

At Our Most Vulnerable

An Exploration of Factors of Teen Dating Abuse

By Lyra Kalajian

The teenage years are some of the most formative in a person's life. Teenagers are still learning and taking things in that will form who they are as adults. It's an in-between stage where they are engaging in adult behavior but don't have the same foundation of experience as adults. One of these behaviors is dating. There is no guide book for how to be in a relationship. Teenagers have to find their own way, taking cues from their friends, parents, and popular culture. This creates a lot of room for uncertainty: how is someone supposed to know if a relationship is unhealthy and toxic if they haven't experienced anything else? Even if they know something is wrong, how are they supposed to get help? Being a teenager can be isolating, and people may feel like they can't rely on their family or friends to get them out of a bad situation. For my project, I worked to shed some light on the topic of teen dating abuse. Domestic violence is something people are getting better at talking about, but teenage relationships are often left out of the conversation. My mentor was Patrisha Mclean, the founder of Finding Our Voices, an organization based in Midcoast Maine that raises awareness for domestic abuse and tells the stories of survivors. She noticed the need for a specific focus on teenage relationships, and I was lucky to be able to help with putting together the beginnings of this. I did research in my community and reached out to young people to find out what abuse looked like in young relationships. Once I had this research, I used it to create a graphic of information to distribute so teens have the tools to recognize abuse. During my time, I also wrote about things from my personal experience as a teenager that may contribute to dating abuse. I hypothesized that factors like popular culture, pornography, toxic masculinity, pressure, and lack of support create a foundation for teen dating abuse to occur.

Teenagers consume a lot of media, from books to music to movies and TV shows, and they look to these sources to gather information about how to act and live.¹ In my experience, the portrayal of abusive relationships in the media, specifically TV, can go two ways. The less commonly portrayed version is a seemingly accurate, if a bit dramaticized relationship that has all the hallmarks of what people think of as domestic abuse. A lot of these relationships from TV or movies are physically abusive. In these cases, the characters in the show/movie will usually point out the abuse, and the abuser is treated as a villain. Most people are familiar with physical abuse and are aware that it happens in abusive relationships. If a character is being beaten by their partner, the watchers can more clearly identify the relationship as a bad one. However, while physical abuse does happen, it is just one factor in abusive relationships. This can mislead people about what abuse actually looks like, especially teenagers.

A lot of relationships in the media directed at teens have the hallmarks of abuse, but are very romanticized and treated like ideal relationships. It very rarely gets called out either within the media or in real life. The types of abuse seen in these relationships in media portrayals is more subtle, emotional rather than physical. It is things like controlling and manipulative behavior being passed off as protectiveness and harmless jealousy. Stalking is passed off as a grand romantic gesture, and screaming matches are just fits of passion because one person cares about the other so much. A TV show that I watched religiously in middle and high school was *Gossip Girl*. One of the main relationships is swooned over and called one of the most romantic

¹ Michael Milmine (2013) "Beware of What You Watch: Television Viewing and Dating Behavior in Young Adults," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 5 , Article 5.

on TV, but after growing up and getting some perspective, I realized that the male character's behavior was scarily possessive and his obsession with the female was unhealthy.² He would do things like get drunk and threaten her, say he couldn't live without her, and tell her she was his when she had broken up with him and moved on. At the time, I thought it was attractive that he wanted to be with her so much because these clearly abusive behaviors were glossed over in the name of passion, but I can now see it was very damaging for young people including myself to be watching. This romanticization and subsequent realization isn't something I am alone in experiencing.³ When I bring it up with my friends, a common response is "Yeah, I guess it was abusive". We absorb so much from the media we consume. If teens are taught that controlling relationships are romantic, it makes it harder to realize that they are in a bad situation, and therefore less likely to reach out or get out.

In the same vein of media, it's important to talk about pornography. There are many layered issues with pornography, especially when it is being consumed by young people.⁴ I've had conversations about this with my peers and teachers in and out of school, and at first I didn't realize the harm. I thought people had a problem with the industry because it promoted sex and "promiscuity" and as a feminist I didn't have a problem with that. After having informed conversations, I realized the backlash is much more valid and that I agree with it. My main issue with it is the unrealistic standards it sets for people in terms of both their sexual partners and

² Emily Exton. "Gossip Girl: Best of Chuck-Blair." EW.com. Accessed May 25, 2020.
<https://ew.com/gallery/gossip-girl-best-chuck-blair/>.

