

Education, Support Can Help Stop Tide of Violence

by Pearl Wolfe

“How was school today, Rachel?” “Mom, I learned about battering and domestic violence today, and it really made me look at our family and friends. I realized the impact that it’s had on our lives.”

It has been estimated that between 1 in 5 high school students have been physically abused in dating relationships. Before they reach the age of 18, 1 in 5 women will have been battered. According to the National Crime Survey, 2 million women report being battered each year; if all battered women reported their incidents, this number could be as high as 4 million. Every 8 seconds a woman is beaten by her intimate partner. In Oregon, 20 to 30 women are killed every year in a domestic violence incident. One-third of all women will be battered in their lifetime.

To stop this violence, information must be made available to young people. This knowledge can save their lives. A shelter provides a refuge from violence and lends physical safety and support, but a strong community prevention program must also be in place to bring this crucial information to the next generation.

In classrooms, we encourage students to share what they’ve learned with friends and family and to continue talking about the issue with their teacher or classmates. Discussion of this thought-provoking issue may bring hidden concerns to the surface and establish new family communication and openness. It may also bring necessary information to a family in crisis.

Domestic violence is not an occasional verbal disagreement or a light spat; it’s behavior that begins as putdowns and shoving in high school and escalates to punching and kicking and even the use of weapons to the point of life endangerment.

Unfortunately, domestic violence is infrequently discussed, and numerous myths about domestic violence pervade. Our high school presentation is designed to dispel the most common fallacies and to enable young people to identify the beginning of abusive patterns in relationships. The presentation also provides a foundation that builds awareness and may reduce the likelihood of being abused or becoming an abuser. It informs young people of the resources available to them in their own community.

The most common fallacies are: domestic violence is centered in groups who have lower incomes, drugs and alcohol cause the violence, stress causes battering, the problem is couple abuse with both members assaulting each other, and battered women are masochistic and provoke the violence.

The accurate responses to these misconceptions:

- Domestic violence is a widespread social problem that crosses all classes and races.
 - The problem is not intimate partners assaulting each other, but men battering women.
- According to the National Crime Survey, 95 percent of serious assaults are against women.

- Drug and alcohol addiction are often used as excuses to free the batterer from responsibility. It seems that the batterer needs to deal with two separate issues: the addiction and the violent behavior.
- Similarly, some batterers experience stress, but stress does not cause abuse. Even if the batterer is able to reduce his stress, he may still continue or resume the violence. The violence must be treated as the problem, not as a symptom that will disappear.
- Finally, women who are battered are not a personality type; any women can be battered. Women who are abused do not enjoy the beating, nor do they feel that they deserve the assault.

It's important to recognize the warning signs of an abusive relationship. For a young woman, signs might include: feeling isolated from friends and family by her boyfriend's controlling behavior; dealing with excessive jealousy and accusations; feeling afraid to say what she thinks or feels for fear of reprisals; being the recipient of name-calling and putdowns, either privately or publicly; and feeling afraid of her partner. He may even threaten to do something to her or himself if she attempts to leave the relationship. These are all warning signs.

Fortunately, community resources are available to deal with this problem. We encourage high school students to discuss their relationship with a trusted adult, parent, teacher or school counselor.

It's particularly helpful to get assistance from those who specialize in the problem of domestic violence. Womenspace has a 24-hour hotline to provide counseling and referrals to young people in crisis. Looking Glass works effectively with teenagers and can offer support services. Anger control treatment provides group and individual treatment and offers behavioral options to abusers.

Domestic violence is very real in the lives of many high school students, whether it occurs in their own dating relationship or between their parents.

Our goal, when we go out to speak in the high schools, is to give young people information that will help them recognize the problem. Teaching them the warning signs of abuse in intimate relationships helps them make informed decisions about safe and healthful relationships.

What did your son or daughter learn in school today? Thanks to the receptiveness of your local teachers, community educators like Womenspace can add important information to your children's learning experience. Your role as a parent is to help them digest the information by adding your insights and listening to your children's, thus ensuring its application within their lives.

Pearl Wolfe is the community education coordinator for Womenspace, a shelter for battered women and their children in Eugene.

Original publication date: 11/10/1991 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon