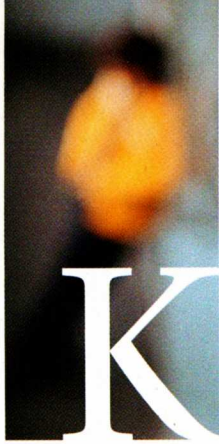


How well do you know your daughter's boyfriend? Even the young are vulnerable to relationship abuse. Here's how you can spot it – and what you can do about it.

Dating

Abuse

BY SUSAN MCCLELLAND



Kate* met Brian* two weeks after she started her first term at college. He was arguing with their instructor over marks. "He got 29.5 out of 30 on a test and wanted to negotiate," says Kate, now 22. Kate and a friend were waiting to speak to the teacher and whispered to each other, "What a loser. Who would fight over something so measly?" Later that week, Brian saddled up beside Kate as she was playing pool in the college's student centre. He didn't say hi. He didn't introduce himself. "Are you single?" was all Brian asked. Kate, then 19, had never had a boyfriend. She didn't have any experience with men, other than a few male friends she hung out with, and she answered a timid yes. "I called a girlfriend later that night and asked, 'Do guys just walk up and ask if you have a boyfriend?'" recalls Kate. "My friend said it meant he was interested in me."

Sure enough, Brian, 25 at the time, and Kate began e-mailing each other several times a day, and then Brian invited her out for coffee. A romance blossomed. Their college program was small, so they socialized with the same group of people and shared many of the same classes. Kate and Brian were together all the time.

Brian had returned to school after taking several years off and told Kate that he admired her dedication to school. She fell for him hook, line and sinker. "My heart leapt whenever he was near," says Kate. "He was confident, smart and brave." But Kate saw another side to Brian a month into their relationship. A male student put his head playfully on her shoulder during class. Afterward Brian cornered Kate and the guy by the lockers. "He started yelling, 'I don't like what you did and don't do it again.' I was so embarrassed. It felt like Brian had slapped me in the face."

The put-downs came next. Brian would say that he didn't like Kate's clothes, her eyeglasses made her look like a nerd and she didn't write well, which devastated Kate because she wanted to become a writer. In mid-conversation, Brian would stop and stare at other young women. "They were all your stereotypical TV beauties

with perfectly applied makeup, tight clothes and tiny bodies," explains Kate. "He would tell me they were beautiful. But he never called me beautiful. At first I thought nothing of it; then I started to question why Brian was with me."

While Kate didn't like Brian's remarks, she had no plans to break up with him. For one thing, she liked the idea of having a boyfriend, and because she'd never been with anyone before, she had nothing to compare his behaviour with. Kate held out hope that things would change; that one day they would marry. So about one year into the relationship, Kate, who had been living at home, decided to move in with Brian. Almost immediately, the verbal attacks became more personal. "He would call me stupid because I didn't know about certain events that were going on in the world, and he'd say I had a learning disability," says Kate. "When I'd respond that he was treating me badly, he'd say, 'But I'm the best thing you've got.'"

Kate, who was slightly overweight and considered herself awkward, believed this was true. "I came to fear being alone, so instead of standing up for myself, I tried to change my behaviour. I thought if I acted a certain way, if I didn't say certain things, maybe Brian would love me more."



Between 16 and 35 per cent of women say they have experienced at least one physical assault by a male dating partner; 27 per cent reported at least one incident of sexual abuse.

Statistics Canada

Now, two years later, Kate knows their 18-month relationship was fraught with verbal and emotional abuse. The put-downs, name-calling and shaming were ways Brian used to control Kate. And he won. Near the end of their relationship, she no longer listened to the Dixie Chicks or Shania Twain, or watched the Walt Disney films that gave her great joy. Instead, Brian's music and movies came first. Once described by her friends as a bright yellow flower, Kate became a moody young woman who blamed herself for her boyfriend's outbursts and criticisms.

