

Working with Teen Survivors of Sexual Violence

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Adolescence is a complicated and often chaotic time of life. Adolescence is also one of the most vulnerable periods in life for sexual violence: most sexual violence occurs before the survivor's eighteenth birthday. Teens are resilient and creative, however. Working with teen survivors of sexual violence is complicated, but can bring new inspiration to our work as we witness the courage of teen survivors as they move through healing.

Sexual violence in the lives of adolescents is not simple to define or categorize; rather, it is a complex range of sexually violent acts united only by the age of the victim. It is difficult to determine the prevalence of sexual violence for teens. Girls experience more sexual violence than boys do, but both genders experience disturbingly high rates of sexual violence. Some specific populations of adolescents, including LGBTQ teens and teens with disabilities, are victimized more than other teens. It is clear that over half of all sexual violence occurs before the victim's eighteenth birthday for both girls and boys, with a significant portion of violence occurring in the teen years.

- 42.2% of female rape victims were under 18 when assaulted: 29.9% were aged 11-17, and 12.3% 10 years or younger (Black, et al., 2011)
- 23% of male victims were ages 12–17 when the sexual violence occurred (Thoennes & Tjaden, 2000)

It is also clear that perpetrators of teen sexual violence are close to the survivors. Across the lifespan, only 13.8% of females and 15.1% of males report sexual violence by a stranger, while “most victims of rape knew their perpetrators” (Black, et al., 2011). For the majority of teens raped by someone known to them, the perpetrator may be a relative, friend, classmate, authority figure, or dating partner.

There is a range of sexually violent and coercive behavior in the peer relationships of teenagers, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2003):

- One-third of sexually active teens aged 15-17 reports “being in a relationship where they felt things were moving too fast sexually,”
- 24% have “done something sexual they didn't really want to do,”
- More than one in five report having oral sex to “avoid having sexual intercourse” with a partner,
- More than a quarter of teens aged 15-17 report feeling pressure to have sex, and

- Nearly one in ten 9-12 grade students report having been physically forced to have sexual intercourse.

Good service to adolescents must begin with frank dialogue about sexual violence using the experiences and terminology of teens. In this paper, we will discuss what teen sexual violence is; the intricacies in the intersection of teen dating violence and teen sexual violence; and finally, creative possibilities in developing services for teens.

What Exactly is Teen Sexual Violence?

To answer that, we first must consider what ‘teen’ means. Adolescence is a difficult period to isolate – definitions vary according to their purpose and cultural context, and individual children mature into adults at different rates. Menstruation, for example, is a historical marker of the beginning of adolescence for girls. Today, however, many girls start menstruation as early as eight or nine years old, an age at which many of us firmly consider them children. For various academic and social reasons, children become ‘tweens’ or ‘pre-teens’ before they are full-fledged ‘teens,’ but these terms do not come with hard numerical rules. Identifying when the teen years end and adulthood begins is no simpler. In most places, we say adulthood starts at age 18 for voting purposes, but 16 for driving or working. The states and territories have many different ages at which a person can make adult decisions, such as consenting to sexual activity. This paper will not rely on any strict age range for adolescence, but will generally focus on individuals aged 12-17.

Sexual violence encompasses a wide range of nonconsensual sexual activity, and sexual violence against adolescents takes a variety of forms. Teen sexual violence happens on dates, on ‘hook-ups,’ at parties, in the classroom, on the field, or at a friend’s home. In addition, many adolescents are sexually victimized in their own home. Mitru Ciarlante, Youth Initiative Director for the National Center for Victims of Crime, explains youth sexual violence this way:

Youth are exposed to a wide range of behaviors on the sexual violence continuum, many that involve touching and many that do not. Sexual exploitation in the lives of youth may include exposure to sexualized images of other children and youth, sexualized violence, explicit pornography, verbal sexual harassment directed at youth, unwanted sexting, exhibitionism, and pressure to send sexualized photos of them[selves]. Other direct sexual abuse in teens’ lives includes sexual contact and touching by adults frequently perceived as authority figures, including parents, household members, teachers, and others... Verbal sexual harassment is so common in the daily life of teens that youth tell us it is something they experience or overhear every day at school, on the school bus, walking to/from school, etc. *and* that it is from adults as well as from other youth... Teen males experience verbal sexual harassment and sexualized physical assaults and hazing that are actually sexual violence but are not often handled or reported that way (personal communication, November 17, 2011).

Most acts of sexual violence—unwanted touching or penetration, sexual harassment—are similar across age groups though, of course, the context changes the experience and aftermath of the violence. However, some acts—trafficking, street harassment, unwanted sexting—are far more common for teens than adults. Others—statutory rape, child pornography—are crimes that, by definition, only happen to children and teens.

Adolescents experience much of the same emotional, physical, and social aftermath of sexual violence as adults. “However, adolescents have less life experience and emotional fortitude to handle the trauma associated with the intentional violence. Their neurobiology is on a tremendous journey of growth. The brain is still developing, particularly the neo-cortex (the decision-making part of the brain), and the hormones in both genders are in major flux” (P. O. Giggans, personal communication, December 7, 2011). It is important for adults to respond to the emotional reality of adolescents. As with all sexual violence, a number of factors influence how people perceive and cope with the violence (see the 2011 Resource Sharing Project paper, *Action, Engagement, Remembering: Services for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, for a full discussion of pre-, peri-, and post-trauma factors). Adults often dismiss verbal sexual harassment like name-calling or shaming, but it can and has driven teens to suicide. Teen boys experience sexual violence, but may also experience non-sexual genital harming, such as in hazing. The stories of Audrey and Sarah illustrate how different types of sexual violence lead to different impact and needs.

Audrey is a 14-year-old girl. Last week, she discovered she was pregnant because of sexual abuse by her uncle Eddie. Eddie had been in and out of contact with the family over the years, and is currently living in a trailer on their land. The abuse has been happening since Audrey was 10, and she’s been terrified of getting pregnant ever since she started menstruating a year ago. According to her mother, Audrey started acting withdrawn about the same time her periods started, but she thought it was “normal teenage stuff.”

Sarah is 15 years old. She’s been in a relationship with Kyle for nine months. For the past several weeks she has been having a lot of pain in her lower abdomen, or “down there” in her words, especially when she goes to the bathroom. Sarah says she loves Kyle, and wants him to be happy. Sex makes him happy, but he doesn’t always ask first. Kyle decides when and how they will have sex, and he decides whether they will use protection. Sarah suspects he is having sex with someone else from school too.

Audrey and Sarah will have different paths in emotional and social healing from the sexual violence, and therefore will need different responses from advocates, health care providers, law

enforcement, and the school system. Teen dating violence services would be appropriate for Sarah because, whether or not Kyle has physically abused her, he is clearly exerting sexual and emotional control in the relationship. Sarah may find a teen dating violence support group very helpful. Audrey, on the other hand, would likely not feel comfortable or validated in that type of support group. The dynamics in an uncle-niece relationship (even one where the rapist uncle casts himself as an equal) are different from the dynamics in a dating relationship, and this has different implications for Audrey's healing. A support group for survivors of child sexual abuse or individual counseling focused on sexual violence would be more appropriate for Audrey. Audrey's safety plan and emotional support will probably focus on the home and involve many family members, while Sarah might need more safety planning and emotional support at school. Both girls would probably benefit from well-timed, trauma-informed sexuality education. Neither one has gotten the opportunity to learn about consent and sexuality in a healthy way. Reclaiming sexuality can be an important part of healing for both Audrey and Sarah.

Talking to teens about sexual violence starts with understanding their cues and language. Teens do not often use words like 'rape' or 'sexual violence' to describe rape and sexual violence. Instead, they may say that something "messed up" happened, or that someone was 'bugging' or 'annoying' them (J. D'Anniballe, personal communication, November 14, 2011; M. Ciarlante, personal communication, November 17, 2011). Teens are highly attuned to adults' emotional states and communication patterns. They will often "test adult responses by seeking support for something they perceive as less risky or vulnerable" (Ciarlante, 2007, p. 11). This means that disclosures often come in pieces over a long period, as the teen is scrutinizing the openness and supportiveness of the adult. For example, a teen may ask a general question about sex to gauge the adult's ability to discuss sexual matters comfortably and honestly. Then, he might bring up a hypothetical situation involving a friend or television characters to assess the adult's openness to taking teen relationship problems seriously.

