



Dating Violence among Youth – Changing the Narratives

Domestic violence is a serious problem in Canada, yet we often give little consideration to violence in dating relationships when considering the scope of the issue. Given the high rate of dating violence among young Canadians; this is a matter we need to be taking much more seriously.

Statistics Canada reports that women and men aged 15-30 have higher rates of police-reported intimate partner violence than any other age group of Canadians. As with other age groups, young women are far more likely than young men to experience severe violence at the hands of their partners. With research showing how vulnerable young people are to dating violence, we

must face the fact that we only minimally discuss this problem with youth, or gloss over it entirely. It's time to make changes! In taking concrete steps, such as educating youth about warning signs of abuse at an early age, and altering the narratives of what romance and healthy relationships look like, we can lower rates of abuse among young people.



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Young people in Canada between the ages of

15 - 24

Make up 43% of all incidents of dating violence, with sexual assault being the most common crime resulting in charges.

Young women between the ages of

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Experience 10x more violence in relationships than young men, according to police-reported cases.

Risks of Domestic Violence Highest Among Young Adults

Current research gives us an idea of just how commonplace abuse has become in the realm of teenage dating, and the numbers are startling. About 1 in 11 teens report having experienced physical dating violence each year in the U.S. Young people in

Canada between the ages of 15 and 24 make up 43% of all incidents of dating violence, with sexual assault being the most common crime resulting in charges. Young women between the ages of 15 and 19 experience ten times more violence in relationships than young men, according to police-reported cases. This type of abuse is perpetrated by current or former boyfriends and girlfriends as well as in “other” intimate relationships, although the vast majority of dating abuse in teen relationships is committed by a current or former dating partner. Teenagers are far less likely to report violence in their relationships to police than adults. A [2017 study](#) led by Deineria Exner-Cortens from suggests that only one in eleven episodes of teen dating violence are reported to adults or authorities.

These numbers are highly concerning and more so because the effects of dating violence experienced as an adolescent can be far-reaching. This type of abuse is a strong predictor of future adult violence. Young female survivors are one and a half times more likely to experience intimate partner violence abuse as adults. Young people who experience dating violence are not only at an increased risk of being physically injured, they are more likely to act out, take unnecessary risks, report binge drinking, suicide attempts, physical fighting, and sexual activity.

These facts should serve as a wake-up call that teen dating violence is a serious issue. Rather than dismissing youth romantic relationships as immature or short-lived, we have to realize that these relationships can have truly grave effects on the health and development of young people.

Dating Violence Comes in Many Forms

Dating violence can be physical and signs may be apparent to others, but it can also be emotional, sexual, or psychological. These forms of abuse are generally not as obvious and can often remain hidden from others.

Sexual abuse can range from sexual harassment, to sexual coercion – manipulating a person or situation in order to engage in sex – to sexual assault – kissing, touching, fondling, oral sex or sexual intercourse without consent.

Psychological abuse covers a wide spectrum of behaviours, including dominating behaviours, verbal put-downs, social isolation, excessive jealousy and possessiveness.

Many young people and even the adults around them have a disconcerting tendency to minimize abusive or controlling behaviours of dating partners, especially boyfriends. Common examples include texting non-stop, cyberstalking, demanding a partner stay away from certain friends or refrain from wearing certain clothing. When these forms of obsession and jealousy are idealized, either in the media or by peers, they are normalized and increasingly controlling behaviour is not recognized as abusive. Youth are convinced that toxic abusive relationships are normal or somehow even romantic. Ensuring children and young adults are well educated on the signs of all types of dating violence is a crucial component of discussions surrounding healthy relationships.

Dating and Dating Violence Starts Early

Research indicates that dating violence is showing up at younger ages than many adults might realize.

71% of youth in Canada report being
in a dating relationship by the age of **15**

Among those that have engaged in a dating relationship, 55% had their first dating relationship by the age of 12. Since this sort of abuse can begin as early as grade six, it is imperative that the issue is taught and discussed by the time students reach middle school.

When these conversations are conducted in age-appropriate ways and supported by age appropriate resources, we can support young people to develop healthy relationships. This is an important way of taking dating violence seriously. This includes teaching youth the warning signs for all types of dating abuse and how to seek help, both for themselves and others. If we are not teaching girls and young women these signs, we cannot expect them to recognize that what they or a friend is experiencing is unhealthy or abusive. And while a focus on prevention is critical, we also need to make sure they know how to seek help.

Discussions surrounding healthy relationships and dating violence must address how traditional norms, such as constant persuasion have been glamorized and masked as romance. Media portrayals of men pursuing women in the name of love reinforce skewed ideas about what it means to be in a healthy relationship. As Exner-Cortens says, "There's a lot of misunderstood filtering of information about what is romantic. 'If he pursues me in an aggressive and relentless

way, he must really like me.’ The moment that turns into violence is not necessarily expected by a young woman who’s not looking for the signs.”

It is vital to include discussions of how social media and cyber-bullying are implicated in dating violence. Abuse behaviours such as online shaming, intimate acts coerced through cyberbullying, and constant requests for images or sharing of images without consent - are all happening at astounding rates. One fifth of young Canadians surveyed admitted they have experienced some form of cyberbullying or cyberstalking. This type of abuse can be especially dangerous, as many young female victims may not recognize this as a type of dating violence.

To be equipped to address the problem of dating violence, adults need to understand the severity of the risks as well as the many ways this kind of abuse can manifest, including those specific to youth. As adults we need to be equipped to have important conversations with youth and to support them in times of need. Education is paramount in efforts to end dating violence. Parents, teachers and other adult role models can play an important role in preventing adolescent dating violence by encouraging youth to speak up and report the violence to a teacher, a school nurse, or another trusted adult. The prevention of dating violence can also be addressed through community or school-based educational curricula.

Talking about dating violence, teaching the signs of abuse and how to help, dismantling myths that conflate coercion with romance and demonstrating healthy relationships are valuable steps that can help to prevent young people from experiencing abuse, check the escalation of abuse and ensure young people feel supported and heard. It is imperative that we give the problem of dating violence among youth the attention it deserves.

If you want to help youth learn more, we recommend the **free** Healthy Youth Relationships [online course](#) for youth offered by the Canadian Red Cross.

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