³ Caroline Bohra. "Dear TV Writers, Please Stop Romanticizing Abusive Relationships." Dear TV Writers, Please Stop Romanticizing Abusive Relationships | IRIS, U.Va., October 2, 2019.
<https://iris.virginia.edu/2019/10/dear-tv-writers-please-stop-romanticizing-abusive-relationships>.

⁴ David Perry, "The Impact of Pornography on Children," American College of Pediatricians, June 20, 2017,
<https://www.acpeds.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/the-impact-of-pornography-on-children>

themselves. The people who create this type of media are not teenagers, they don't look like teenagers, and they don't act like teenagers. Porn is not a realistic portrayal of the lives of the young people that watch it. This may lead to problems like feeling inadequate or expecting your girlfriend/boyfriend to be like the people you watch, leading to anxiety and pressure on both parties. Another issue with pornography is how it can promote violence against women. If young men and women are introduced to rough or violent sex through this media, it may be normalized in their minds and lead to sexual abuse in relationships. Overall, porn can be just another way women are degraded and abused. Porn is harmful because if that is the way young people are introduced to sex, they are not going to have a healthy or realistic idea of it, which can lead to problems later in their personal lives.

When researching for this project I heard stories of both young women and men being victims of abuse, so I wanted to explore how male privilege and toxic masculinity relate to the issue of abuse.

The first thing I wanted to look into is how male privilege and toxic masculinity are portrayed in popular culture. I found that the most prevalent example is in music. A lot of music has pretty violent or just rude wording directed at women that they get away with because it is in a song and therefore is a kind of art. People can't speak out against it for fear of being told they are trying to censor art. It worries me when women are referred to in such derogatory terms in this music that is then widely listened to. Women are often treated as sex objects or generally hated on, and no one can really say anything without being labeled as too sensitive. You don't really hear that kind of thing in music made by women, and I wonder what would happen if it

was a similar kind of messaging against men, how would they feel and react? I bet no one would call them “too sensitive”.

There are countless examples of this trend. If I go on Spotify and look at the “Today’s Hits” playlist, I can pick out several songs with misogynistic messaging. For example, the popular song “Blueberry Faygo” starts with the lyrics “One bad bitch, and she do what I say so” and then later says “She on go, your bitch fuck the team, uh (lil' bitch)/ 'Cause you know your bitch want a winner (winner)”. Women are exclusively referred to as bitches and hoes, and reduced to objects to be controlled or exploited. I’ve listened to this song in the car with all my female friends, and never realized how bad the lyrics were. Some songs aren’t even just sexist, but downright violent. The song “Blackout” that is popular with teenagers contains the lyrics “Choke the shit out a bitch, look at her neck/Those are not hickeys, they bruises”. Violence against women is popularized in these songs and hidden behind the guise of artistic liberty. It worries me that this is something that so many people listen to without acknowledging the harmful messaging. I remember one specific song that we all listened to in middle school was “Blurred lines” which was a very thinly veiled song about disregarding consent. The lines were “I hate these blurred lines/ I know you want it/ I hate them lines/ I know you want it/ But you're a good girl”. This song just perpetuates the culture of treating women as objects, and is really disturbing to hear as a young adult, especially knowing how I listened to it in middle school alongside my peers. We were aware the song was inappropriate, but we didn’t understand the deeper message. Knowing what I know now about consent and rape culture, I am concerned that I was exposed to such harmful messages at a young age. As I said in the earlier section about

abusive relationships in the media, this normalization of violence and mistreatment isn't a healthy way for teenagers to think about relationships.

Toxic masculinity doesn't just affect women. I've observed it affect boys in every stage of their lives, which can shape who they become as adults. It starts early, with the way they are raised by their parents and the culture around them. I experienced it and bought into it as well when I was young. I would cry all the time, but as soon as my brother did I'd make fun of him for being weak, because I'd been taught that boys were supposed to be strong and not show emotion. I didn't learn this lesson from my parents, but from simply growing up in the world, because toxic masculinity is ingrained in everything. When my family moved to Mexico when I was in 4th grade, my brother dropped out after a year and became homeschooled because he hated the culture of being insulted and pushed around as a sign of "friendship". I remember one day in my karate class that year, a boy who had been bullying me threw a ball at my head. I started crying and he looked shocked. As I was recovering, I heard the instructor telling the boy that I was okay, that I had cried because girls were weak, whereas the boy was strong and wouldn't have cried. My friend and I who took that class together were already mini-feminists and immediately ran to our parents to tell them how misogynistic he had been. I realize now that his words were harmful on two ends: they were sexist and invalidated my experience being bullied by this boy, and they also enforced the message that boys aren't supposed to cry, even when they've been hurt. In middle and high-school, boys groups are built around this culture of manliness and not being emotional for fear of being ridiculed. The effect of this is that boys who are being abused by their partner may not seek help from their friends because they worry about being perceived as weak. There is stigma around men speaking out about their experiences with

abuse, in part because toxic masculinity makes people assume a man could never be hurt by a woman. So when boys are in these kinds of relationships, they suffer in silence.⁵

