



By Stopping Teen Dating Violence Now, We Can Prevent Abuse in Adulthood

By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott

Most of us remember the innocence of dating as teens, and many of us have watched as our own children venture out on their first dates. Despite our own fond memories, there can be a dark side to teen dating that is often not discussed but potentially dangerous: behavior that is aggressive, controlling, or emotionally abusive, and which thrives in secrecy. Victims may be too embarrassed or afraid to tell family or friends, even as the behavior progresses to physical or sexual violence.

Studies have found that unhealthy teen relationships can have a lifelong impact. Often it is a predictor of domestic violence in adult relationships, for aggressor and victim alike. Additionally, many of the behaviors in teen dating violence overlap with sex trafficking, such as the use of power and control, which raises another danger.

As City Attorney, I lead an Office that provides services to victims of domestic and sexual violence and also prosecutes their abusers. We know this phenomenon all too well. That's why we are working to break the cycle of violence by educating teachers, teens, parents, and guardians about this hidden aspect of teen dating.

Our goal is to reach these students – both those being harmed and those causing the harm – and their families before aggression or controlling behaviors occur or escalate into violence, identify the problematic behavior, and help correct it, leading to happier, safer lives. We recently conducted trainings on the importance of healthy relationships, and how to recognize and prevent dangerous ones, in conjunction with the San Diego Domestic Violence Council (SDDVC), the San Diego County Office of Education, the Center for Community Solutions, the Community Resource Center, San Diego Youth Services, San Ysidro Health, and South Bay Community Services.

Our Office, along with the San Diego County Office of Education and community domestic violence partners, is also doing targeted outreach to all middle and high schools with the goal of hosting future trainings. If you'd like to see this training in your school, contact the Teen Dating Violence Subcommittee of the SDDVC at teendv.sddvc@gmail.com.

Locally, one in five San Diego students has experienced emotional violence, one in 10 has experienced sexual violence, and one in 16 has been subjected to physical violence. These rates are more than double for teens who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, according to a 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey by the San Diego Unified School District.

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In a study by the Centers for Disease Control of adults who were victims of violence or stalking by an intimate partner, 26 percent of the women and 15 percent of the men had first experienced sexual or physical violence before age 18.

At our San Diego Family Justice Center, which provides comprehensive services to those who have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, and sex trafficking, we see devastating cases every day. Some involve pregnant mothers, disabled children, child abduction, and other circumstances that would break your heart. No one should be forced to endure this kind of pain.

While our Family Justice Center provides victim support services, our Domestic Violence and Sex Crimes Unit continues to aggressively prosecute violent offenders, with recent convictions resulting in significant jail time and requisite counseling.

Many of the victims we serve have a history of abuse, coercion, and exploitation that has led them into a pattern of unhealthy relationships. That's why we're working hard to educate teens about how to foster healthy relationships as they embark on adulthood.

Anyone who is already experiencing violence in a relationship can find the assistance they need in a safe and supportive setting at the City Attorney's San Diego Family Justice Center. The center provides confidential services, free of charge. Call 619-533-6000 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday - Friday, the 24-hour hotline at 888-385-4657, or visit www.sandiego.gov/fjc.

Here are some additional resources for those who need help or would like to learn more:

- Center for Community Solutions: www.ccssd.org / 888-385-4657
- Community Resource Center: www.crcncc.org / 877-633-1112
- San Diego Youth Services: www.sdyouthservices.org / 619-241-0608
- San Ysidro Health: www.syteenclinic.org / 619-800-8336
- South Bay Community Services: www.southbaycommunityservices.org / 800-640-2933
- WRC: www.wrcsd.org / 760-757-3500
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: www.thehotline.org / 1-800-799-7233 or 1-800-787-3224 for TTY, or if you're unable to speak safely, text LOVEIS to 22522

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City Attorney Mara W. Elliott
1200 Third Ave., Suite 1620
San Diego, CA 92101
Phone: 619-236-6220
Email: cityattorney@sandiego.gov
www.Sandiego.gov/cityattorney