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Teen dating violence: a culture of change starts in our classrooms

By Hayley Welgus Guest columnist Updated Nov 26, 2016

The United Nations marked Nov. 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It is an opportune moment to reflect on our own communities, on the kind of society we want to live in, and on the values we want our children to grow up with.

While many of us think of domestic violence as emblematic of the issue of violence against women, what too many do not realize is that this is a problem that can start much earlier than womanhood; terrifyingly, our teens are no strangers to dating violence.

According to the Center for Disease Control, almost a quarter of all females who have experienced rape, violence or stalking at the hands of a partner first experienced dating violence between the ages of 11 and 17. In 2013, one in 10 high schoolers had also experienced sexual victimization in the past year by someone they were dating.

Let us take a moment to reflect on this: Children are experiencing physical and sexual victimization under the guise of "romance" from as young as 11. In your high-school-aged son or daughter's classroom, an average of 2-3 kids will have suffered in the last 12 months. Is this something we are prepared to accept?

No. Our schools need to act.

Understanding what teen dating aggression and violence look like is essential to addressing this problem. They occur on a spectrum of behaviors, ranging from telling sexist jokes, to jealous and controlling behavior, to sexual pressure, to full on sexual assault.

All of these behaviors contribute to a culture of violence. None are acceptable. None are things we want our child to experience. None are things we want our child to commit.

Just as the women's movement fought hard for public recognition of domestic violence as a social issue that concerns us all, teen dating violence must also be recognized as everybody's problem and everybody's responsibility to solve. Schools need to take the lead in establishing a community of responsibility, and all young people can play an active role in its enforcement.

"Bystander intervention" refers to those who are aware of acts of dating aggression stepping in to help prevent it, even if they are not involved. Evidence has shown that training college students on bystander intervention can have a positive effect. Now experts are increasingly recognizing the critical importance of this approach to prevent youth dating violence in high school settings.

With the right education, kids have the power to take action and be part of a positive change. This can be as simple as speaking up when sexist comments or jokes are made to create social environments where this behavior is not tolerated. It can also mean letting a friend know that their behavior towards their boyfriend or girlfriend appears to be controlling. It means speaking up or calling an adult when a drunk teen at a party is taken off to a bedroom. It means being kind and supportive to those who have experienced abuse.

Young people are capable of learning these skills and of using them in ways that help their peers, while keeping themselves safe.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction is already getting a lot of things right. The high school Health Education curriculum covers important ground, including teaching empathy, principles of healthy dating, power and control in relationships, and sexual assault. It now needs to take it to the next level by teaching teenagers how to go from noticing problematic behaviors to assuming responsibility and choosing to act.

We need to demand bystander intervention education of the DPI and all North Carolina schools. They have a responsibility to ensure not only the immediate safety of our teens, but the provision of skills to enable them to be responsible citizens throughout their lives.

America has just elected into its most powerful office a man who has boasted about groping women and has a list of sexual assault allegations against his name. Now more than ever is the time for introspection, to ask ourselves whether this is the culture of acceptance we want our children to grow up in -- regardless what side of the political divide you fall on.

A culture of change can start in your child's classroom.

Our kids deserve it.

Hayley Welgus holds a Bachelor of Arts in women's studies and over the last decade has had a global career in gender equality promotion and human rights. She is a Rotary Peace Fellow and a 2018 Master of Public Health candidate at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Gillings School of Global Public Health, in the department of health behavior.