

## Issue Brief

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# A Development Approach to Working with Teen Victims

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Adolescence is a period of great change. In addition to the transformations we normally associate with this life stage, the architecture of the brain is in flux as the foundational structures for adult behavior and thought processes are being built. Victimization during this crucial time can act as a wrecking ball, threatening the stability of these emerging structures.

Although teen victimization doubles the risk for a multitude of problems, teen victims of crime do not receive the same level of intervention and support as adults<sup>1</sup>. Yet if adult practitioners apply basic knowledge of adolescent development to work with teen victims, teens are more likely to obtain the interventions they need. Law enforcement professionals, juvenile and family court personnel, advocates, and other victim assistance practitioners serve vital roles in intervening in juvenile victimization. A developmental approach to practice issues that arise in various stages of the justice process will improve practitioners' decision-making in juvenile victimization cases, and will:

- **enhance** practitioners' communications with teen victims and witnesses;
- **augment** safety planning with teen victims and witnesses;
- **promote** teen cooperation with investigation and prosecution;
- **improve** the quality and outcomes of investigations in teen cases;
- **increase** teen willingness to report crime.

### Teen Transitions

Adolescence is the stage between puberty and adulthood, from about ages 10 to 17. The transition from childhood to adulthood involves tremendous physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes. During adolescence, teens begin to move from concrete thinking to abstract thinking and face other common developmental tasks. Figuring out who they are and who they are becoming is the overriding challenge for teens. They are developing an identity—the set of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes one uses to make decisions about one's behavior. Teens' experiences shape their brain structure for behavior and thought, and once this form is set, it is difficult to rearrange. Experiencing violence and abuse during identity development affects this form in lasting ways.

Puberty, the stage of sexual maturation and rapid physical growth, entails many developmental challenges :

- **adjustment** to physical changes;
- **acceptance** of sexual feelings;
- **understanding** personal boundaries, roles, and relationships;
- **knowledge** of reproductive processes;
- **experiences** with degrees of intimacy; and
- **integration** of socially acceptable standards of sexual expression.

Teens are developing greater independence from their families and are realizing that some of their emerging values and beliefs are different from those of their parents. As family relationships change, peer relationships become highly influential and more intimate. During this time of changing rules and increasing freedoms, teens are

negotiating new and tricky social situations. Support and guidance can help teens navigate new, but necessary, decision-making challenges. Teens need to gain decision-making experience and learn from mistakes with support from adults .

### Intimate Partner Abuse

Until they have a secure identity, teens have no stable center from which to make choices and decisions. As a result, they may define themselves according to the likes and dislikes of their peers, particularly in dating relationships, which often begin by age 14. The desire to be accepted drives many young people to conform to strict gender roles such as those demanding aggression from boys and passivity from girls. These social norms profoundly affect the identity development of youth and contribute to vulnerability for intimate partner abuse. Those teens who seem to challenge these norms face hostility or violence.



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. Teens may believe that possessive jealousy, controlling behavior, and even sexual pressure are expressions of love. Teens in abusive relationships are particularly vulnerable to the controlling and isolating behavior that abusers often exercise over their partners. Abusive relationships can damage victims' identity development and increase their emotional dependence on others. Practitioners must be able to help and support teen victims who fail to recognize abusive behaviors or who refuse to end their relationships despite the abuse.

Youth with same-sex partners experience the same types of intimate partner abuse as those in opposite-sex relationships, but their safety concerns are greater when they seek help. Youth who are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are at a higher risk for violent verbal, physical, and sexual victimization. Practitioners should maintain confidentiality. Also, it's important to respect the youth's expression of gender and sexuality and learn how the youth identifies, because not all youth who have same-sex

experiences or relationships will identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Many teens hesitate to tell adults when they've been victimized. When teens are abused in relationships, they may feel regret over choices they have made. Victims need nonjudgmental support when they list and share the choices they wish they had made differently. At the same time, they need to hear that no one has the right to hurt them regardless of what they may have done or regrets they may have .

### Support for Youth Victims

Teen victims of dating violence, sexual violence and stalking have a right to information to help them make their own choices about criminal proceedings, pursuing civil justice, seeking crisis intervention, counseling, and advocacy support. Practitioners who understand adolescent development will realize that successful approaches for adults may not work with teens. Teens may simply need adults to listen and then support their efforts to use available information or services. They may prefer information over help, advocacy over counseling, and a discussion about rights rather than protection. We can powerfully support teen victims by offering options and asking how we might best help.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> National Council on Crime and Delinquency, National Center for Victims of Crime. *Our Vulnerable Teenagers: Their Victimization, Its Consequences, and Directions for Prevention and Intervention*, 2002. Washington, DC.

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<b>HELPING TEEN VICTIMS: LESSONS FROM FIELD WORK</b>		
<b>PRACTITIONER CHALLENGES</b>	<b>CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<b>PRACTICAL TIPS</b>
<b><i>I feel pressed to gather critical information and worry that my questions won't be answered in the time available.</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teens do not open up on demand.</li> <li>• Teens are still negotiating trust with adults.</li> <li>• Teens' sense of what is important differs from that of adults.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan for more frequent and less lengthy interactions with teen victims.</li> <li>• Allow teen victims to tell what happened without interruption or questions.</li> <li>• Explain the time frame and important deadlines in the case.</li> </ul>
<b><i>I take over or "parent" teen victims and find myself using more leading statements, giving advice, or telling teens what to do.</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teens are likely to shut down or rebel against control.</li> <li>• Teens desire independence but lack decision-making experience.</li> <li>• Teens receive conflicting advice from different sources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen, give information, and ask what support teen victims need to make decisions.</li> <li>• Instead of giving advice, present ideas as rights and options for victims to consider.</li> <li>• Help teen victims explore the safety and feasibility of their choices.</li> </ul>
<b><i>I question the victim's behavior more when working with teens, or I make judgments about them.</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teens engage in more impulsive behavior and risk-taking than adults do.</li> <li>• Teens may not react the way adults assume victims should react.</li> <li>• Teens cope with victimization in ways that may be hard for others to understand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a non-judgmental tone of voice.</li> <li>• Avoid questions that ask "why" or "why not."</li> <li>• Don't blame the victim! Consider how your approach may affect a teen victim.</li> </ul>
<b><i>It's hard to get teens to use the available interventions and support.</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teens weigh many factors in deciding whether to use help.</li> <li>• Peer support, peer counseling, and support groups may be more welcome than one-on-one counseling.</li> <li>• Teens need to be able to trust the privacy of services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer teens victims multiple options for receiving support.</li> <li>• Ask teen advisors to evaluate outreach approaches, service options, and locations.</li> <li>• Address confidentiality and safety concerns up front.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Sometimes a teen's priorities conflict with what I need to discuss, and it can be challenging to stay focused on the important issues.</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teen values are shaped by intense social and emotional pressure.</li> <li>• Teens are loyal to relationships and sensitive to implied criticism of others—even those who are hurting them.</li> <li>• Teens focus on short-term outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend to teen victims' "here and now" needs and concerns first.</li> <li>• Listen for the social and emotional pressures influencing teen victims and validate their experiences.</li> <li>• Practice relating to a wide range of teens with a variety of attitudes.</li> </ul>

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