

Dangerous Liaisons

Abuse and violence in the teen dating world.

by Lisa Grant

Growing up, I could talk to my mom about almost anything. I shared my joys, pains, worries, and dreams with her. Thankfully, my daughters also share most things with me. When my daughter told me about a friend involved in an abusive relationship, it brought back memories of my own high school friend.

As a sophomore, Vicky began dating Allen. The relationship quickly became serious, and before long, they were sexually active. Soon after that, Allen became very controlling. They began to



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fight—a lot—and I encouraged Vicky to end the relationship. She refused. Then Allen’s verbal abuse became physical.

I remember the first time I saw Vicky after she had been beaten. It made me physically ill. I thought she would now break up with Allen, but she told me how sorry he was and how it would never happen again. That became the rhetoric.

I didn’t know what to do. Vicky asked me not to tell anyone, and I was naïve enough to listen. Sadly, this was one thing I never told my mom, which I regret to this day. I watched, helplessly, as my friend made a complete mess of her life.

In our senior year, Vicky got pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. She

I Hope You Dance: Parents’ survival guide to prom night

by Lisa Grant

Prom season is here, and teens are preparing for what they hope will be “the best night of my life.”

My first prom experience as a parent may have been “the longest night of my life.” You may be anticipating the same, considering activities that often accompany prom

night: outrageous spending, drinking, drug use, and sex.

With a few proms under my belt now, I have learned to view this rite of passage as an opportunity

to improve communication and teach my children about making good choices. **Here are a few tried-and-true guidelines:**

TALK. Plan a discussion well in advance.

Tell your teen you want him/her to have a wonderful, memorable prom. Emphasize your belief in your child’s character and in his/her ability to act responsibly.

AGREE ON DETAILS. Get a complete itinerary and list of companions for the night.

CURFEW. Make a decision based on your teen’s past level of responsibility.

CONTACT. Establish a couple of mandatory check-in times and insist on the ability to contact your child at all times.

TRANSPORTATION. Whoever is driving must promise not to drink or take drugs. This rule is non-negotiable.

AFTER. If the post-prom plan includes going to a friend’s house, confirm the

information with the parents. Ask if they plan to be present and if they allow drinking in their home. Some parents believe that as long as they “take car keys,” underage drinking is permissible.

OFFER. Give your child the unconditional option of calling you for help, any time of the day or night. That includes picking them up, with a promise not to shame or humiliate them in front of others.

TEMPTATIONS. Help your teen develop a response plan for potential situations, such as:

- Being offered alcohol or drugs
- Driver has been drinking or using drugs or is driving recklessly
- Being pressured to perform sexual acts

FINANCES. Decide how much you are willing to contribute. If your teen wants to spend more, it will have to come out of his own pocket. **CPC**

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married Allen and had two more children. The abuse continued and she withdrew from her friendships. She finally left him, but later married another man, who was eventually shot and killed by police during a domestic incident at their home.

Violence in dating can happen to anyone, says Andy Gorski, children's advocate at New Horizons Shelter and Women's Center in La Crosse. Your teenager likely knows someone who has been the victim of abuse within a dating relationship or has been the victim herself. Consider these statistics from a February 2008 Liz Claiborne Inc. study:

- 1 in 3 teenagers report knowing a friend or peer who has been physically hurt by their partner
- 13 percent of teenage girls report being physically hurt or hit
- 1 in 4 teenage girls reveal they have been pressured to perform oral sex or engage in intercourse
- 26 percent of teenage girls in a relationship experienced repeated verbal abuse
- Nearly 1 in 5 teenage girls said a boyfriend had threatened violence or self-harm if presented with a break-up

Knowing if your child is in a healthy relationship is crucial. "Often teens will get into an abusive relationship and not know how to get out," says Gorski. "Parents should get to know their child's boyfriend or girlfriend and have them over regularly." Gorski also recommends parents heed these warning signs:

- The boyfriend/girlfriend refuses to or makes excuses for never coming over to spend time with the family
- The boyfriend/girlfriend is calling/contacting the child excessively and is constantly around or keeping tabs
- Their child is withdrawn from family and/or friends
- Declining grades or loss of interest in activities
- Irritability, signs of depression and/or substance abuse
- Lack of respect to parents displayed by the boyfriend/girlfriend

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Recognizing the overall attitude of your child is key. "It is important for parents to know when it is 'typical teenage behavior' and when they should be concerned," according to Gorski.

If you suspect your child is in an unhealthy relationship, take care not to ignore the issue or take the wrong approach. "Parents should be able to ask their child about their relationships in a way that says 'I care about you, I love you, and I want what is best for you' when confronting their child," Gorski says. Encourage your teen to talk to other adults they are comfortable with, such as relatives, a coach, teacher, school counselor, or youth pastor.

Being available and creating a safe, comfortable environment can help your child maintain healthy dating relationships, says Gorski. Talk to your teens about how they should expect to be treated and what specifically constitutes abuse. Modeling this behavior in your own marriage or relationships is important too.

Girls are not the only ones to be victims of dating abuse. My son Jeremy, now 22, recently shared an experience from a dating relationship during his late teens. "She definitely wore the pants (in the relationship)," he told me. "Once I realized that and wanted it to change, things got worse." When he eventually broke up with her, she threw a chair at him.

Knowing if your child is ready to date can also prevent teens from being vulnerable to violence. Some teens date because they feel pressured by society, parents, or their peers. "I didn't really know how to be in a relationship," Jeremy admitted.

I can't help but wonder if Vicky's life would have turned out differently if I had intervened. Wherever you are, Vicky, I hope you're safe. **CPC**

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