



## We Accept the Love We Think We Deserve: Stand to End Teen Dating Violence

By Erica Herman and Lammy Askar

It's quite fitting to think of February as the 'Month of Love', but what most may not realize is that it is also Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month. And as we enter February, we are reminded of the importance of establishing healthy relationships, especially with teens.

Healthy relationships play an important role in our lives, but for children they're particularly significant, helping to shape them into both the adults they'll become and the relationships they'll continue to forge. Once children hit puberty and begin dating it's important that we're aware of their interactions, demonstrate healthy relationships in our own lives, and, although sometimes uncomfortable, have an open-door policy for discussing their relationships with them.

As defined by the CDC, teen dating violence (TDV) is a form of intimate partner violence that occurs between two teenagers in a close relationship. TDV is more common than you think, one in three teens in the U.S. is a victim of either physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner, a figure that far exceeds rates of other types of youth violence. Additionally, children age 12 to 19 have the highest rates of rape and sexual assault. If teen dating violence were a disease, it would be an epidemic.

Teen dating violence can take place in-person or electronically, going from teasing and name calling to repeated texting to posting sexual pictures online without consent. And with technology readily available, more than a quarter of teens have been a victim of some form of digital dating abuse over the last year alone.

These statistics are even higher for children in foster care, who are more vulnerable than their peers in so many ways. These children have experienced trauma which can have consequences on their physical and mental health, social skills, self-esteem and coping abilities. Some of these children grew up in homes where domestic violence occurred and lack consistent, caring adult role models to show them what healthy relationships should look like. Children who are in foster care and have experienced child abuse and/or family violence have a greater likelihood of being a victim or perpetrator of TDV.

Everyone can make a difference by reaching out to young people in simple ways. Here are a few steps you can take to raise awareness and help to establish healthy relationships:

- Become a Guardian ad Litem (GAL). A GAL volunteer is a specially trained, child advocate whose dedicated advocacy positively impacts a foster child's safety, well-being, and best interest.
- Discussing the warning signs of dating abuse (all kinds, not just physical abuse).
- Talk about the characteristics of healthy relationships. A healthy relationship is one that is respectful and supportive. Communication and boundaries are both key here.
- Foster a safe and comfortable environment for a teen to help facilitate healthy conversations about something that is often ignored— only 33% of teens who were in an abusive relationship ever told anyone about the abuse.

As we interact with teenagers in our work or personal lives, each of us can take a stand against teen dating violence. Anyone can do it, and everyone deserves to be respected in a healthy and loving relationship.

Voices for Children of Broward County's programs works to ensure children in foster care are provided with advocacy, case management, advocacy, case management, age-appropriate referrals, and wrap-around services to foster an abuse-free future.

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[www.voicesbroward.org](http://www.voicesbroward.org).