Boys aren't the only ones who may struggle with opening up to their friends. In middle school, within my large friend group of girls, there was constant drama. This drama was based on jealousy, boredom, lack of communication, and other factors. On many occasions, it was about boys, like when two girls would have a crush on the same boy. When talking about relationship abuse, many people talk about using your communities of women as support systems, whether your family, friends, or another group. However, when women or girls are in constant competition, or always undermining the other person, these support systems seem less viable. In my experience, it was hard to open up about any problems that I was having to my friends for fear that I would be ridiculed or blamed for my pain rather than comforted and helped. I wouldn't go to my friends when I was feeling hurt or upset because I didn't think they would care, or I thought they would trivialize my feelings. I am lucky enough that I was able to find a small but tight knit group of friends that I can rely on once I got to high school, but some people haven't found anyone they can really trust. In this world, there are hardships that women face in every aspect of our lives. From the wage gap to sexual harassment to being underestimated and not taken seriously, we struggle. As women, we should be able to recognize this shared struggle and help each other through it, not add to it.

Boys and girls alike don't always have a good group of friends that they can rely on, but what about the adults in their lives? Well, speaking from personal experience, in middle and high school I never wanted to talk about my problems with adults because I didn't think they

⁵ Gabe Moses, "3 Ways Toxic Masculinity Harmed Me as a Male Survivor of Abuse," *The Body Is Not An Apology*, December 10, 2019, <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/3-ways-toxic-masculinity-harmed-me-as-a-male-survivor-of-abuse/>

understood me. Despite my uncertain relationship with my friends, I would much rather talk about a problem I was having with them rather than my parents or a teacher/guidance counselor. In my experience, many times the adults I talked to, whether they were my parents, teachers, or others, had a habit of downplaying or dismissing my experiences and finding some way to turn things back around so they were my fault. Sometimes they probably were my fault, but this just strengthened my distrust and resentment of adults. I never knew how adults were going to react when I told them things, so it was easier to just not tell them at all. These were mostly small things, but they paralleled what could happen if I was facing a bigger problem. I am getting better at trusting adults, partly due to the mutually respectful relationships I have with my teachers at my high school, Watershed. However, most teens don't have this kind of relationship with their teachers, and many schools don't have good support systems in place even if teens were to use them due to things like a lack of funds or resources. Not every school has the money to have enough well-trained guidance counselors or other support systems for students to take advantage of. This lack of support from adults can make it harder for teenagers in abusive relationships to get out. They don't know who they can turn to in order to validate and help with their situation.

One of the many reasons I left public highschool was because I was overwhelmed by the culture of stress that was cultivated there by students and teachers. It was something that I experienced every day in freshman year. I filled my course load with all honors classes, already thinking about how it would look on transcripts for colleges. My peers did so as well. A weekend outing to the movies with friends would turn stressful as we got the notification that a grade from an english essay was posted. I obsessed over every little grade fluctuation, cried over projects,

and held grudges about bad grades. And that was just freshman year. After I left, I heard my friends and acquaintances talking about how little sleep they got, how stressed they were, how the AP course load was crushing them, but they were still taking 5 of them. There were several effects of this that I perceived. The first was drug and alcohol use. Adderall was popular, because it fed into the obsessive need to be a good student, but there was also a fair amount of weed as well as nicotine products and even stronger things like cocaine. The other effect was the clear degradation of students' mental health. Many of the kids were pushing themselves to the edge, burning the candle at both ends. This meant being an AP student, a varsity athlete, volunteering at the soup kitchen, and working on the weekends or after school. The need to be the best, to stand out, to compete, was ingrained in the culture, and it took a taxing toll on the mental health of the students. What does this have to do with the topic of teen dating abuse? Going into a relationship with compromised mental health isn't good for anyone. It can leave a victim vulnerable, or make an abuser volatile. It can create an unhealthy dependent relationship where a person may feel trapped because they are afraid of what their partner might do if they left.