Intersections of Sexual Violence and Teen Dating Violence

Sexual violence has many intersections with dating violence in the lives of teens, but it is a different form of violence with different effects. Some sexual violence and dating violence happen concurrently. Perpetrators of teen dating violence use some forms of sexual violence, such as coerced or forced sexual activity and reproductive coercion, in the context of dating violence. Other forms of sexual violence, like sexual shaming (e.g., making survivor feel bad about their body or sexual performance, making embarrassing or disparaging remarks about survivor's sexuality in public), technology-based harassment, and sexual violence in casual dating relationships, sometimes fall into the category of teen dating violence but often do not. When sexual violence happens on a first date or a 'hook-up,' teens are unlikely to consider that dating violence, for example. Findings from the *National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence* (NatSCEV) show a fair number of teen dating relationships where there is sexual

violence, but no physical or verbal abuse. In addition, there are physically and verbally abusive partners who do not use sexual violence (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, and Hamby, 2005).

Unwanted sexting is sometimes initiated by violent partners, but is as likely to be initiated by nonviolent partners, friends, or classmates. Still other forms of sexual violence, such as sexual violence by family members, teachers, or classmates, have little or no relationship with teen dating violence. While survivors victimized in any of these contexts share some common developmental traits, service providers must respond to the particular needs of particular survivors based on their particular experiences. The graphic on page six depicts the different forms of sexual violence and their intersections in the lives of adolescents.

One of the tasks of adolescence is learning about sexuality, and abusive relationships can deeply affect a survivor's understanding of sexuality and consent. Abusive dating partners may force or coerce sexual activity, threaten sexual violence, expose the survivor to sexually transmitted infections, control access to reproductive control, engage in sexual shaming, force sexual acts with others, among other sexually violent acts. Dating relationships are one of the many new experiences for teens as they start to experiment with adult behavior. "Teens' lack of experience with intimacy makes it difficult to negotiate their new sexuality, handle relationship conflict, and realize the seriousness of intimate partner abuse" (Ciarlante, 2008, p. 2). The lack of experience is compounded by teens' reluctance to talk about sex with adults and vice versa (P. O. Giggans, personal communication, December 7, 2011). Services for survivors of teen dating violence must include screening and education on sexual violence.

Sexual Violence in the Lives of Adolescents



Sexual violence and teen dating violence intersect when they occur concurrently, but there are other intersections as well. We must also examine the broader connections between sexual violence, dating violence, and other types of violence. Sherry Hamby and her colleagues have studied multiple forms of youth violence in the NatSCEV. They found that survivors of teen dating violence experience high rates of sexual violence. However, someone other than the violent partner, such as another peer or an adult, commits much of the sexual violence (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, and Hamby, 2005). Hamby explains,

Teen dating violence and teen sexual violence are closely linked—victims of one are at much increased risk of the other. And boyfriends (and girlfriends) are sometimes the perpetrator of both physical dating violence and sexual violence. Still, there appear to be other reasons for these links—probably common vulnerabilities that put youth at risk for both. Many youth who are victims of teen physical dating violence and teen sexual violence have multiple perpetrators who are not all boyfriends or girlfriends (personal communication, November 27, 2011).

Teens are at high risk for all types of victimization. In addition to sexual violence and teen dating violence, Hamby and her colleagues found that many adolescents experience multiple forms of violence, such as bullying, witnessing family violence, property crimes, and assaults by siblings, but there is an especially strong link between sexual violence and teen dating violence. There is some evidence that childhood sexual violence increases the risk for later sexual violence and domestic violence (for a full discussion of the links, see Stevens, 2007; Yuan, Koss, & Stone, 2006a; and Fellitti et al., 1998). Therefore, it is crucial that advocates understand the dynamics of child sexual abuse and implications for adolescent and adult survivors. The research makes it clear that our prevention and intervention efforts must link to prevention and intervention of other forms of violence to be truly effective. Prevention programs will be most successful when they target “common underlying risk factors” of multiple forms of violence (Finkelhor, Turner, Hamby, and Ormrod, 2011, p. 9). Youth-serving professionals who screen and intervene for one form of violence, be it bullying, neglect, sexual violence, or teen dating violence, should screen for other forms of violence. We cannot help survivors move past the trauma unless we look for and help with all the traumas.

Sexual Violence Services for Teens

There are many things we can do for teen sexual violence survivors under current teen dating violence funding streams, as there is so much concurrence of teen dating violence and teen sexual violence. Moreover, the Sexual Assault Services Program of the federal Office on Violence Against Women opens many creative possibilities for sexual violence specific work with teens.

