

HTWCEA Underlines February as Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month

By Kim Zahne, Hopi Tewa Women's Coalition to End Abuse

Hopi Tewa Women's Coalition to End Abuse (HTWCEA) is a non-profit nongovernmental tribal coalition that provides advocacy support to tribal and non-tribal government programs and agencies. HTWCEA is a steady voice dedicated to end sexual assault and domestic violence on the Hopi Reservation. HTWCEA's mission is to advocate for a coordinated and effective response system that creates a safety net towards building healthy communities, while embracing the strength of Hopi cultural values and traditions. HTWCEA also informs, educates, and does outreach in sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and sex trafficking. With that information, the Hopi and Tewa Women's Coalition to End Abuse calls attention to Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month in February.

Dating Violence is a big problem, and is affecting youth in every community across the nation. Simply, Teen Dating Violence or TDV is the physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional abuse; harassment; or stalking of a former or current dating partner. Most commonly TDV occurs between age groups 13-19, but can occur as early as 11 years of age. The National Institute of Justice reports that one in three adolescents in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner. That statistic far exceeds any other type of youth violence. 1.5 Million High school students in one year alone reported that they experienced physical abuse from their dating partner. Teen Dating Violence is affecting our youth drastically and its becoming too common.

The effects of Teen Dating Violence are long lasting. Adolescents in violent relationships can have serious ramifications by putting victims at higher risk for substance abuse, depression, domestic violence, and risky sexual behavior, and poor academic behavior. Teens that are sexually assaulted or abused in dating relationship are six times more likely to get pregnant, and twice as likely to get an STD. In addition, suicide attempts are more likely to occur among those who experienced teen dating violence compared to those who did not. The long effects of teen dating violence are serious and life altering.

The effects of TDV are severe on a physical level, but Dating violence isn't always physical. Emotional violence is a significant problem and the most experienced form of dating violence. Threatening harm, deliberate humiliation tactics, and even telling a partner what they can do, where they can go, and who they associate with is emotional abuse. Finally, stalking can be devastating to a victim psychologically and increases risk of anxiety and depression.

In addition, humiliation has become an emotional and psychological abuse tactic among dating partners, but it's severity has now reached a whole new level of publicity on the internet and social media. Dating Violence can take place in-person, AND electronically via text messaging, Facebook posts and messaging, YouTube videos, and cell phone calling. A perpetrator can literally stalk, abuse, and harass their dating partner, and not even be in the same room.

Identifying teen dating violence can be a challenge because teens often misinterpret controlling behavior as love. Although, 82% of parents feel confident that they could recognize the signs if their child was experiencing abuse, a majority of parents (58%) could not correctly identify all the warning signs of abuse. Red flags that can help you identify teen dating violence, like: extreme jealousy, excessive texts/ calls, constant stream of hurtful statements, not respecting boundaries, and making unsupported accusations.

If parents aren't able to identify signs of abuse, then parents usually believe that teen dating violence is not an issue with their child or are confident their child would tell them if they are being abused. Recently, Loveisrespect.org found that only 33% of teens who were in an abusive relationship ever told anyone about the abuse. This silence can be for any number of reasons. One, teens fear what will happen if they tell, and expect a negative reaction from parents or authorities towards the victim if they do tell. Teens will also blame themselves for the abuse. Other teens simply do not even realize that they are in an abusive relationship. Bystanders are also a problem. Friends of victims will also not report abuse because they don't want to disrupt their school environment, or simply will not report because the victim asks them not to report. Not speaking up when someone is being hurt is almost equivalent, in youth's eyes, to endorsing the behavior.

It's important that parents start discussing with their children about healthy relationships and what they look like, this will not only help teens identify and become aware of dating abuse, but it will aid in preventing abuse from initially occurring. A healthy relationship is simply where both partners feel safe, respected, and communicate through problems openly and effectively. Unhealthy behaviors like trying to control one's partner by isolating them from family and friends, "watchdog" behavior, put-downs, and even stalking/ threatening a former partner are all unhealthy examples of dating.

Modeling and demonstrating healthy relationships and effective communication with our youth is imperative, because it is our responsibility as parents and as a community to foster a safe environment where teens can learn how to think critically about the ways they communicate and connect with one another. Abuse and violence does not discriminate. It can happen to any person no matter your religion, social status, gender, and background. We must teach our children respect for the opposite sex, and even the cultural significance of respect in a relationship. Parents and children proactively talking about healthy relationships and safe dating now can teach stronger bonds, safety for our children, and safer communities.

Hopi Tewa Women's Coalition can be reached at 928-225-7029 or 928-225-6494 for more information.