

It shouldn't hurt to be in love Valentine's Day hype can fuel youth dating violence

Ontario... At least one in five Canadian teens experience dating violence. There's nothing romantic about getting hurt—but in fact, misconceptions about romance can fuel assaults. Unfortunately, the romantic messages around Valentine's Day stop far short of helping youth understand healthy romance.

“Our culture starts laying the groundwork at a very early age to convince young people that romantic love is all-important. However, we often neglect to teach young people what's healthy and what isn't in romance,” says Debra Cockerton, Ontario Provincial Coordinator. RespectED is the Canadian Red Cross program that aims to prevent abuse and violence in young people's lives.

According to Cockerton, part of the reason dating violence flourishes among young people is that they misunderstand what violent behavior means. “Young people are particularly vulnerable to the belief that jealousy, possessiveness and anger are signs of intense passion and devotion.”

Studies in recent years indicate that between 20 and 30 per cent of North American teens will experience some form of physical or emotional abuse in a dating relationship before they reach adulthood. Forced sexual activity is also a problem among adolescents. One study of over 1,600 Canadian teens found 19 per cent of girls and 4 per cent of boys had experienced sexual coercion in dating relationships.

Online relationships can also lead to abuse. Using Internet communication tools such as chat rooms, e-mail and instant messaging can put youth at risk of encountering online predators. The Internet allows people to be anonymous where trust and intimacy can develop quickly online. Predators take advantage of this anonymity to build online relationships that feel close and very real for young people.

Unhealthy relationships in adolescence can establish a lifelong pattern of accepting violence. And for a few, this violence will escalate, resulting in injury or even death.

Unfortunately, adults tend to minimize the importance of relationships among teens, “It's important that we take young relationships very seriously, and become familiar with the warning signs of abusive relationships to help protect the young people in their lives,” explains Cockerton.

Communicating early and often about healthy relationships is key. Adults should:

Discuss media messages and stereotypes with youth: While a teenager's ideas about intimate relationships are influenced by many factors, including their own experiences and what they witness in family and peer relationships, Cockerton says that teenagers are especially susceptible to messages from the media and society about love and romance. Parents and teachers can help by communicating respectfully about why certain messages, images and stereotypes in the media are troubling.

Talk about the benefits and risks of the Internet: Make them feel that it's OK to ask you questions or talk to you if they run into problems online. Build guidelines around Internet use just as you would for other activities. Be proactive in finding out who your kids are talking to online. Help them make smart decisions while they use the Internet.

Make sure teens know the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship: Relationship violence usually happens on a continuum. Young people should know that someone who exhibits possessive or inappropriate behavior may progress to threats and intimidation to keep their partner "in line," and perhaps to physical violence. And if there is any physical violence, they should know to seek help from a trusted adult.

Watch for warning signs, and ask questions: Warning signs could include sudden personality changes, a withdrawal from activities, family and/or friends, walking on eggshells, secrecy about fights or bruises/injuries, sudden self-destructive behavior, and a tendency to make excuses for a boyfriend/girlfriend's inappropriate behavior.

For parent groups and those who work with youth, RespectED offers a workshop called *Not Just Puppy Love* to help adults understand the causes, issues and indicators of youth relationship violence. To help educate youth, RespectED offers a program called *What's Love Got to Do With It?* for adolescents. Available to schools and community groups, this program uses videos, popular music and other materials to examine what constitutes a healthy relationship and how to recognize abusive relationships. Stereotypes are challenged and information on how to get help is provided.

Society must work harder to help young people navigate the difficulties of dating as they establish lifelong relationship patterns, Cockerton says. "On Valentine's Day and every other day of the year, each one of us at every age deserves to be in healthy relationships where we feel safe, trusted and respected."

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For more information or to arrange an interview, contact:

Debra Cockerton
705-745-8222
debra.cockerton@redcross.ca