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Search the Archive:



[May 20, 2005](#)

[Back to the Table of Contents Page](#)

[Back to the Voice Home Page](#)

[Classifieds](#)

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Teens studying dating violence

Program aims to educate students, parents

By Kathy Schrenk

It wasn't hard for Amanda Fuller to realize her best friend was in an abusive relationship. Her friend showed almost all the warning signs, and Fuller knew what to look for thanks to the Girls for a Change program at Los Altos High School.

Fuller and about 15 other Los Altos High students have been working through Girls for a Change to gauge the prevalence of dating violence and to boost public awareness of the problem. Girls for a Change is a Santa Clara County-based program in which participants at individual schools choose a theme each year to learn about and educate their peers.

One thing they've learned is that there are lots of clear warning signs. In a pamphlet the girls have distributed, there's even a quiz to help determine if abuse is taking place in a relationship. It asks questions like, "Have you ever been afraid of your partner? Is your partner jealous of your friends? Does your partner hold you against your will?" When Fuller showed her friend the quiz, she answered "yes" to almost every question, Fuller said.

Girls for a Change also learned that abuse can take many forms. "People assume domestic abuse means physical violence," said Sarah Shakour, a senior. In fact, abuse can be emotional and even spiritual, she said.

But what really shocked them was that all of the Los Altos High students they surveyed -- more than 1,000 male and female students in all grades -- had either been in an abusive relationship or knew someone who had. They noted that students seem averse to talking about domestic violence: "People are embarrassed," explained junior Jackie Cruz. Also, students don't seem to realize that boys can be abuse victims, too.

These and other realizations make them want people to be more aware of the realities and warning signs of dating violence. They want their fellow students to critically evaluate their relationships and know that even a small warning sign can portend big problems in the future.

The earlier these problems get addressed, the better, since young people who get abused tend to be more likely to date and marry abusers when they get older.

To that end, the Girls for a Change students are holding parents' information meetings this Thursday, May 19, so moms and dads can learn what the girls found in their research and what they can do to help their own kids. The meetings will be held at the high school, with

a meeting in Spanish at 6 p.m. and one in English at 7 p.m.

On May 26, the students will be performing skits during three assemblies at the school, at 8:15 a.m., 10:10 a.m. and 12:25 p.m.

For more information about Girls for a Change or dating violence, contact high school counselor Judy Prothro at (650) 960-8816.

How to spot an unhealthy relationship

Here are some questions teens can ask themselves to make sure their relationship is not an abusive one:

Have you ever been afraid of your partner?

Does your partner want to know where you are at all times?

Is your partner jealous of your friends?

Does your partner choose who you can hang out with?

Does your partner tell you how to dress?

Does your partner hold you against your will?

Does your partner call you late at night to be sure you are at home?

Does your partner not want anyone else to be around when you are together?

Does your partner want to be with you around-the-clock?

Does your partner make you feel guilty?

Does your partner push or coerce you into sexual activities that you don't want?

Does your partner ask you the same questions over and over again?

Does your partner push or slap you when angry?

Does your partner blame you for his or her bad behavior?

Does your partner threaten to spread rumors about you if you leave?

Does your partner say nobody else will ever want to date you?

Does your partner get angry if you speak to other people?

Does your partner say nobody will love you as much as they do?

Does your partner get mad at you if you don't call back right away?

Does your partner threaten to hurt themselves or someone or something you care about if you threaten to leave?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you might want to talk to someone who can help you think about your relationship. If you answered "no" to all of the questions you are likely to be in a healthy relationship. Just remember to always keep your emotional and physical safety in mind. You can call Next Door Solutions to Domestic Violence for help at (408) 279-2962.

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[Back to previous page](#)



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