

# Teen Center

## Teen Dating Violence Technical Assistance Center



## Issue Brief

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# Technology and Teen Dating Violence

**T**oday's teens are increasingly reliant upon technology in their everyday lives. Cell phones, PDAs, and the internet provide teens with almost constant communication. While technology has greatly improved teens' ability to stay in touch with their friends, families, schools, and communities, these new technologies can also present a challenge to service providers who work with teens experiencing dating violence. In the hands of an abusive partner, the same tech devices and websites that connect teens can be turned into tools of abuse. The privacy offered by cell phones and the internet adds another layer of challenge for providers, as this same privacy often means that high-tech abuse is hidden. Providers can help protect their teen clients by understanding the challenges that technology presents and sharing strategies for teens to stay safe.

Many teens use cell phones, email, social networking sites, and personal computers every day. A recent study found that 93% of teens use the internet,<sup>1</sup> 72% own a desktop computer,<sup>2</sup> and 67% own cell phones;<sup>3</sup> these numbers are increasing every year. More than half of 12 to 17 year olds who use the internet have a profile on a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace,<sup>4</sup> and nearly half of teens visit a social networking site once or more times daily.<sup>5</sup> Teens are using the internet in every area of their lives and most report that the internet and other digital devices make their lives easier.<sup>6</sup>

When one considers the amount of time an average teen spends on a cell phone or the internet, it is not surprising that these technologies can become tools of abuse in the hands of an abusive dating partner. While teens experience the same types of abuse as adults, the methods may be unique to teens and teen culture; the use of technology is one area where this is easily seen. The controlling behavior, or monitoring, that abusers often exercise over their partners is easy to translate to the digital world. Teen abusers can easily monitor their dating partners by frequently checking in by cell phone, text or instant messenger (IM) or by requiring a dating partner to check in. One in three teens say they are text messaged up to thirty times an hour by a partner or ex-partner inquiring where they are, what they are doing, or who they are with.<sup>7</sup> Between cell phone calls and frequent texting, an abuser can exert almost constant control over a partner day and night.

Slightly more technologically savvy teens can spy on or monitor a partner through spyware programs or Global Positioning System (GPS) devices. Spyware is computer software, installed on a personal computer without the owner's knowledge, which can track internet usage, collect personal information, and intercept electronic communications. GPS-enabled cell phones can be accessed using online services to monitor the user's location, often without the user ever knowing.

However, one need not be a technophile to use the

**“1 in 4 teens has been harassed, called names, or put down by a dating partner over cell phone or text message.”**

internet to monitor a dating partner. Many teens post their schedule or location on their personal blogs, Facebook or MySpace pages. The list of people able to access this information is determined by the level of privacy that the teen has selected on his or her account. Many teens do not restrict access to the content that they post, including pictures. Recent reports show that 40% of teens make their online profile visible to anyone<sup>8</sup> and 21% of teens do not restrict access to their photos.<sup>9</sup> It can range from only those people on the teen’s list of “friends” to anyone with an account to anyone at all, with no restrictions. Many teens post enough information to allow anyone with access to find them at any point during the day – cell phone number, class schedules, addresses, extracurricular activities, social events, and jobs. Even if the teen does not post personal information, it may be available on a friend’s webpage or even a school website.

The potential for abuse through technology goes beyond mere monitoring to harassment, threats, and intimidation. One in four teens in a relationship has experienced harassment, name-calling, or put downs from a current or former dating partner through cell phone or text messaging<sup>10</sup> and nearly one in five has been harassed or put down through a social networking site.<sup>11</sup> An abuser can use his or her own webpage to post personal information or unwanted pictures about a dating partner. Teens who share their passwords with friends and dating partners risk having their own email accounts and webpages accessed and used by abusive dating partners. The speed of communication on the internet allows this information to be shared among friends and classmates almost instantaneously, often before a teen even knows it has been posted.

