

Think dating violence doesn't happen to teens? Think again

As the mother of elementary-school daughters, I am amazed by the things they come home from school talking about. Not just the typical disagreements with their friends and boys they like, or even bullying but already questions about sex. Yes, in elementary school!

I hardly feel prepared for this, but the truth is they are still young enough that they are willing to ask me questions and talk to me about these things. And I know that if I wait a few more years it will be too late. I also know that it's my responsibility to initiate some of these conversations. Given my line of work, I think the



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Voices

first one is going to have to be about teen dating violence.

There is a myth shared by adults that dating violence doesn't happen to young people or that it's not as severe. However, one in three high school students will be involved in an abusive relationship, and 45 percent of teenage girls ages 14 to 17 say they know someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend.

While domestic violence can happen in all neighborhoods, income levels and ethnic groups, women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest per capita rates of intimate violence. Why are teenagers affected so much more?

One reason is that teens don't recognize dating violence. They have little access to information about the red flags and often no models of healthy relationships. Inexperienced in relationships, teens are more likely to confuse emotions like jealousy and

obsession as signs of true love.

They may be dismissive of verbal and emotional abuse as just joking around, not recognizing the impact of isolation, and see sexual coercion as "just how it is" in a relationship. In addition, new technologies such as texting, instant messaging and social media easily become powerful tools to harass, stalk and exploit a dating partner.

Worse than the naiveté of teens is the naiveté of adults. We don't take teens seriously. We don't take their problems and relationships seriously. And we are the ones most able to make a difference!

We need to talk to our kids. And listen. Maybe listen more than talk, but we need to do both. We need to have those hard and often awkward conversations. The consequences of not doing it are too severe!

According to the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence's Fatality Review

project, in the last decade 17 percent of the victims of domestic violence homicides in the state of Washington were under the age of 20. This statistic has been an all too real issue in our community where a 19-year-old pregnant mother was killed by her boyfriend this spring.

Teens often don't know where or how to get help if there are problems in their relationships. They don't know how to end the relationship or improve the situation. Nearly 80 percent of girls who have been physically abused in their intimate relationships continue to date their abuser — and teens don't want to talk to adults out of fear of punishment and distrust that information about their relationships will not be kept private.

All of these barriers can be

SYMPOSIUM

Domestic Violence Services of Benton and Franklin Counties is sponsoring a Teen Dating Violence Symposium at 6 p.m. Wednesday at the Columbia Basin College HUB.

easily overcome by just simply talking to the teens in your life. Let them know you care, that you are concerned for their safety, that you want them to have healthy, respectful relationships with their dating partners, and let them know that if their relationship gets scary that there is help available.

Teens can call the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline at 866-331-9474, or visit resources such as thesafespace.org, a multimedia resource for teens on dating violence, including a

Spanish language site, or loveisrespect.org, which offers a peer advocate chat line.

They can also call the local Domestic Violence Services hotline at 582-9841, or arrange to meet with an advocate to talk about what's going on and find out about what resources are available for them.

Awareness of teen dating violence is the first step in helping a teen in an unhealthy relationship. Teens need to know there is information, safe options and support available for them as well. Teen dating violence is a complex issue with no simple answers, but it is simple for each of us to play a role in ending it, especially for our own children!

► *Erinn Gailey is program director at Domestic Violence Services of Benton and Franklin Counties.*