

## **Women's Center update: Talking to teens about abuse**

**Lisa M. Utzig**

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The U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives have declared Feb. 5 through 9 National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week for the second year in a row. On Wednesday, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, along with Liz Claiborne Inc., launched the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline.

This is the first national hotline designed specifically for teens and young adults experiencing violence in their relationships, and calls are answered by trained teen advocates.

One in three teenagers has been in an abusive or unhealthy relationship, or will be sometime during their high school or college years. It may be hard for some adults to take teenage relationships seriously, but it is important to note that the partners and friends teens choose now are likely to be the same kind of people they choose to surround themselves with as adults. Taking the time to talk with your teen and create an open dialogue about relationships not only displays good communication skills, it sets the stage for future conversations.

It's a good idea to begin conversations with your teen about healthy and unhealthy relationships before they begin to date. Even if your teen has not started dating, it's likely that they have a friend in a dating relationship. Some questions you may want to consider asking are: What are your friends' relationships like? Have you ever seen any abusive behavior between two people who are going out? Why do you think someone would hurt a person they are dating? Why do you think a person might stay in an abusive relationship? What do you think makes a relationship healthy?

Practice assertive skills with your teen and discuss healthy boundaries. When confronted with a difficult choice, a teen who has thought seriously about their personal boundaries will be less likely to succumb to peer pressure. On that same note, teens who have practiced and developed assertive skills have an easier time saying no, speaking their minds and standing up for others. These are important, life-long skills.

Warning signs that a teen may be in an abusive relationship include: apologizing and making excuses for his/her partner's behavior; losing interest in activities he/she once enjoyed; no longer seeing friends or family members and becoming more isolated; hearing that a teen's partner puts him/her down and calling her names in front of other people; jealous and controlling behavior such as constantly calling and demanding to know where he/she has been; laughing off the partner's violent behavior as a joke; and unexplained injuries. These are only a few of the red flags of unhealthy relationships.

This week these warning signs will be placed throughout the South Lake Tahoe High School Campus on giant, red-flag-shaped posters. There will be educational outreach on campus, including a lunchtime booth from which teens can take home information about healthy relationships, enter in a raffle, and receive a free, healthy relationship Valentine's Day card. As parents, this awareness week creates a wonderful opportunity to talk about dating violence with your teens.

If you would like more information on teen dating violence, call our business line at (530) 544-2118 or stop by our office at 2941 Lake Tahoe Blvd.

- Lisa M. Utzig is the outreach coordinator at the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center.