

# Dating Violence

***The warning signs of dating violence are often subtle but always serious, and informed educators can intervene early to protect everyone involved.***

**By Adam M. Collins and Susan M. Swearer**

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*Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).*

**H**ailey is known among teachers and staff members as one of the most outgoing, intelligent students in the junior class. She has a high GPA and good relationships with teachers, and until recently, she was on the varsity volleyball team. Lately, Hailey has been acting differently. She walks through the hallways looking sad or upset, and she turns in assignments late and with less quality than usual. She also has stopped sitting with her friends during lunch and is spending the majority of her time with her boyfriend, Gabe. One day during the passing period, the principal saw Hailey talking to her friends. Gabe came up behind her, lightly grabbed her arm, and whispered something in her ear. Hailey quickly said her goodbyes and walked away with Gabe.

Concerned, the principal asked the school psychologist to talk to Hailey about her social relationships and her recent decline in grades. When the school psychologist asked Hailey about her new boyfriend, she admitted that he sometimes pulls her away from her friends and that he wants to spend all of his time with her. When they aren't together, Gabe calls her repeatedly and demands to know where she is. When asked whether Gabe has ever hurt her, Hailey begins to cry and admits that he sometimes shoves her against a wall and yells when he is really angry. Together, the school psychologist and Hailey develop a safety plan to help her get out of her abusive relationship with Gabe.

## Background

Dating violence among middle and high school students is a surprisingly prevalent form of aggression that can have long-lasting effects. Depending on how dating violence is defined, the prevalence rates for adolescents range from 9% to 57% (Giardino, 2010). Prevalence rates tend to be lower when researchers define dating violence as physical aggression and are typically higher when researchers also include verbal, emotional, and sexual aggression. Women are the targets of dating violence in about 85% of cases, and the majority of abusers are male. Although female perpetrators do exist, most research on dating violence focuses on abuse by a male partner.

Involvement in dating violence during adolescence has been linked to other forms of aggression (Espelage & Holt, 2007). Research has suggested that students between grades 5 and 8 who report bullying others may be

more likely to be involved in dating violence (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000). The academic and social impact that dating violence has on these students may stay with them for years. One study by Gómez (2011) suggested that being involved in dating violence as an adolescent was related to being in an violent dating relationship later in life. In addition, it should be noted that dating violence does not discriminate. All age groups, sexual orientations, and ethnicities can be harmed by its effects.

Dating violence is defined as violent behavior that occurs in dating relationships, and it can be divided into three distinct categories of behavior: physical, emotional and psychological, and sexual aggression (Teten, Ball, Valle, Noonan, & Rosenbluth, 2009). Physical dating violence includes such behaviors as hitting, slapping, and restraining. Emotional and psychological dating violence includes such behav-

iors as name calling and excessive jealousy. Sexual aggression includes any form of kissing or sexual activity without consent, not stopping sexual contact when asked to, and sexual harassment. Although sexual harassment does not always take place within a dating relationship, when it does, it can be considered a form of dating violence. Sexual harassment includes such behaviors as lewd comments or gestures made to cause a partner to feel embarrassment and any behaviors, actions, or words that are sexual in nature.

### **Development of Dating Violence**

Benign forms of aggression and control usually precipitate more extreme acts of dating violence. Young people who do not have past experiences to help them understand what constitutes a healthy romantic relationship may view such behaviors as signs of affection. For example, abusers may send dozens of text messages each day asking about what their partners are doing and who they are with. The attention and apparent interest in the partner's life may create the illusion that the messages show how much the abusers care for their partners. Over time, however, the tension in the relationships begins to build. For example, abusers may begin to tell their partners whom they may and may not see. Instead of showing loving interest, the messages become a form of control that enables abusers to check on and control their partners.

Because adolescents do not frequently report dating violence, it is helpful for school administrators and teachers to know and be able to recognize several key warning signs. The controlling nature of dating violence means that students who have violent

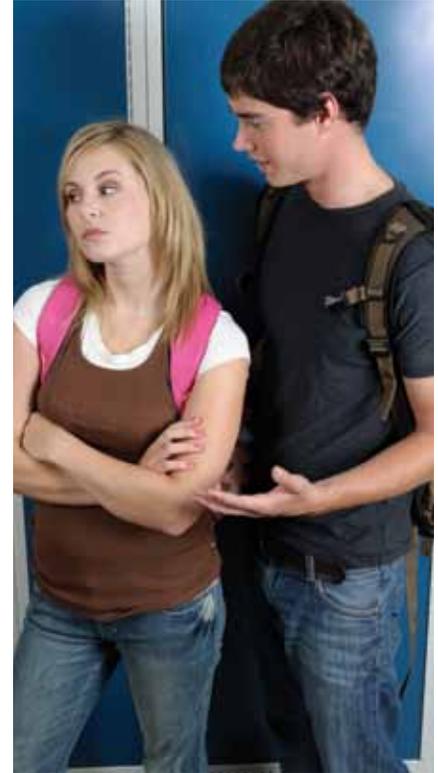
partners may become isolated from their peer groups. Students who typically socialize with many friends may no longer engage in those friendships and may quit cocurricular activities, such as school sports. Students may casually mention their partners' violent behavior but then immediately try to diminish the statement by laughing about it or making jokes.

Somewhat more obvious warning signs include unexplained bruises or marks on the skin. Students may also make excuses for the inappropriate or abusive behavior of their partners. Simply observing students when they are together may provide information about any abuse, especially during unstructured periods when social interaction is common, such as during lunch, before or after school, and passing periods in the hallway.

