

ST. 1/3/2012

Teen dating violence isn't just kids' stuff



By ANDY HO
SENIOR WRITER

A NEW survey in Singapore reports that one in three unmarried persons aged between 15 and 34 here has been in an abusive romantic relationship.

Among this group, two-thirds had their first such relationship in their teens. At least one in four of all survey respondents began dating between 13 and 15, while some had begun at 12 or younger.

Commissioned by the non-profit Promoting Alternatives to Violence (Pave), this survey shows that local teens are at risk of dating violence.

The abuse can be physical, which may involve grabbing, shoving, choking, slapping, punching, kicking or throwing something at the target person or destroying her personal property or hurting her pet.

It can also be emotional abuse – intimidation, humiliation, name-calling and stalking. It can also involve trying to coerce the victim to have sex.

While the Pave study shows that young adults here are also at risk, teens present a special problem. Experts say that the teenage years are a critical stage for individuals to establish their gender identities and will determine how they will play their gender roles in adulthood.

Social psychologists have long observed that teenagers are more shortsighted in decision making and more willing to engage in risky behaviour. In the last decade or so, brain imaging technology has confirmed this, showing that the brain does continue to mature through adolescence into early adulthood.

In particular, those parts of the brain involved in planning ahead and controlling one's impulses continue to develop beyond 18 years of age. Thus, even in one's late teens and very early adulthood, risk seeking behaviour and experimentation are still par for the course.

Adults must remember that the teen dating context is highly passionate, very exciting but extremely confusing as well. Teens may confuse jealousy with devotion or libido with love. If so, teens definitely need adult help when they are caught in an abusive dating relationship.

However, lawyers say that while the domestic violence victim may apply for a Personal Protection Order (PPO) for herself (or himself) or for a minor, it is only available in the context of "family violence" involving "family members".

That is, the law does not apply to the teen dating violence situation.

You cannot get a PPO against a boyfriend, a friend, acquaintance or stranger because they are not family members, by definition. There is also no specific anti-stalking law here that a victim can turn



ST PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

to get protection from someone out to harass her or him.

What a victim of dating violence can do is file what is called a magistrate's complaint at the magistrate's court against a non-family member who may have hurt you in the past, whom you fear will do so again. With this complaint, the abuser may be prosecuted if he puts you in danger again. Since teenagers can't start this legal process, the parent would have to do so on their behalf.

If the police are summoned in an altercation where no prior magistrate's complaint has been filed, the officers may decide to take no further action – that is, not seek to have the abuser prosecuted.

With the magistrate's complaint, it is possible for the abuser to be prosecuted for criminal intimidation, or for "caus(ing) alarm through anonymous means". A violent boyfriend or girlfriend could also be charged under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act if the harassment had occurred in full public view. Cyberstalking and cyberharassment may be chargeable under the Computer Misuse Act as well.

But the laws available may not give adequate protection to victims of teen date violence. Since the case involves a teenager, the juvenile Court may be involved as it handles crimes committed by children (defined as those under 14 years of age) and young persons (defined as those 14 years of age or above and below the age of 16).

Or, it might involve the Community Court set up for "youthful offenders (aged 16 to 18 years)" or other persons under 21 who are accused of violence, sex crimes, theft, or drug-related charges. The focus here is to mediate between victim and offender, seek an apology if it can be secured, have compensation made as well as get an undertaking from the offender not to repeat the offence and also to seek treatment, if warranted.

In short, the focus in both courts is more on rehabilitating the abuser, not immediately protecting the abused teen.

Given the absence of specific laws to protect teens from dating violence, there is a case for expanding the domestic violence statute to cover victims of violence who are not in a familial relationship but in a quasi-familial relationship described as "dating".

PPOs are now provided for under the Women's Charter to help victims caught in a cycle of domestic violence. The Charter could be amended so that PPOs can be sought by people against their partners in violent dating relationships.

The Pave study shows that under 5 per cent of affected teens seek professional help. Even when they do, without a PPO, they risk getting hurt again.

If violence broke out once in a relationship, it is likely to happen again. However, 60 per cent in the Pave survey admitted that they continued dating the same person despite the violence. So teenage dating is not always "kids' stuff", which is why this issue deserves some immediate attention.

andyho@sph.com.sg

C M K