When we think about the range of sexual assault services provided to youth, it is helpful to break them down into a few categories. First, we can consider modifications to make current services

more accessible and welcoming for teens. Second, we can consider creating new services specifically for teens. Third, we must consider organizational changes and systems advocacy work.

Modify Existing Practices

- *Assess staff knowledge of youth language and culture.* Teens won't use services they don't trust. Learning the language and culture is an important way for adults to earn credibility and trust. Do you have workers that know which musicians and TV shows are hot right now? Does the agency use teen language and pictures of teens in publications and marketing?
- *Look for true appreciation of youth when hiring new staff.* Not everyone enjoys or understands teenagers. Ask applicants about their experience working with youth and how they feel about teenagers (Ciarlante, 2005).
- *Schedule appointments after school, but don't go too late in the evening.* Teens are busy with school, friends, work, and other activities. For some teens, it is appropriate to meet at school, but advocates should carefully assess each case.
- *For all services and information, keep it short and simple.* Teens are still developing their attention span and ability to retain information (J. D'Anniballe, personal communication, November 14, 2011).
 - 45-minute group or individual sessions are better than 60- or 90-minute sessions.
 - For advocacy, allow teens to have several brief contacts over a week rather than one long meeting per week.
 - Make paper publications directed at teens a half-page or less—try to design something they can stuff in a pocket.
 - The Wix Learning Center recommends, “When designing websites for teenagers you’ll need to take these things into account. Here are a few design tips to help you along:
 - “Simple, snappy text - your text should be to the point. Teenagers don’t want to spend too long reading. Vary up your text with attractive images.
 - “Use video - teenagers love short videos (they’re used to watching them on YouTube!). Embed short videos of under 4 minutes to grab their attention.
 - “Make it easy to use - if your website becomes too much like work (i.e. too much like school) your teenage audience will be off to find something less boring
 - “Don’t be patronizing - while bright colors and Flash website animations are loved by kids, teenagers like to think that they are grown up. Make your free website clean but include stylish visual elements
 - “Kids are not teens - your website should be for ‘teens,’ don’t call them kids or they will feel patronized. Teens are far too cool to be kids” (Wix Learning Center, n.d.)
- *Review transportation rules and expectations.* Most teens don't yet drive, and those who do may not have regular access to a car. In addition, rural teens have little or no access to

public transportation. Advocates may need to meet teens at school, home, or other locations, so long as privacy is assured.

- *Review agency policy and state law on confidentiality to assess what nontraditional locations you can safely use for services.* “Counseling doesn’t have to just happen in a face-to-face counseling room. Take a walk around the block, meet [at school] or in a park. Be creative! Kids prefer to not stare into somebody’s face when discussing difficult or personal things” (P. O. Giggans, personal communication, December 7, 2011).
- *Talk about rights early and often.* Teens are generally very concerned with their rights, especially when it comes to mandatory reporting, medical decision-making, and confidentiality (M. Ciarlante, personal communication, November 17, 2011). All publications directed at teens should include information about rights. Coalitions help programs by creating guides on the laws governing teens’ rights in their state. Be prepared to discuss rights, especially privacy rights and decision-making rights, at the first meetings with teens. “Teens are often concerned about what adults will do with the information they share: panic, call the cops, take over, shame and blame, report somebody, judge them unfavorably, take over their lives, or restrict their life” (P. O. Giggans, personal communication, December 7, 2011). Remind teens of their rights—and places where they don’t have rights—often, so they may continually make informed and empowered decisions.
- *Take teens’ relationships seriously.* “Teens feel very judged and misjudged by the adults in their lives. If teens want to keep a secret from parents, they can and do quite easily. Adults often don’t take teen relationships seriously. For the teens, these relationships, even though they may be loaded with drama, are very serious. They are in love for real...This is a challenge for adults.” (P. O. Giggans, personal communication, December 7, 2011).
- *Involve youth in all levels of the agency.* Create a teen advisory board to help with prevention and intervention work. Allow and encourage youth to serve on the board. You may need to change policy or have an adult liaison cast their votes, depending on state law, but the program has much to gain from the youth perspective. (Ciarlante, 2005).

