Understanding Teens and Technology: Safety, Privacy, & Empowerment

Teen digital dating violence is an increasing pattern within teen dating. This affects a large number of teens and young adults especially with the increasing need for technology use in our daily lives. As more light is shed on this issue, we are better able to understand the impact digital dating violence has on teens.

For any parent, guardian, or professional working with a teen or young adult, it is important to understand how technology can impact their privacy and safety, as well as how it can be empowering and helpful. This info sheet aims to help anti-violence workers and caregivers to understand teen digital dating violence and provide tips to help.

Positive Use of Tech

Technology is a powerful tool that can be used by teens in positive ways. It offers teens a level of flexibility where they can explore different versions of themselves. It allows them to connect with allies on various platforms without fear of anyone judging them, receive support services, and obtain an education. In a survey by the Pew Research Center "40% of respondents said that social media has had a positive impact because it helps them keep in touch and interact with others."[1]

Through social media and online spaces, teens express themselves through posts, create challenges to raise money for charities, play games, raise awareness, and organize around the issues and injustices that affect them and their future. They

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[1] Monica Anderson & Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018," Pew Research Center, May 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/

can also create petitions, do research, and educate themselves and others on topics that impact them.

"The Internet also can be helpful to young people who are looking for information about health and sexuality, yet don't feel like they can ask about these issues at home or in their schools."[2] Websites that answer questions about health, sex, STIs, and even puberty can give reassurance to youth.

During times of crisis, technology has been one of the most important tools to keep youth connected to their peers and school community. Having connections through technology can boost self-esteem through validation, feedback, and acceptance, increase a teen's self-worth and decrease isolation, fear, and stigma.

Because of this, suggesting that teens disconnect from technology if they are experiencing digital dating violence can further isolate and remove them from their greater community.

Impact of Technology Misuse

Teen digital dating violence often overlaps with other forms of abuse. An Urban Institute study found that cyber dating abuse had the greatest degree of overlap with psychological dating abuse.[3]

Misusing technology to perpetrate harassment, stalking, or reputation damage are common tactics of abusive people within the context of teen dating relationships. In a 2021 survey, 86% of BC anti-violence workers responded that

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[2] Amina Sharma, "Benefits of Teens Using Technology", Center for Innovative Public Health Research, 2021. Date accessed: March 1, 2021. https://innovativepublichealth.org/blog/benefits-of-technology

[3] Zweig, JM," The Rate of Cyber Dating Abuse among Teens and How It Relates to Other Forms of Teen Dating Violence." 2013. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/23321/412749-The-Rate-of-Cyber-Dating-Abuse-among-Teens-and-How-It-Relates-to-Other-Forms-of-Teen-Dating-Violence.PDF

"teens have disclosed experiences of technology-facilitated harassment by an abusive dating partner."[4] It is important to note that tactics of teen digital dating violence such as harassment, threats, stalking, impersonation, and the distribution of intimate images without consent are common and appear to be the same across age groups and are rooted in patterns of power and control.

Teens experiencing digital dating violence may avoid going online because they may fear further abuse from the abuser or bullying from their peers. In addition to emotional abuse, teens report experiencing physical violence, depression, anxiety, failing classes, drug use, and suicidal thoughts. Now more than ever it is important to support teens as they navigate digital dating violence. Helping to find ways to address the violence while increasing safety and privacy online can help teens feel empowered and supported.

Supporting Youth: "You've Got This!"

Anti-violence workers and caregivers may feel uneasy when engaging with teens experiencing digital dating violence if they are unfamiliar with the tech themselves. That's normal! However, regardless of the tech involved, much of the advocacy and support will be the same. By focusing on building connections, establishing trust, and remaining youth-centered, we can empower teens to make informed decisions around tech use.

Here are Some Tips to Get you Started:

1. **Listen**. You don't need to know the details of every type of technology teens are using to *recognize patterns* of abuse, stalking, and harassment.

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[4] BC Society of Transition Houses, "Responding to Teen Digital Dating Violence: BC Anti-Violence Worker Survey Report, March2021. https://bcsth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5.-BCSTH_Responding-to-Teen-Digital-Dating-Violence_BC-Anti_Violence-Worker_s-Survey-Report-2021-Final.pdf

2. Be prepared to ask basic questions to help *identify the risk* of the technology and *narrow down what's happening*.

What is popular to teens one day may be outdated the next. Technology use among teens can also vary between geographic locations, demographics, and interests. Downloading an app or researching a platform that teens are telling you about can help you understand the options for safety, security, and privacy. Many apps and online spaces have similar processes, community standards, and terms of service. Another option is to watch a tutorial video of how the app or online space functions or have the teens provide you with a tutorial. Engage them as experts!

3. When teens impacted by digital dating violence are seeking support, **ask**:
   - What is happening?
   - Where/when is it happening? (a specific time, location, platform)
   - What does the abuser seem to know (what is the context)?
   - What does the teen want to see happen?
     Sometimes they just want the abuse to stop, sometimes they want to address wider reputation concerns and other times they may want law enforcement involved. Help them explore options that could keep them safe.
   - How have they been keeping themselves safe? What are some other options for safety?

4. **Remember**: Although technology can be misused as a tactic in teen dating violence, **technology can also be used strategically**. Empowering teens to take control over their tech use will help them understand how it can be used as a tool to support them, and how they can create safe spaces free from violence. Teens often have a lot more insight and skills to navigate technology, online spaces, and abusive people than they are given credit for.

   Let them inform you what they need.

BC teens are not alone and there are confidential safe support services available for them.

PEACE Program for Children and Youth

Kid Help Phone

Victim link

KUU-US Crisis Line Society

Society for Children and Youth BC Child and Youth Legal Centre

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Spark Teen Digital Dating Violence Project