



# New Dating Seminars Target Teen Violence

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The CDC says that about 1 in 10 adolescents reports an experience with physical violence from a dating partner. With this in mind, schools are increasingly offering seminars to students to help them create healthy relationships.

School officials are worried that too many teens are hitting and slapping the person they're dating. To target this dating abuse, violence prevention classes are springing up in schools around the country.

This fall, middle and high schools in Wichita, Kan.; Providence, R.I.; Boise, Idaho; the Bronx in New York; Boston; and six other cities have lined up programs based on a curriculum that has proven effective in Ontario.

## **Learned Behavior**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that about 1 in 10 adolescents reports an experience with physical violence from a dating partner. If other forms of abusive violence are included — from being threatened or emotionally harassed, to name-calling and insults — that number goes way up.

Where does this behavior come from? Dave Wolfe, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Toronto, Ontario, developed a curriculum for Canadian schools that's being adopted in the United States. He says it isn't fair to blame the family or a teen's environment.

The exception is exposure to violence; that's a known risk factor for increasing the likelihood that a young person would engage in violent behavior.

"Everyone agrees that violence is learned," Wolfe says. "Someone is teaching it." He points the finger at the violent and abusive culture kids absorb in adolescence. "It is worse today because of all the different media they can be exposed to," he says, such as cyberbullying and video games. "Violence is entertainment. It's fun. They take out their cell phones whenever there is a fight. They put it on YouTube."

## **Foreign Territory: The Opposite Sex**

Teens are being exposed to these things at a very crucial moment in their development, when they are becoming interested in the opposite sex and when they're trying to establish a sexual identity. Up until adolescence, Wolfe points out, they've been relating to people of the same sex.

"They are now trying to relate to the opposite sex. And the simplest way I have to explain it is they are not very good at it," he says. "If they try to relate to a girl the way they related to their male friends, she won't like it. If she tries to relate to him the way she does with a girlfriend, or if she tries to act like a male friend, he won't like it. There's a lot of confusion."

Girls may end up being physically aggressive when they interact with a boyfriend, punching and poking, says Wolfe, because they think that's what guys like. "And the guys may be very controlling because they think that's what works in relationships with other guys."

## **Learning New Behavior**

A whole host of programs like Safe Dating, Student Connection and My Strength are working to prevent this interpersonal violence among young people, and to teach adolescents and older teens how to develop healthy relationships.

Wolfe's program for adolescents is now used in 800 Canadian schools. It started out in 20 middle schools in urban, suburban and rural southwestern Ontario. It's an interactive curriculum, where students script scenarios that blend the issues of sexuality, drugs and fighting into situations they are likely to face. They then role-play the situations, which are just as likely to include same-sex couples as heterosexual couples.

The goal is to make teens comfortable telling their partners what behaviors they don't like, and what they would rather have happen. Wolfe says the exercises are intended to teach assertiveness so they can avoid aggression and passivity. "We want them to identify healthy and unhealthy responses, and then practice enough to feel comfortable."

After 2 1/2 years, the program appears to have reduced dating violence and increased condom use at the Ontario schools, though it appears to be more effective among boys than girls. The rate of violence among adolescent boys who were surveyed was 7.1 percent among those who did not take the classes, compared to 2.7 percent among those who did.

Among the girls surveyed, those who took the class were just as likely to report abusive behavior as those who didn't — about 12 percent in both groups of girls. Other researchers have also found that girls report being more abusive than boys. It's not clear whether they're just more honest than boys, or whether it's their way of trying to get a boy who is unresponsive to talk. Wolfe says, "That's what they tell you. 'I do it because I can't get him to talk to me. I get angry at him, and I react, and I lose control.' " Physically, the boy is unlikely to be harmed; it's the girl who catches the brunt of it if he does react.

## Healthy Relationships Are Possible

Early one morning at Woodrow Wilson Senior High School in Washington, D.C., about a third of the class is drowsy and sits draped over their desks. The rest sit attentively or are actively engaged in a discussion about the legal, safety and health questions of abusive relationships. Tabitha Joyner, an educator with Break the Cycle, a California-based violence prevention group, is leading the discussion.

Among the things the students are being taught:

—Courts in the District of Columbia will grant a 12-year-old a civil restraining order in a violent relationship.

—Someone who throws a book bag at another person and misses can be charged with attempted assault.

—One of the first warning signs of potential abuse is a partner who only wants the two to be with each other; i.e., no friends allowed.

It's not just the dark side of love gone wrong that Joyner hopes to get across to the students. She wants this racially diverse group of 16- and 17-year-olds to know how to build healthy relationships. So she gets them to express how they think a healthy relationship should feel.

"Safe, confident, respected," come the answers from all sides of the classroom. Joyner reassures them that they have the right idea — that each person's opinion should matter, even if they can't always agree. And what should they do when they can't agree with a partner, Joyner asks? The students struggle for a moment to find the "c" word that Joyner says is an important characteristic of a healthy relationship. They yell out, "communication!"

But the word she's looking for is compromise — not a concept that springs easily to mind among the young. But in a healthy relationship, Joyner explains, you don't always get your way.

Rodrigo Coca, 17, asks, "Is there really a relationship like that, perfect like that? Does it really exist?" Joyner assures him that, yes, people do have problems sometimes relating. But there are people who have good communication, who compromise, who love each other and feel good about each other. Yes, she says; that exists.