Create Specific Services and Practices for Teens

- *Create a support group just for teens.* A 17-year-old is developmentally quite different from a 25-year-old or a 19-year-old, even if they have suffered similar violence. If possible, consider running groups for young teens and older teens separately. At a minimum, try to separate the 12- to 17-year-olds from adults.
- *Include strong skill-building and psycho-education components in support groups to help teens learn healthy coping skills and avoid negative ones.* Adolescence is a time of great impulsivity and not-so-great understanding of the future. For many teen survivors, trauma manifests as risk-taking and substance abuse. Group curricula like *Love and Life: G-TREM Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model Group Intervention for Adolescent*

Girls or Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) are good examples of skill-building curricula. DBT would need to be adapted for the developmental stage of teens, as most DBT guides are written for adults (some states may require or strongly encourage a licensed therapist for DBT facilitation).

- *Embrace teens' communication tools.* Technology-based communication, whether texting or online, is essential to most teenagers. There are complicated questions surrounding how to use technology in services and what technology to use, with ramifications in confidentiality, ethics, and accessibility. State coalitions provide important guidance to member centers on what technology they can use ethically.
- *Encourage teens' creativity and energy.* Use music, art, writing, and movement in group sessions, individual sessions, and prevention work.
- *Develop advocacy, training, and technical assistance on education laws, policies, and practices.* The laws governing children's lives are complex. Coalitions can "improve the teen advocacy ability of program staff by helping them unravel education laws and policies" with publications, trainings, and technical assistance. Coalitions also "help advocates decipher the sometimes contradictory laws and policies that impact teens' ability to get free, confidential help." Programs can "organize cross-trainings with educators and other youth-serving professionals" (Ciarlante, 2005, p. 3).

Create Organizational and Community Change

- *Work closely with schools.* Many adolescent survivors are teased, shamed, bullied, and harassed by their peers after sexual violence. The perpetrator and his friends may initiate some of this, but it is as likely to come from other sources. Indeed, this post-assault harassment can cause as much, if not more, emotional and social harm as the rape itself. Train teachers and school counselors to recognize and interrupt harassment. Work with schools to develop policies on protecting survivors. Programs can also collaborate with schools to provide services, by having an advocate onsite at their school a couple of times a week, for example. Schools can bring advocates into health classes to talk about healthy sexuality.
- *"Create opportunities for teens to be peer counselors on their campuses.* The rape crisis center would need to be working very closely with school personnel. Have a champion at the school who could keep the rape crisis center connected and invite the rape crisis center to train some students. Some schools actually give school credit for peer crisis counseling. Involving teens in prevention is one way to help interventions happen when needed" (P. O. Giggans, personal communication, December 7, 2011). Teens are more likely to seek help from a peer than an adult. Peer educators or trained peer crisis counselors can be an important link to rape crisis centers.
- *Train social service providers and health care providers, especially reproductive health care clinics and youth clinics, to screen for sexual violence.* "Teens tell reproductive health care providers if they ask" (Ciarlante, personal communication, November 17,

2011). Health care providers in many states can provide confidential services to teens, making the health care office a potentially safe place to discuss violence.

- *Encourage teens' creativity and resilience.* Many survivors find hope and healing in activism and the arts. For example, organize—or help teens organize—a poetry slam for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Invite teens to make shirts for the Clothesline Project and display them at the poetry slam.
- *Support teens in creating awareness campaigns in their communities.* Several state coalitions have created youth-driven awareness projects. Bring teen survivors to meetings with school administrators or elected officials to advocate for change.
- *Engage teens in statewide work.* The *Lead On! Youth Leadership Mini-Summit 2011* in Alaska is a youth conference on “healthy relationships, nonviolence, culture, and identity, as well as how to be effective leaders in one’s community. *Lead On!* is one of the events supported through a statewide collaboration of agencies and funders working towards ending violence...It gives teens a chance to plan the conference, get inspired by others and go back to their towns and villages re-committed to making a difference in preventing violence in their own communities...*Lead On! 2011*’s unique program utilized various creative formats including music, dance, art, and theater as well as youth-led workshops. Youth were also able to connect with policy leaders, D. Victor Kester, Walt Monegan, and Elvi Gray-Jackson, in a mock policy panel discussing real legislation” (Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, n.d.)

In Closing

Adolescent survivors of sexual violence present unique challenges to rape crisis centers, and they bring creativity, energy, and resilience. Serving teen survivors starts with a nuanced understanding of the range of sexual violence in teens’ lives and the dynamics of teen development. From here, we can design creative services that are truly responsive to the needs of teen survivors of sexual violence. Sexual violence can deeply affect youth development, but good support from empowering, trustworthy adults can help set them on a strong course for the future. Good support and information can help us all become creative, energetic, and resilient advocates for youth.

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