

I think my daughter may be in a violent relationship. What should I do?

Did you know:

- 40 percent of teenage girls age 14-17 report knowing someone their own age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend.
- Eight percent of high school-age girls answered "yes" when asked if "a boyfriend or date has ever forced sex against your will."

Adolescence can be tough. Bodies are changing, hormones are raging. Teens crave independence from their parents and rely heavily on their peers for acceptance and approval. Teens are insecure about their identities and prone to self-doubt, and they are vulnerable to emotional and physical violence in their relationships.

How can you recognize signs of a potential abuser in your daughter's boyfriends? Surprisingly, it may not be who you might think. It could be the boy who comes across as the "perfect boyfriend" in front of parents. Pay more attention to how he treats your daughter, and less to how polite or "smooth-talking" he is with you.

If you think your daughter may be in an abusive relationship, talk with her about it. Don't rush to judge her or give her ultimatums. Let her know that you care for her and support her, and that you want to help.

Recognizing Signs of Abuse in Your Teen

Does your daughter come home with injuries she can't explain? Ask her what happened. If the explanation doesn't seem to make sense or if she seems to continue getting injured, keep asking her gently until she opens up. If she feels she can't talk to you, make sure she talks to another trusted adult, whether it's an aunt, a school counselor or a family friend.

Does she ever seem afraid of her boyfriend, or worried about making him angry? Does she seem overly deferential to him? Is she preoccupied with pleasing him? Does she apologize for his behavior? When you question their relationship, does she answer with excuses ("everything is under control," "it's not your problem") that don't ring true to you? These could be important warning signs.

Does her boyfriend check up on her? Notice if he shows up at the house unexpectedly or if she constantly seems to be apologizing to him for where she has been, whom she has been with or what she has been doing. Does she make excuses for his behavior?

Does he say mean things to her? If you hear her boyfriend cutting her down, mocking her and insulting her, at the very least he is chipping away at her self-esteem. A healthy sense of self-worth can be a lifesaver to a girl as she grows up and asserts herself and her right to safe and healthy relationships.

Does your daughter seem to be giving up things that used to be important to her? Is she isolating herself from her friends and family and losing interest in activities she used to enjoy? Has her appearance, weight or behavior changed dramatically? These could be signs of depression, which can be an indicator of abuse.

Does your daughter's boyfriend break or strike things in anger? Does he get into fights with other people? If he can't control his temper around others, he probably can't control it around her, either.