

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is one of the best-kept secrets in America. One in four American women report they have been physically abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives; nearly one third of all Americans say they know a woman who has been physically abused by her husband or boyfriend in the past year.<sup>1</sup> While these statistics speak to the staggering prevalence of domestic violence, our media and education systems often fail to highlight the significance of this issue.

“I remember constantly being complimented on what a perfect family we had. People would say my parents could write books on parenting, but people didn’t know what went on behind closed doors. People didn’t know my real family. When people said these things, it made the domestic violence an even bigger secret.” —JoAnne

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, between 1998 and 2002, 84 percent of spouse-abuse victims were female, and 86 percent of victims of dating-partner abuse were female.<sup>2</sup> To reflect this

reality, we have chosen to refer to adult victims of domestic violence as “she” and perpetrators as “he,” but it is important to recognize that women can also be perpetrators of domestic violence, and that domestic violence happens in all types of relationships, including married, dating, heterosexual, and homosexual partnerships.

Domestic violence is not about disagreement, and it’s not simply an issue of anger. Domestic violence is one partner exerting power and control over the other, in ways that range from economic control to physical abuse. In homes where there is domestic violence, children are frequently victims of abuse as well. Even if a teen is not physically abused by the perpetrator of domestic violence, the emotional effects of witnessing domestic violence are often comparable to experiencing personal abuse.

Use the handout on page X to understand what domestic violence is and the many ways perpetrators of domestic violence take power and control over their partners. Share this handout with peers, co-workers, and people whose welfare you are concerned about.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

### If You Feel Discomfort Talking about Domestic Violence

If you are uncomfortable talking about domestic violence, explore these questions: Is it because you need more information on the dynamics of domes-

tic violence? Does it feel too close to home because you or someone you care for has experienced domestic violence? Do you think women who stay in abusive relationships are just as much to blame as the abuser for exposing their children to abuse? Take the risk of being completely honest with your biases and discomforts and seek evidence-based information on domestic violence to address your concerns.

### **Believe the Teen**

Youth almost never lie about abuse. If a teen discloses abuse in the home, let him know you believe him. Never underestimate the power of your support. Recognize the courage that led to his disclosure and commend him for it. Encourage the teen to say as much as he wants to about what has happened. Listen without judgment.

### **Ensure Safety**

Ask the teen if she feels safe and if it is safe for her to return home. Be aware that youth may minimize the abuse or feel the need to protect their families. Minimizing the abuse may be due to fear of social service involvement, feeling responsible for the abuse in the home, or not wanting to break the family apart. Determine whether you need to contact your local social service agency, and if so, make a report immediately. Different states and municipalities areas have different definitions of what constitutes abuse and neglect; find out if you have to report domestic violence to a child protective services agency. Document what the teen shared with you, regardless of whether or not you have a responsibility to report to authorities.

Make a basic safety plan with the youth if he plans to return home. Assist him in identifying what he can do if domestic violence occurs. A basic plan might include something like this:

- Call 911.
- If a fight begins, move to the safest place in your home (try to move to a room with an exit, and avoid rooms with weapons, such as the kitchen).

- If you can leave, go to a neighbor's home, and call 911 from there.
- Practice getting out of your home safely; identify which windows/doors provide the safest exit.

### **Validate the Teen's Feelings**

Providing youth with a nonjudgmental and safe space to express their feelings is critical. Simply ask, "How do you feel about what is going on in your home?" Be aware of common emotions of teens living in homes with domestic violence, such as fear, shame, guilt, isolation, helplessness, embarrassment, anxiety, and anger. Accept the youth's feelings, even if they make you uncomfortable. If a teen shares that she loves the person who is abusive, validate this feeling; don't try to challenge the feelings she holds.

### **Be Aware That Any Youth Could Be Exposed to Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence occurs in all types of communities and homes. Domestic violence occurs in families from all backgrounds, religions, and socioeconomic status, and in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. People in abusive relationships often say the abuser "behaves like a different person when other people are around" and can seem very likable to others. Just because a family is actively involved with their children's school or activities does not necessarily mean there could not be domestic violence in the home. A compliant and enjoyable parent or guardian may behave in other ways in the home.

### **Respect the Teen's Difficulty in Learning to Trust**

While not all young people who live in homes where domestic violence is present develop an inability to trust, many do. Let the youth take the lead in defining your relationship with each other. Practicing patience when you are concerned for a youth's safety is challenging; we often just want the youth to disclose enough information so we can