



Webinar Series

Teachers: Responding to **Disclosures** of **Teen Dating Violence**

This webinar presented by Dr. Joanne Cummings discusses the role of teachers, guidance counsellors, and other mental health-focused staff when it comes to responding to disclosures of teen dating violence (TDV), in the context of school policy and provincial/territorial legislation.

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Which Students are Most Likely to Experience/Perpetrate TDV?

Students who reported TDV victimization were more likely to:

- Be older
- Report a female or non-binary gender identity
- Live in a single parent/other household
- Report food insecurity and lower family affluence

Students who reported TDV perpetration were more likely to:

- Be older
- Report a non-binary gender identity
- Come from a racialized group
- Be a first or second generation Canadian
- Report food insecurity and lower family affluence

Implications of Prevalence Data

- Need to recognize role of larger structural inequities and social determinants of health
 - Must dismantle structures of racism and gender-discrimination – the root cause of violence
 - Caution needed when teaching individual students assertiveness at expense of teaching unequal racial and gender power hierarchies, as this may inadvertently blame victims

How do Adults Become Aware?

1. Disclosure by teens directly involved
2. Witnessing an event
3. Hearing about TDV from peers

Adults can take the role of “actionist” – someone who takes action to support the youth involved, or the role of “bystander” – someone who does nothing to address the problem



How Do Teens Usually Seek Help?

- Informal sources of support (friends, parents, family): 61-93%
- Formal sources of support (teachers, school staff, medical and mental health professionals: 8-40%)
 - School climate and overall commitment to TDV prevention has impact on students' comfort in disclosing
- Females seek help more than males
- Physical and sexual TDV is reported more often than psychological and cyber TDV
- 24% tell no one



Barriers to Disclosure to Formal Sources

- Confidentiality and mandatory reporting requirements
- Sense of responsibility, self-blame, guilt and shame
- Lack of trust in formal sources
- Fear of partner's anger and/or punitive response

What Is Trauma-Informed Care?

- **Trauma-informed care (TIC):** The persons who has experienced violence feels heard, believed, safe, respected and empowered
- **Trauma and violence-informed care (TVIC):** Expands on the concept of TIC to acknowledge the broader social and structural conditions that impact wellbeing

What You Need To Know

- Your provincial or territorial legislation concerning Safe Schools / School Violence Prevention
- School board policy and your school's policy
- Your local landscape of agencies and providers with expertise in TDV
- Limits of your professional role
 - As a teacher, your role is to stay connected with students (monitoring), fulfill mandatory reporting requirements, and when necessary make a referral to an agency with expertise in TDV for mental health support

Legislative Landscape

- Across Canada, the only targeted and uniform federal protection against youth dating violence is found in the Criminal Code and the Youth Criminal Justice Act.
- In each province/territory, there is no formal legislation pertaining to youth dating violence, however relevant legislation is included in Safe School legislation, and Family Service/Child and Youth Protection legislation.



Across Provinces and Territories

- Although TDV is not specifically mentioned, the list of **“bullying behaviours”** or **“behaviours worthy of suspension”** include TDV behaviours. These behaviours must be internally reported by teachers to school principals.
- Family service/child and youth protection acts require that adults working with youth (maximum age varies) have a **duty to report** to an official child welfare service, where they have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is being or at risk of being physically abused, sexually abused, subject to physical harm, and/or is suffering emotional harm, and the child’s caretaker is unable to or neglecting to care for or protect them.



Adult Response

Know your limits of confidentiality and communicate them up front

- At the beginning of **any** disclosure or interaction you initiate
- E.g. “I am here for you, and we will make decisions together. But you need to know that if I am concerned about your safety I will have to report to _____”.
- Provide truthful reassurance about privacy, allay concerns about gossip/getting unwanted attention, etc.
- Consider risk of harm to the individual vs. risk of breaking their trust and possibly making things worse.

Key Principles of TVIC

- **Promote** organizational culture recognizing impacts of trauma and violence
- **Create** safety and foster trust amongst staff and students
 - Giving control and power back to the student
 - Need to understand that youth might not fully trust us
- **Facilitate** opportunities for choice, collaboration, and connection
 - Offer choice to youth whenever possible.
- **Build** on individual’s strengths and skills to restore feelings of worth and competence and to enhance resilience

Opportunities for Actionist Response

- Student using/perpetrating TDV
- Student experiencing TDV
- Students witnessing/suspecting violence in their peers’ dating relationships

All the above need support to develop skills for healthy dating/intimate romantic relationships

What makes a response supportive?

1. Be honest about working within the confines of confidentiality and your duty to report.
2. Affirm (don't minimize) teen's concerns.
3. Acknowledge their attempts to stay safe, whether or not attempts worked. Key point is that under the circumstances they did the very best they could. Avoid statements that will be experienced as victim blaming.
4. Dialogue to help teens figure out their own goals.



Responding to Disclosure Scenarios and Questions

Note, the following six steps are presented as a sequence, however, these steps are likely to overlap and you may move back and forth between steps.

1. Explain limits of confidentiality out front. Respect the student's right to privacy and personal space while following school protocol on reporting and make sure the student is aware of this.

- I am so glad you've reached out to me. Before we talk more, I need you to understand that I might be required to report this to _____. My first duty as a teacher is to protect your safety. I promise you that if I need to make a report I will tell you first. We will discuss this as we go along. There will be no surprises.

2. Check in with yourself

- What thoughts, feelings, and reactions are coming up for you in the conversations? Keep your reactions in check, so your response is guided by the needs of the student, not your needs.

3. Affirm

- Repeatedly convey to the student you are glad that they came to you.
- **Do not judge.** TDV can happen to anyone. For example, "A lot of teens face issues like this with their romantic partners. I'm so glad you came to me to share this." "Romantic relationships are hard for everyone – especially when you are young and haven't had a lot of experience."
- That it expected, to have overwhelming emotions that may be contradictory (e.g., loving the partner but feeling unsafe staying in relationship with the partner, wanting to protect oneself but not make trouble for the partner, etc.)
- That the student has done the very best they could even when things went wrong.

4. Clarify

- **Dialogue** to determine student's goals. Create a safe space in which the student can gradually explore their experiences in the relationship, unpack their feelings and needs, and articulate their goals.
- **Determine if you understand correctly.** Reflect back what you hear them saying, to check accuracy, and to enable the student to gain perspective.
- **Discuss** possible next steps that build on the student's strengths and are based on the student's choice.
- **Support them** in process of preparing to implement their plan in their own way, in their own time.

5. Educate about Available Supports

- **Inform** the student of available TDV resources in the community. Describe the services offered and what the student can expect.
- **Connect** the student with specialized TDV support and safety resources, making a “warm referral” (see below).
- **If you feel you must report**, tell the student to whom you will report and describe what the student can expect to happen as a result.

6. Follow Up

- **Inform** the student that you will follow up with them over the coming days.
- **Ask** the student if they have a preference for how you should follow up.
- **Find** a confidential time and space to check in with the student around how they are doing.

What makes a Warm Referral to a Specialized Agency/Individual?

- Get to know referral agency/person in advance.
- Let the student know what will happen if they call/go to for support.
- Would the student like to call the support or referral together with you?
- What feels most helpful for the student?
- Consider preparing a list of potential resources in advance so that you know the options.



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