

Independence House steps up efforts to teach teens about abusive relationships

By Cynthia McCormick / cmccormick@capecodonline.com

Posted Mar 10, 2015 at 3:00 AM

A new website and peer groups at three local high schools promote violence prevention and make it less intimidating to seek help.

HYANNIS — The warning signs of dating violence may be confused with true love for young people just getting involved in relationships.

But jealous tantrums, checking email and cellphones without permission and possessiveness all point to an unhealthy, controlling relationship, people who advocate for victims of domestic violence say.

Now, Independence House is taking extra steps to get the word out to the youngest victims of dating and sexual violence by setting up a special website dedicated to teens.

Established last month, the website includes a teen dating bill of rights, the warning signs of abuse, what to look for in healthy relationships and a 24-hour hotline number for teens who are being abused or are witnesses to domestic violence in their homes.

It will soon include a chat room and texting capability, said Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, executive director of Independence House, a Hyannis organization that provides counseling and court advocacy for victims of domestic and sexual violence.

"That's how (teens) communicate," Hurge-Putnam said. "That's the world we live in."

Independence House already offers services for teens, such as its partnership with three local high schools in the Mentors in Violence Prevention program, which focuses on getting students to educate their peers about the dangers of abuse. The website, however, is an attempt to remove any trepidation young people might have about approaching the agency, Hurge-Putnam said.

Teens might be afraid to go for help some place where they don't know anybody, said Rosa Giberti, 18, an officer in Barnstable High School's Mentors in Violence Prevention program.

A website dedicated to their age group helps them understand they are not alone, Giberti said.

The chat room and the texting capability will make Independence House services even more accessible to teens, said Chloe Samter, 17, co-president of the Mentors in Violence Prevention program at Falmouth High.

"Our generation is extremely attached to technology," she said.

But like older generations, today's teens may not understand the signs of abuse in a relationship, Samter said.

They may take it to heart when their boyfriend or girlfriend calls them ugly or says "what's wrong with you," she said. "They assume that's how it's supposed to be. (They think) they are just going through a rough patch."

There is a danger that accepting unhealthy relationships at an early age can last a lifetime, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which considers teen dating violence a public health problem.

Behaviors such as teasing and name-calling can escalate into more serious forms of violence, according to the CDC's website.

The Mentors in Violence Prevention program, which started at Northeastern University in the 1990s, works to help teens understand the characteristics of abusive relationships and the realities of domestic, dating and sexual violence.

At Falmouth High School, students in the MVP program are making a video that features the teens holding placards with statistics on sexual and domestic violence.

Through MVP and anti-bully programs, "a lot of kids learned to step up instead of being bystanders," Giberti said.

"We're just trying to raise awareness throughout the school," said Jack Giberti, Rosa's brother and a member of MVP at Barnstable High.

MVP also is active at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School, Hurge-Putnam said. "We're really trying to be present where we know teens are present."

— Follow Cynthia McCormick on Twitter: [@Cmccormickct](https://twitter.com/Cmccormickct).