I didn't really think much about relationship abuse before starting this project because it had never directly affected me and I had never really had the chance to learn about it in depth. I guess I was aware that teenagers also could be in abusive relationships, but I figured they were few and far between and that they looked similar to the domestic abuse I was used to hearing about from things like health class or presentations at school. Once I started to do my own research I found that, at least within my community, teen dating abuse looked a lot different than what I'd previously perceived as abuse. I realized that it comes across much more subtle, in behaviors that people may not be sure are normal or not for a relationship because they are new

to dating. I also found that it related mostly to the emotional or sexual categories of abuse rather than the physical. I didn't hear any accounts of hitting or kicking, but I heard several of manipulation and control. This is not to say physical abuse never happens in teenage relationships, but it doesn't seem to be the biggest indicator. This is different from my perception of domestic abuse in adults because it seems like a lot of the media, information, and awareness about domestic abuse focuses on physical abuse as a big part of the issue. Another thing I learned was that in teenagers, abuse is less of a gendered issue. I heard just as many stories of teen boys being the victims as I did girls, which is definitely different from what I had learned about abuse in past experiences in school or life in general. All in all, I basically started from scratch with my knowledge of what abuse looked like in teen relationships, and was able to talk to people and gather information so I could be informed and inform people about the issue. This was an eye opening experience for me because I consider myself pretty informed about most social issues, but I didn't know much about this topic. This made me realize that most people probably also don't know what teen dating abuse looks like.

The reason for this gap in knowledge is because teen relationships are often left out of the conversation of abuse. Many adults or parents don't see it as a serious problem, which means they don't talk about it with teenagers and may even minimize the issue if a teenager comes to them with concerns. From a legal standpoint, it is harder to get help from the law because of certain rules about what constitutes a relationship. Similarly, it is very difficult and sometimes impossible for a minor to petition for a restraining order against their abuser. Then, there is the issue of how to discipline an abuser if they are also a minor. It is hard enough to enact punishment on adult domestic abusers; a host of new challenges and concerns arise when dealing

with someone whose brain isn't even fully formed. The continued trivialization of teen dating abuse can have many harmful effects. Many abusers don't just stop once they mature, but rather escalate. If a teen abuser receives a positive response from their abusive behavior, like cooperation from their significant other with no repercussions, they are more likely to continue this behavior in the future. A curriculum that teaches healthy vs. unhealthy behaviors in schools has only recently started to be used, and is still not widespread.⁶ The bottom line is that there is a gap in our information and awareness of abuse that leaves teenagers vulnerable; it must be filled.

Each morning during my project, I met with my mentor Patrisha to go over what I did the day before as well as the plan for the day. My first week or so was spent reaching out to teenagers in the community and asking them the question "In your experience, what does dating abuse look like?" I got very interesting responses from people talking about things they had gone through or witnessed their friends go through, and I used these responses to craft my final product, the Toxic and Unhealthy Behavior wheel. I modeled the wheel after the Power and Control wheel that Finding our voices uses, but cut out some of the non-applicable categories and supplemented my own definitions. Patrisha and I went over it draft by draft until we had a final product that was ready to be shown to the public. Our goal for the wheel is to be something informative that can be put in spaces like schools or doctor's offices so that young people can absorb the information and use it as a guide for their current or future relationships. At the end of the process, I felt that this thing that I created and did the research for has the power to do some real good.

⁶ Rebecca Pensak, Must Be 18 or Older: How Current Domestic Violence Policies Dismiss Teen Dating Violence, 21 Wm. & Mary J. Women & L. 499 (2015), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmjowl/vol21/iss2/7>

Throughout my time working on this project, I had to think back to my own experiences in high school, middle school, and even before. I used my own personal experience to formulate an idea of what experiences young people go through that may lead them to enter or get stuck in an abusive relationship. Coupled with this, I reached out to my peers in the community to find out what they had experienced or witnessed in relationships. I did this for two reasons: one, to gather information, and two, to assess the knowledge that people my age have about this subject that affects many of us. I used this information to create a plan for how to spread awareness of the issue of teen dating abuse. My own personal research explored things like how abuse is portrayed in the media/popular culture, which included tv shows, pornography, and music. In this category I explained how inaccurate or romanticized abuse can cause harm to young people. I also looked into reasons why someone in an abusive relationship might have a hard time reaching out to their friends, and wrote about the lack of support systems for boys and girls alike. I detailed how the pressure of high school might have an impact on people entering into a relationship. Finally, I explained how teen relationship abuse is often overlooked, not just by adults, but also by the legal system. Teenagers are at a vulnerable age, and because of the situations around them, the most likely don't have the knowledge, support, or resources to recognize a relationship as abusive and then be able to leave that relationship. This is why my project is important: the first step is awareness.

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