



Combating domestic violence starts with education



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Inside the walls of Auburn Junior High School, students in eighth-grade health classes learn about healthy relationships.

When asked about stereotypes in today's society, they say men are supposed to be tough and strong and express their anger, while women are supposed to be quiet and dainty and hold in their emotions.

For Jennie Huling, a domestic violence advocate and educator with the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, these stereotypes can be a recipe for a harmful relationship. Since 2008, she has dedicated her work to letting teenagers know that these presumptions don't have to be true.

In the wake of what seems like an ever-increasing problem with domestic violence, many schools have begun weaving advocacy and awareness programs into their curriculum. As part of her work at the community action agency, Huling visits schools throughout Cayuga County, giving lessons to teenagers about healthy and unhealthy dating practices.

"When we're young, we have all these misconceptions," Huling said. "If there's no education, those won't go away."

Huling has designed presentations and lessons that are age-appropriate for children ranging from sixth grade all the way up to high school students, many of whom, by that time, have relationship experience of their own.

In her discussions with eighth-grade students, she talks about how stereotypes can hurt a relationship.

"If you put this guy in a relationship who is supposed to be tough and strong and hit things, and then you put this girl in the relationship who thinks she's supposed to be quiet and weak, what's going to happen?," Huling asked the students.

"It won't be good," she said.

Many people who work with domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, agree that it is about power and control. Sarah Barnard, director of domestic violence services at the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, explained that an abuser will work toward gaining control over several aspects of a victim's life in order to enhance

their power, and said that abuse often progresses in stages, making it easier for warning signs to go unnoticed.

"Typically it starts as verbal abuse and then maybe that doesn't work anymore," she said. "It could go on for a while without being picked up on but the signs are always there."

This concept is one that Huling stresses in her work with teens, educating them on how to recognize when things start to turn dangerous. She has them listen to songs and pull out the lyrics that describe unhealthy or abusive behavior in a relationship, which many teens can often ignore.

At Auburn High School, students in teacher Amy Cox's health class spend part of the semester learning about the dangers of intimate-partner violence. She has each of them write a short story about something that has happened to them, or something they have seen someone else go through, that can be described as a form of abuse within a relationship. She wants her students to learn to recognize the red flags and unhealthy behavior that could otherwise be overlooked as "normal teenage stuff."

"Everyone is affected by this," Cox said. "The majority of these kids have endured some kind of abuse themselves, even if it's verbal or emotional, and the ones who say they haven't, usually just don't understand enough to actually see it."

Part of Huling's education to high school students deals with learning the signs of an abusive relationship. She tells them about resources, like www.thatsnotcool.com and www.athinline.org, that give real-life examples of situations that teens can relate to and help them see why certain behaviors are healthy or unhealthy.

The community action agency recently launched an advocacy program for teen dating violence, focusing on the idea that jealousy does not automatically equate to love. There are differences between affection and obsession, and these differences are often what draw the line between a healthy relationship and a dangerous one.

"A lot of teenagers think, 'Well if they're jealous, then they must love me and care about me,'" said Huling, "but that's not the case."

In her presentations to junior high school students, Huling talks about affection and obsession and helps them understand how to distinguish the two.

"It's really important to understand this, especially with teens, because technology makes it harder," said Huling. "Just because you're dating someone doesn't give them the right to look through your phone and your Facebook and have all your passwords. You are entitled to your own personal space."

Feeding off of suggestions from the students, Huling dedicates a part of her lesson to discussing some of the reasons why people may become abusive. Many experts say that abusers think that threatening their partner with harm is the only remaining way to keep their relationship intact.

"Some people stay for their own safety," Barnard said. "Sometimes it's not safe to leave. There are a lot of factors."

Huling said that young teens don't always understand that they do have choices and that they can make the decision to walk away before things get dangerous. Her work teaches them that they have the right to break up with someone if they don't want to be in a relationship with them anymore. She also talks to them about how to avoid becoming an abuser themselves, letting them know that there are healthy ways to cope with anger, rather than turning violent and harming someone.

"Anger does not cause abuse," she said. "Everyone gets angry, but not everyone is abusive. You just have to find a way to deal with it."

