

This article is a review of the key points discussed in Dr. Jill Murray's book "but I love him: Protecting Your Teen Daughter from Abusive, Controlling Dating Relationships" available at the Casa Grande Public Library. Funding for the article was provided by the ADHS Office of Injury and Disability Prevention.

But I love him...

By Karen Wanjico
Prevention Services
Horizon Human Services

Teen dating violence is cause for alarm. 1 in 3 girls has an abusive dating experience by the time she graduates high school. Domestic violence shelters are filled with women who were first abused while in high school. In nine seconds another girl in the USA will be battered in her relationship.

Abuse starts out sneakily. What is done, is at first flattering. He really likes me. He wants me to call and check in. He pages me at school. We have a secret signal. He really knows what looks good on me. He wants to spend time with me. He makes me feel special. He said he loved me within the first week. These are the warning signs. Trouble up ahead.

His attention makes the girl feel special. But then it feels ugly. When she talks to another boy, he gets jealous. She has to explain and apologize for simple things like discussing homework with another boy. She ends up crying a lot, trying to figure out how to be right for him. She can't go with her friends because she has to call him exactly on time, or he will get angry. He can call two hours late, but she has to wait by the phone. She can't dress right. He tells her what to buy or what to wear. He calls her bitch or whore. These are supposedly terms of endearment. He tells her she is lucky that he loves her, because no one else will. He may or may not hit her. If he doesn't hit, he destroys her favorite things, or maybe he'll just hit a wall. Her grades take a dive. She loses interest in things she enjoyed before him. If she leaves him, he'll commit suicide. If she tells her parents what he does, he'll kill her.

At first, he charms the parents. They may even like him. He's not evil 100% of the time. Yet, he is abusive. Likely, he comes from a home where he was abused or where he watched his mom being abused. He uses drugs or alcohol; His parents use. His temper is out of control. He gets angry more often and quicker than others. He holds stereotypical views about women and men's roles. She thinks it's all her fault. She has low self-esteem. Her family has a history of abuse. She has learned that women care for men, that she should forgive and forget, that women fix the relationship, etc... She needs a boyfriend to feel secure.

These symptoms and causes of teen abusive relationships are easy to recognize. Preventing it is more difficult. Knowledge is key.

Parents can help prevent their children from engaging in abusive relationships, by teaching about the differences between infatuation, addictive love, and mature love. Let your children know that healthy relationships take time to develop and that it is not normal to "love" someone the first time you talk to them. You may know these things, but your child has little life experience when it comes to love and relationships.

Infatuation is characterized by "urgency, intensity, sexual desire, and anxiety." It is consuming, exhausting. Physical and sexual attraction is the central, driving force. Relationships based on infatuation burn bright and burn out quickly.

Addictive love is infatuation gone wrong. There are few times of happiness. The relationship is all consuming. Time is constantly spent on apologizing, feeling guilty, being afraid. Life depends on the partner, yet there is insecurity, distrust, lack of confidence. Outsiders notice how you've changed. This is where sexual assault or physical abuse happens. The abusive partner criticizes and tears down. Promises to self and others are broken in order to keep the relationship going. You feel worse and worse as the relationship progresses.

Mature love develops gradually, is marked with friendship, as well as sexual interest. There is calm, empathy, security, tolerance, and a lack of feelings of threat. The relationship is based in reality. Partners are secure in themselves and with each other. The best is brought out in each other.

Parents can also help their children to learn and practice assertive communication styles. Teach her to say, "Let me think about that and I'll get back to you." Help her to say no, without apologizing. Help her to be direct with her thoughts and feelings, not someone who can be pushed around. "No. I don't want to do that."

If your daughter is in an abusive relationship, she may not know it is abusive. She thinks it is love. She may fear for your safety. She may feel guilty. Intervention is needed. Individual and family counseling is a must. Her life may be at stake. Other interventions may be needed, orders of protection, temporary restraining orders, permanent restraining orders. Schools and neighbors may need to be enlisted in the process of protecting her. You may need to help her develop personalized safety plans. If her abusers shows up at school, home, or work, where can she go to be safe? Who can she get help from? Where are the exits, the phones, the weapons he could turn on her? If she is on a date with someone and feels unsafe, what should she do? How can she get home? These are sad things to consider, but you know the saying about an ounce of prevention. The best case scenario is always to work with your children before the problem occurs. Let this article be your starting point.

The preceding article is based on the book, but I love him: *Protecting Your Teen Daughter from Abusive, Controlling Dating Relationships*, by Dr. Jill Murray a psychotherapist who works in high schools around the US educating youth about teen dating violence. In the article I did not have time to cover Dr. Murray's three levels of violence, or her power and control wheel designed for teens. The book is full of lists, easy to spot and quick to read, as well as personalized stories that drive home the author's main points.

At times, the causes of teen dating violence are too generalized for persons who know the research on abuse and sexual violence. This statement had me laughing out loud, "Often a boyfriend will tell his girlfriend that he 'can't stop now,' that he's 'reached the point of no return.' In my lectures, I usually counter this excuse by asking boys, 'If your mother or a priest walked into the room at that moment, would you be able to stop?' "

Too, there is a point where Dr. Murray nearly engages in victim blaming:

As parents, we must also teach our daughters that they are responsible for the message they send to boys, While "no always means no" is an absolute, I must tell you that whenever I go to high schools, I see girls who are dressed very provocatively, speaking very sexually, and gyrating against boys. At the moment a girl is checking out his tonsils with her tongue, she needs to understand that her boyfriend's probably not thinking, 'Gee, I'd really like to take her to church this Sunday.'

These statements should be taken in the entire context of the book, however, which is designed as a tool for helping parents talk with their daughters. Indeed, the book's weakness is its focus on girls. Not much reflects a concern for teaching young men or sons. Nor does the author attempt to include relationships that are not heterosexual. In this, the author continues society's silence on the matter. Despite these weaknesses, the book is a good place to start and is written in easy enough of a style that parents and their teens could benefit.

I close by including a complete breakdown of the book's chapters:

1. WHAT IS TEEN DATING ABUSE?
2. VERBAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE: THE FIRST LEVEL OF ABUSE
3. SEXUAL ABUSE: THE SECOND LEVEL OF ABUSE
(HERE SHE SPECIFICALLY ADDRESSES DATE RAPE, STATUTORY RAPE, UNWANTED TOUCHING, AND UNWANTED KISSING)
4. PHYSICAL ABUSE: THE THIRD LEVEL OF ABUSE
5. WARNING SIGNS: RECOGNIZING ABUSIVE TEENAGE RELATIONSHIPS
6. WHAT'S HE THINKING? HOW TO SPOT A POTENTIAL ABUSER
7. WHY GIRLS CHOOSE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS
8. INFATUATION, ADDICTIVE LOVE, AND MATURE LOVE
9. THE ROLE OF ALCOHOL AND DRUGS
10. HOW TO PREVENT ABUSE IN THE FIRST PLACE: FAMILY DYNAMICS
11. GIRLS WHO ABUSE BOYS

12. WHY TEENS DON'T TELL: HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DAUGHTER ABOUT ABUSE
13. MEDICAL, LEGAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS: CONFRONTING ABUSE
14. WHO WILL OUR DAUGHTERS BECOME? WHAT WE WANT FOR GIRLS IN AN IDEAL WORLD

Regan Books, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2000, ISBN 0-06-019724-2