

# WORKING WITH TEEN VICTIMS OF DATING VIOLENCE



What Every Court Should Know Before Working  
With Teen Victims of Dating Violence.

## WHAT DOES DATING VIOLENCE LOOK LIKE?

*Teens experience the same types of abuse in relationships as adults – physical abuse, emotional/verbal abuse, and sexual abuse. In most cases, the abuse escalates over time, becoming more frequent and more severe.*

*Technology can play a significant role in dating violence. Cell phones, text messages, and social media can all become tools of power and control in the hands of an abusive partner.*

Teens have the right  
to a safe and  
healthy relationship...  
free from violence  
and free from fear

## WHAT IS DATING VIOLENCE?

Dating violence is a **pattern of abusive behaviors** used to exert **power and control** over a dating partner. The core of dating violence is power and control. Abusive words and actions are the tools that an abusive partner uses to gain and maintain power and control over their partner.

While the meaning of “**dating partner**” differs across generations and communities and the words used to describe intimate relationships change frequently, dating violence happens in all kinds of relationships – gay or straight, serious or casual, sexual or nonsexual, monogamous or non-monogamous, short-term or long-term.

## WHO IS AFFECTED BY DATING VIOLENCE?

Youth of all ages, genders, and sexualities can experience abuse in a relationship. It cuts across all races, ethnicities, and socio-economic groups.

## TEENS IN THE COURTROOM

Youth and adults all enter the legal system with a set of experiences that affect their perceptions. Teens may assume that adults will not understand what they are going through and fear that they will face harsh judgment. In the unfamiliar setting of the courtroom some teens will be nervous and intimidated, some will be eager to please an authority figure, and others will be bold and confident.

## Remember:

- Challenge yourself to see every teen as an individual rather than a stereotype.
- Youth often know less than the average adult about court procedures, the legal system, and their legal rights.
- Teens face different practical concerns than adults – they may attend the same school, share a friend group, or participate in the same activities as their abusive partners.
- Don't take a teen's behavior personally – it may just be nerves or difficulty talking to adults.
- Ask questions - don't make assumptions about the youth, their case, or their relationship.
- Don't assume that because the relationship appears casual the abuse isn't severe.

Court personnel must judge the credibility of the teens that appear in court and may witness confusing behavior from both parties involved in a dating violence case. As in adult cases, young victims of abuse may be overwhelmed by the court process, afraid of the consequences of following through, or feeling shame or guilt. A young offender's actions are often calculated to threaten, intimidate, control, and abuse the victim, or to avoid responsibility for abusive actions. Understanding these dynamics is key to holding offenders accountable and enhancing victim safety.

## WHAT EVERY COURT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TEEN VICTIMS OF DATING VIOLENCE

### ISSUING TEEN-FOCUSED CIVIL PROTECTION ORDERS

- Consider the victim and abusers' shared spaces (e.g., school, neighborhoods, extracurricular activities).
- Explain the conditions of the order clearly to both parties using developmentally- and age-appropriate language.
- Explain the options for modifying the order to accommodate schedule or life changes.
- If possible, require the abuser to attend a teen-specific domestic violence intervention program.
- Monitor the abuser's behavior and compliance with the court orders by requiring regular court appearances for status updates and/or progress reports.
- Establish a "zero tolerance" policy for the violation of a protection order.
- Treat all protection order violations seriously, as permissiveness of even seemingly minor violations may embolden a teen abuser and lead to more serious violations.
- Remember that the relief available in adult cases is also available in teen cases, including the federal mandate against gun possession by domestic violence offenders.

### QUESTIONING A YOUNG PETITIONER

- Use open-ended questions—let the youth tell their story in their own words
- Ask follow-up questions and for clarification of vague or incomplete answers
- Avoid "legalese." Use straightforward language.
- Consider the teen's developmental stage when forming questions and interpreting a teen's behavior.
- Teens may use slang or shortcuts in explaining what happened—ask for explanation if you don't understand.
- Avoid the question "why" unless necessary—the youth may interpret it as accusatory and shut down. Explain why you are asking follow-up questions.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

Before passing information regarding a teen's case on to a colleague, consider the following questions:

- Does the other office need to know this information?
- Why?
- Who specifically needs to know it?
- How much do they need to know?
- How can I limit this information to meet the need and no more?

Whenever possible, share information on a "need to know" basis and let teens know which other offices will have access to their case file and what they will do with the information.

### BEING AN ALLY

Appearing in court can be very empowering for victims of abuse, especially for teens who are only just beginning to stand up for themselves and their rights. Hearing a judge state that the abuser's actions were wrong can go a long way towards restoring the teen's confidence and sense of self.

Youth who are experiencing dating violence may be involved in their first intimate relationship and it is important that all actors convey that all forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, have no place in an intimate relationship.

**REMEMBER:** Victims of abuse need to feel that the courts take their experiences of abuse seriously. Teens depend a great deal on their peer group and are likely to share their experiences with one another. Taking the extra time to be supportive and compassionate with youth victims and survivors will encourage more teens to seek out the help they need in the future.

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