It's common to hear that drugs or alcohol are what cause someone to be abusive, but Huling tells the teenagers that that's just a false stereotype that society has attached to domestic violence over the years. She tells them that things such as drug or alcohol abuse can certainly trigger a violent act, but it's not the underlying cause. If that was the case, she said, then everyone who drinks would also be abusive.

One major focus of domestic violence advocacy is letting victims know that there is help available. During her lessons, Huling tells students where they can turn, like to a school guidance counselor or the action agency, if they have been a victim of abuse or if they know someone who might need help.

"There are a lot of resources you can use to help yourself or a friend," she said. "You might not have control over what happened to you but you do have control over how it affects you."

The work that Huling does to educate teens in Cayuga County is just one part of a large wave of advocacy programs making its way through schools across the country. Records at the National Conference of State Legislatures indicate that by 2011, at least 14 states had already adopted legislation regarding domestic violence education, and at least eight more had proposed bills that were being considered.

In New York, a bill was introduced in January that, if passed, would require teen dating violence education to be added to the mandatory state curriculum for grades 7 through 12, as well as education about respect and self-esteem in curriculum for grades K through 6. It would also require schools to implement a set policy for dealing with dating violence incidents.

Cox said she feels that more time in health classes should be dedicated to domestic violence education. Although she spends time with her students discussing relationships and dating violence, she fears that other teachers aren't as dedicated to the subject.

"I hope they do mandate that we spend more time on this," she said. "These kids are the future of our community and they have to be more aware of this problem."

Though it may be just a small battle in a large war, Huling's educational outreach programs have sparked community-wide dating violence awareness among teens of all ages. People who work with victims of domestic violence often say that some days their work can be very emotionally draining, and Huling agreed. But she said that seeing how she helps people - children, especially - makes it all worth it.

"I feel very lucky to be not only an advocate, but an educator as well," she said. "I have such an opportunity to help change futures, to be able to laugh and joke and have fun with them, but do it while talking about something serious that they will most likely face in their lifetime."

Every lesson that Huling gives to teens around the area is different, personalized based on their age group and environment, but one large similarity can be seen across every piece of advocacy that she's worked on throughout her career - one lingering statement that Huling and her colleagues at the C/SCAA want everyone in the community, men and women alike, to know.

"You don't have to be quiet and weak and not say anything if someone is hurting you," she said. "We can break those stereotypes."

Everyone's Battle

This is the final installment in a four-day multimedia series assessing the impact of domestic violence on our community and what's being done to reduce its prevalence. Head to auburnpub.com/everyones_battle to see video interviews related to today's stories, as well as stories and videos published Sunday and Monday and Tuesday.

Join the conversation

Share your thoughts on this issue in the story comments section for any of the articles in this series. In addition, auburnpub.com will feature a live blog discussion at noon Wednesday with local professionals on the front lines of the fight against domestic violence, including Cayuga County Sheriff David Gould, District Attorney Jon Budelmann and professionals from Seneca/Cayuga Community Action Agency.

The facts

72: percentage of eighth and ninth grade students in the United States who say they have already experienced "dating"

1 in 11: number of teenagers who say that they have been the victim of physical dating violence

25: percentage of teen population who report physical, verbal or emotional abuse in a relationship every year

9.4: percentage of high school students who reported being hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend between 2010 and 2011

22.4: percentage of adult women dating violence victims who first experienced some form of partner violence between the ages of 11 and 17

15: percentage of adult men dating violence victims who first experienced some form of partner violence between the ages of 11 and 17

All numbers are from a compilation of studies done by the Center for Disease Control.

If you go

What: Take Back the Night, a community rally to support victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, sexual assault, dating violence and domestic violence

When and Where: Kicks off with a march in downtown Auburn starting at 6 p.m. Wednesday, April 24, from Memorial City Hall, 24 South St., Auburn. The march will be followed at 6:30 p.m. by a rally on the steps of City Hall.

Take Back the Night (No More Secrets) T-shirts are available for purchase for \$10-\$12 through Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency. See designs and download the order form at <http://www.cscaa.com/TBTNtshirts.pdf>.

More information: Contact Vicky Myers at (315) 255-1703