



Sexual Assault and Dating Violence Awareness

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At McCaskill Family Services, we often work with adolescents and young adults who are struggling with issues related to their developing romantic relationships. Unfortunately, as many young people explore and form romantic relationships, they can become vulnerable to experiencing unhealthy relationship behaviors and patterns. This month, we would like to raise awareness of some extremely common relationship concerns—Sexual Assault (SA) and Dating Violence (DV)—by sharing some important facts and resources for any of our young people and families who might be impacted by this experience.

Let's face it, relationships can be hard at any age. Especially, when we are first learning how to navigate them. Even for adults with years of relationship experience, it can be challenging to know what makes a romantic relationship healthy. If we think of relationship behaviors on a spectrum from healthy to unhealthy, dating violence and sexual assault fall on the extreme end of the unhealthy spectrum. There are all kinds of reasons why it might be hard to notice when dating behaviors cross the threshold into abuse. For many people, it can be hard to recognize dating abuse because it may seem like “normal” relationship behavior or maybe abusive behavior happens infrequently. Sometimes, the strong feelings we have for our dating partner can also cloud our judgment. We may even know that something isn't quite right in our relationship, but we may feel “too” embarrassed or ashamed to talk about it or ask for help.

So, when does relationship behavior become abuse/assault? Relationship behavior becomes abusive when physical violence, sexual assault, psychological/emotional abuse, and/or stalking behaviors occur and/or turn into a pattern of behavior over time between current or former dating partners. These behaviors do not have to happen frequently or reoccur to be considered abuse. Sometimes, even one severe incident can be harmful enough to be considered abuse or assault. Sexual assault can be a type of dating violence when it occurs in the context of a current or former relationship. Sexual assault can also occur outside of the context of a dating relationship. SA occurs when a sexual act is committed or attempted by another person without your freely given consent or if an act is committed when you are unable to consent or refuse to consent. Research suggests that many young people and adults are unlikely to label/call abusive relationship behaviors, “abuse” and “rape” or “sexual assault.” As caregivers, it can be important to listen to how your adolescent describes their relationship experiences. Describing their relationship as “toxic,” “controlling,” or “unhealthy” may be an indication that abuse could be occurring.

Here are some examples of what dating violence and sexual assault can look like a relationship:

- Hitting or shaking
- pushing/shoving
- pinching/scratching
- choking or spitting
- throwing objects
- biting or pulling hair
- using a weapon
- keeping a dating partner from leaving
- putting down your family and friends
- forcing sexual actions contact without consent
- damaging personal property
- acting in an intimidatory way
- purposefully injuring a animal to scare you
- using sexually derogatory names
- name-calling
- criticizing or putting you down frequently, especially in front of others
- isolating you from others
- behaving excessively jealous
- explosive outbursts, temper, or mood swings
- spreading rumors
- threatening to hurt/kill you
- threatening to hurt or kill themselves
- driving recklessly to scare you
- humiliating you in public/private
- Possessiveness or controlling behavior (e.g., telling you how to dress or talk, who you can or can't interact with, what to believe, etc.)
- outing or threatening to out some aspect of your identity as an LGBTQ+

Unfortunately, many people also use technology as an additional medium for enacting dating abuse and sexual violence. Here are some of ways that **technology facilitated DV and SA** might show up in your adolescent's relationship:

- sending a partner repeated texts pressuring them to have sex
- threatening to expose your intimate photos or secrets on social media if you do not comply with sexual demands
- using public platforms to
 - send out unfavorable photos and videos to others without your permission
 - intentionally exclude you from activities
 - spread rumors about you
 - call you derogatory names
 - intentionally flirt with others
- demanding you turn on location services (GPS), so that you can be tracked through your phone and apps
- demanding your passwords to your phone and/or social media accounts
- accessing your private information on your phone without permission
- using a partner's phone, without their permission, to send out messages intended to harm their relationships with others
- incessantly texting
- expecting immediate responses to calls, texts, or other messages
- sending a partner insulting or threatening texts
- pressuring a partner to send nude photos of themselves

4 out 5 women report experiencing sexual violence/rape before they reach the age of 18.

1 in 3 adolescents report experiencing some form of DV in their romantic relationship before they reach the age of 18.

How common is sexual assault and dating violence? Rates of dating violence and sexual assault often vary depending on the population we are talking about. For example, adolescent girls, people of color, and/or members of LGBTQ+ community are often at greater risk for experiencing dating violence and sexual assault as compared to white, cisgender, heterosexual, or male adolescents. That certainly doesn't mean that young people who may identify as white, cisgender, heterosexual, or male do not experience dating violence or sexual assault. In fact, research suggests that 1 out 3 men have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. It is also likely that our rates of DV and SA are underestimated for many populations due to the stigma attached with reporting different types of abuse. According to the 2019 CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey for high school students, about 1 in 12 students reported experiencing some form of physical or sexual dating violence in their romantic relationship in the 12 months prior to the survey. By far, the most common form of dating violence reported by adolescents is emotional or psychological abuse. Some studies have estimated that rates of emotional/psychological abuse may be occurring in up to 76% of adolescent dating relationships. Overall, this research data suggests that **SA and DV are extremely common** and occurring at alarming high rates for many young people.

