an issue arises, so we must be aware of the warning signs of our child being in an unhealthy “relationship.” They include:

- Your child’s excessive communication with their “partner” via text, social media or in person
- Your son or daughter becomes depressed or anxious
- Extracurricular activities get put on the back-burner or come to a halt altogether
- Your child’s partner is extremely jealous or possessive
- They begin to dress differently
- They have mood swings beyond what is expected among teens
- They stop spending time with their friends

Regular and ongoing, positive communication with our children will help to build and strengthen a trusting relationship and increase the likelihood of them coming to us in times of need. The topic of healthy relationships should be a part of the communication that begins early, ideally, long before an issue might develop. In our next tip, we’ll give you talking points to share with your child to help define healthy relationships and the importance of mutual respect.

Sources: [CDC - Injury Prevention & Control : Division of Violence Prevention – Teen Dating Violence](http://www.cdc.gov). [LoveIsRespect.org: Dating Abuse Statistics](http://LoveIsRespect.org). [LoveIsRespect.org: Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month](http://LoveIsRespect.org).

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