Friends noticed Kate's increasing anger and lack of confidence but didn't relate it to Brian. But her mother, Linda*, was well aware of the source. "One time we were shopping for a dress for Kate to wear to an aunt's wedding," says Linda. "Kate wanted a beige dress, but she bought a black one because

THE FOUR R_s OF RELATIONSHIPS

The Fourth R Program is a 21-lesson initiative that teaches relationship skills in the same in-depth way as reading, writing and arithmetic is presented in the classroom. Its goal is to help teens make healthy decisions when it comes to relationships, substance use and sexual behaviour. It also addresses physical, emotional, sexual and psychological abuse.

The program emerged from The Youth Relationship Project, a Canadian initiative aimed at high-risk youth. "We found that it was well received and we needed to introduce it to the regular curriculum," says David Wolfe, principal investigator of the research team that developed the program.

The Fourth R Program was launched in 2001 to Grade 9 students at 23 secondary schools in the Thames Valley District School Board in Ontario. Debbie Townsley, head of health and physical education at North Middlesex District High School in Parkhill, Ont., says it tackles topics kids can relate to. "We look at the effects of an abusive relationship and the warning signs and ending a relationship. How do you break up with someone? It's significant for kids."

Survey results from 1,800 participating Grade 9 students found the Fourth R Program effective in decreasing physical dating violence incidents in adolescents. Due to the program's success it is expanding across Canada. The goal is to have the Fourth R Program implemented in all school boards by 2010. For more information, visit www.thefourthr.ca. — Leigh Blenkhorn

While some boys are vulnerable to being the victims in abusive relationships, in most cases they are the aggressors, because in Western society boys feel comfortable expressing their aggression, whereas girls are taught to be passive. "Both parties in an abusive relationship are wounded," says Hedva. "When a boy treats a girl badly, or vice versa, it's a reflection of past hurt. It's not about the other person."

Girl-culture may be a contributing factor, too. Cliques might kick a girl out for not dating, or dating the wrong person. As a result, a young woman may stay in an abusive relationship for the sake of her friends. Add into the mix bullying at school and computer games, music and movies depicting violence as an inevitable part of life, "and violence against girls and young women becomes normalized," says Berman.

Most parents are saddened and frustrated to discover how little they can do to stop their daughters from being victims of emotional abuse. Linda found Kate stopped communicating or defended Brian's actions when she tried

to bring up the subject of emotional abuse. "Seeing Kate go through this and not being able to help was the most painful period in my life," she says. "If I criticized Brian, it only pushed Kate further into his clutches."

Dawna Speers, founder of Choices for Positive Youth Relationships, a national school curriculum aimed at raising awareness of dating violence, says the best thing a parent can do is not judge. "The last thing a parent wants to do is make a child look elsewhere for support or drive her away, making her a greater risk," says Speers, whose 19-year-old daughter, Monica, was killed by her boyfriend. Often young women will confide in a friend. "Mothers and friends should remember that abused young women's self-esteem is really low," says Hedva. "Remind them of their talents, their accomplishments, their beauty. They need the courage to leave," she adds, "and that comes from confidence that may need to be regained."

Elizabeth*, 23, was emotionally abused and then, near the end of her three-year relationship with her high school sweetheart, physically assaulted. "He alienated me from friends by saying

my guy friends just wanted me for sex and my girlfriends were sleeping around," says Elizabeth. "The one thing I know from my own experience," she adds, "is that if you feel something is wrong, it probably is. If you feel you are being emotionally abused, you probably are."

The final straw for Kate was when she learned that Brian had been with a prostitute. He blamed Kate for the indiscretion, claiming that her anger and bitterness pushed him away. Linda had employed another tactic to make sure Kate would know that she was there for her. She had her much-younger sister and Kate's aunts e-mail and talk to Kate about good and bad relationships. Linda then stood back and didn't judge. She even invited Brian to family dinners so that Kate felt her decisions were being respected.

The approach worked. When Kate called home asking for help after Brian had been unfaithful, her mother and father immediately moved Kate out of the apartment she and Brian shared. Kate's parents also bolstered her shattered self-esteem, telling her that they loved her, that they would always be there for her and she had a great future ahead of her. "I would never have listened to my mom if she had told me to get out, leave Brian, he's being abusive to you," says Kate. "But when I came to the decision all on my own, I knew where to go for help. I knew my mom was a shoulder to cry on."

** Names have been changed.*

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