What can happen if my adolescent experiences DV or SA? DV and SA can have both short-and long-term negative effects, including:

- experiencing depression, trauma, or anxiety symptoms
- increased use of substances like tobacco, drugs, and alcohol
- exhibiting antisocial behaviors, like lying, theft, bullying, or hitting
- increased thoughts of suicide or use of self-harm
- increased risk for problematic eating patterns and disordered body image
- increased risk for future romantic relationship problems, such as intimate partner violence and sexual assault in adulthood

3 things that you can do as a caregiver to prevent DV and SA or help your teen if they have experienced dating violence or sexual assault:

- 1. EDUCATION. EDUCATION. EDUCATION.** Learn about the warning signs of dating violence and sexual assault from credible sources. Knowing and understanding when relationship behaviors become abuse or assault increases the likelihood that we can recognize these behaviors if they occur in our own relationship or our adolescent's relationship. Keep in mind that we and our teens are constantly observing and learning about what's healthy or unhealthy in a romantic relationship. Many of us have learned how to be in a relationship from observing the adult relationships around us growing up, what our peers/friends say to do in relationships, and/or what we learn through tv/media about how to act in relationships. Many of those sources of information may be providing us with unhealthy or even abusive models of relationship behavior. Learning about healthy romantic relationship behavior, abusive relationship behavior, and consent can help you provide your adolescent with the knowledge they need to be successful and safe in their developing romantic relationships. For sexual assault, teaching your child how to ask for consent and give consent for physical/sexual contact significantly reduces the likelihood sexual violence occurring in a relationship.
- 2. Model healthy relationship behaviors and skills.** DV and SA are preventable. As mentioned above, we learn how to be in relationships from the models of relationship behavior that we are exposed to during our youth. By modeling healthy romantic relationship behaviors as adults, our children are much more likely to learn and practice similar healthy relationship behaviors and less likely to tolerate unhealthy or abusive relationship behaviors in their own relationships. Taking a relationship skills class, learning how to regulate your own feelings, and modeling/practicing healthy communication and conflict resolution are all research supported ways of preventing dating violence and sexual assault. Share what you have learned with your teen or get them connected to an adolescent relationship skills class or group, so that they can develop the skills needed to create and maintain healthy romantic relationships.
- 3. Talk to your teen about their dating experiences and offer nonjudgmental support.** As caregivers, we can't help our adolescents if we don't know what they are experiencing or struggling with. As much as it may feel uncomfortable for you and your teen to talk about their dating experiences, it is an important way for you to stay alert to any unhealthy or abusive dating behaviors that your child may be experiencing or engaging in. You may consider offering a "truth and honesty dump session" where there are no consequences/punishments or judgements for what is shared. For many people, experiencing dating abuse and sexual assault can be a very isolating, painful, and shameful experience. By removing the threat of judgement, criticism, and punishment, your adolescent will be much more likely to share openly and honestly about any harmful dating experiences they've encountered. This creates an opportunity for you to support and provide safety for them. Listen empathetically. Try not to interrupt, yell, inject your feelings, or make light of your adolescent's experiences.

If your adolescent shares that they have experienced DV or SA in a relationship, say things such as,

- "It's not your fault"
- "I believe you"
- "No one deserves to be abused (or assaulted)."
- "Are you afraid?" "I am concerned for your safety."
- "I realize this is a difficult thing to share and I appreciate the courage it takes to talk about it. I am so glad you shared this with me."
- "How can I help?"
- "I love you and I am here for you."

Please do not make blaming comments such as: "How did you get yourself into this?" "I would never let my partner treat me that way," "All you have to do is call the police," "This is why you shouldn't drink/smoke," or "Why were you there in the first place?" You may also consider connecting them to professional resources and support if they share that they have experienced or are experiencing DV or SA.



Where can I find more information about Dating Violence and Sexual Assault resources for myself and my teen?

- Loveisrespect.org Love is Respect National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: Call 1-866-331-9474
- CDC Teen Dating Violence
- CDC Sexual Violence Prevention
- Department of Justice Teen Dating Violence
- [Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](http://Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN))
- The National Sexual Violence Resource Center

We are here to help! If you would like to get your teen connected to our healthy relationship skills group, please call/email McCaskill Family Services for more information or check out the group information on our website.

References:

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