### **Cause for Concern**

Not only is dating violence an unhealthy, unsafe interpersonal problem between two students, but also its effects extend into the classroom. Similar to students who are targets of other forms of aggression, students who are targets of dating violence perform worse academically. When a student is in constant fear of an abuser, his or her ability to focus on school work diminishes. In addition, abusers may claim large amounts of their partners' time, making it difficult to find opportunities to study or complete homework. In the classroom, a student who is being abused may find it difficult to stay focused on learning. As a result, students who are in violent dating relationships may experience dropping grades and perform poorly on tests.

The long-term effects for abusers are not as well known, but research



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## Warning Signs

### A person who is being abused may:

- Show signs of depression
- Become isolated from friends and family members
- Lose interest in activities and hobbies that were once enjoyable
- Make excuses for a dating partner's behavior
- Change eating or sleeping patterns or use alcohol or drugs
- Lose self-confidence.

### A person who is abusing a partner may:

- Threaten to hurt others in any way
- Ignore or insult a dating partner in public or private
- Constantly call or text a dating partner to check up on him or her
- Damage or destroy a dating partner's personal belongings
- Attempt to control a dating partner's appearance (e.g., clothes, makeup, hairstyle, etc.).

suggests that without intervention, those students are likely to continue their abusive behaviors in future dating relationships (Foshee et al., 2004).

The sexual harassment aspects of dating violence in schools have potential legal ramifications. Numerous civil and federal lawsuits have been filed by parents against schools and have resulted in out-of-court settlements or public trials. The rulings from these lawsuits have required school districts to pay tens of thousands of dollars (Stein, 2011). A common theme among those lawsuits is that there was a lack of appropriate response by school administrators and that despite repeated efforts by students and parents, school administrators in those cases responded to concerns by minimizing them—for example, claiming that the behavior is just roughhousing—or suggesting the target was at fault—for example, saying that it takes two to tango.

### Recommendations

Some state laws require middle and high schools to educate students about preventing and intervening in dating violence, but all schools can take steps to avoid lawsuits and support students' overall mental and physical health. First, the adults in schools must recognize dating violence as unacceptable, preventable behavior that they have a role in stopping. School leaders can help staff members examine their personal attitudes toward such behaviors as sexual harassment and aggressive interactions between romantic partners and make clear that any threatening, harassing, controlling, or violent behavior is not a normal part of growing up. Differ-

entiating dating violence from other types of peer violence (e.g., bullying) emphasizes the importance of the issue to students.

Second, schools should take direct, tangible action to prevent instances of dating violence. One of the most effective methods to reduce any type of sexual harassment in schools is to incorporate respect between partners into the culture of the schools (Stein, 1995). Regular discussions about sexual harassment show students that those issues are important and let them know that if they have related problems, they can talk to an adult in the school. There are multiple ways to incorporate information into the school environment; some schools provide short, daily tips (e.g., creating a safety plan) using the announcement system or incorporate lessons into the curriculum of health or family and consumer sciences classes.

Information and resources must be disseminated to teachers, students, and parents to provide the best possible support against dating violence. In particular, training teachers to address dating violence prepares the entire school to effectively handle instances of dating violence. Faculty meetings are good place to provide information about warning signs and available resources, and certain individuals—such as the school psychologist, a school counselor, the school social worker, or another school-based mental health professional—can be designated as specialists who would be responsible for assessing the safety of students and contacting their parents when necessary. Teachers who suspect dating violence should refer students to those specialized staff members.

## Fast Facts

- 72% of students in grades 8 and 9 reportedly “date.”
- 25% of adolescents report verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from a dating partner each year.
- About 10% of students nationwide report being physically hurt by a boyfriend or a girlfriend every year.

**Source:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2010). *Dating violence facts*. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/chooserespect/understanding\\_dating\\_violence/dating\\_violence\\_facts.html](http://www.cdc.gov/chooserespect/understanding_dating_violence/dating_violence_facts.html)

## Conclusion

The effects of dating violence on the social and academic lives of students in middle and high school can be severe and long lasting. Schools are responsible for providing a safe learning environment for all students and, in some cases, are required by law to educate students on dating violence. Abundant resources are available to help principals promote healthy relationships and educate teachers, parents, and students on the warning signs of dating violence. By making a concerted effort to prevent and intervene effectively in dating violence, school personnel have the opportunity to make their schools more effective learning environments for all students. **PL**

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## Resources

**Dating Matters.** Teachers can take advantage of free online training to learn about the risk factors and warning signs of dating violence.

[www.vetoviolence.org/datingmatters](http://www.vetoviolence.org/datingmatters)

**The Injury Center.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Injury Center provides a wealth of resources related to preventing dating violence.

[www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teen\\_dating\\_violence.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teen_dating_violence.html)

**Love Is Not Abuse.** Administrators can access information about what to say to students if they are involved in dating violence as well as research state laws to help inform school policies and procedures. *What You Need to Know About Dating Violence: A Teen's Handbook* educates students about what dating violence is, how to tell if they are in abusive relationships, and what to do if their partners are abusive. *Parent's Handbook: How to Talk to Your Children About Developing Healthy Relationships* teaches parents how to spot warning signs of dating violence and how to approach their children if they suspect an abusive relationship. An iPhone app simulates e-mails, text messages, and phone calls in a manner similar to those which an abuser might send to show parents what to look for.

[www.loveisnotabuse.com](http://www.loveisnotabuse.com)

**National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline.** Students can chat online or call to get help from peer advocates 24/7. Peer advocates can also help students find local resources.

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

866-331-9474 (866-331-8453 TTY)