Fear and intimidation through high-tech channels are just as real as any abuse in the non-digital world. Moreover, high-tech abuse does not happen in a vacuum. For many teens, threats or harassment via cell phone or the internet merely reinforce the threats and verbal abuse they have experienced in person. In fact, 17% of teens in a recent survey report that a boyfriend or girlfriend has made them afraid to not respond to a cell phone call, email, IM, or text message because of what he or she might do.<sup>12</sup>

Teens are talking about high-tech abuse and believe it is a serious problem for themselves and their peers.<sup>13</sup> Approximately half of teens believe that computers and cell phones make abuse more likely to occur in a teen dating relationship<sup>14</sup> and make it easier to conceal abuse from parents.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, parents, teachers, and adult service providers are frequently in the dark about the abuse that occurs over cell phones and the internet. Teens are unlikely to report any abuse, including high-tech abuse, to parents or other adults. The hidden nature of such abuse means that unless a teen reveals the abuse or an adult looks into the teen’s computer or phone, it can easily go undetected. Sixty-seven percent of parents were unaware that their teens had dating partners check up on them thirty times a day on their cell phones and 82% of parents did not know that their teens were emailed or texted 30 times per hour.<sup>16</sup> Monitoring via cell phone and text message often continues throughout the night, when teens are alone and parents are unaware of their teen’s activities. Nearly one in four teens in a relationship communicated with their partner by cell phone or text messaging hourly between midnight and 5:00 a.m.<sup>17</sup>



## Tips for Your Teen Clients

**Changing your cell phone number.** If your teen client is experiencing abuse from a current or former dating partner by cell phone, her first instinct might be to change the number. This might be the right approach for many teens, but it is important to first consider how your teen's abusive partner will respond to a disconnected phone number. If your teen is concerned that her partner may escalate the abuse in reaction to being unable to make contact, then changing your teen's phone number may actually do more harm than good. Further, by leaving the phone on and active, calls can be tracked by the phone company and text messages and voicemails saved for potential use in future legal cases. If your teen does decide to change her cell phone number, discuss strategies to keep the abusive partner from discovering the new number. Remind your teen to give the new number to the people in her support network – parents, close friends, and other service providers. If your teen is unsure about changing her cell phone number, discuss alternative methods of restricting contact from an abusive partner such as talking to the cell phone provider about call blocking and other features.

**Google yourself.** Encourage your teen clients to enter their names in websites such as Google, Flickr, and YouTube to see what information pops up. The amount of personal information contained in various websites can be surprising. Teens must know what information is available to someone looking for them on the internet, including in cached websites, particularly if they wish to prevent a current or former dating partner from obtaining personal information such as phone number or

address. If your teen client comes across a website that contains personal information he wishes to keep private, encourage him to contact the website host directly to see if they will remove the information.

**Make your profile private.** Talk to your teen clients about who has access to their Facebook or MySpace page and encourage them to make their profiles private. Both of these social networking sites allow users to determine who sees the information they post on their pages. Teens should be aware of how much they reveal about their contact information, class and work schedules, extracurricular activities, social events, and daily routines. This is especially true for a teen who has recently ended an abusive relationship or is trying to limit contact from an abusive dating partner. If your teen client has decided to change her phone number, email address, or has made other changes in her life, she should remind friends not post the new information on their own pages.

**Check your computer.** If you have teen clients who are experiencing abuse, encourage them to check their personal computers frequently for signs of tampering or spyware. Up to date spyware detection and antivirus software can help teens avoid computer tampering. Tell your teens to avoid using computers that their abusers have physical access to and to avoid opening suspicious email attachments, particularly electronic greeting cards, computer games, or anything that requires them to click a link. Suggest that they use a computer in a public location for communication with friends or any personal research, particularly if they are looking for resources on dating violence. If your teens suspect that someone has accessed their accounts, advise them to use a public computer to change the password to something that is not



**Stay on the lookout for upcoming webinars on other issues affecting service providers who work with teens at the Teen Center website.**

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easy to guess. Finally, make sure your teen clients are familiar with the quick escape links that are common on domestic and dating violence online resources. These links allow a user to quickly navigate to another, innocuous website, such as Google or Yahoo, if someone unexpectedly enters the room.

Preserve evidence. Most teens choose not to pursue legal remedies against abusive dating partners, and many cannot imagine ever changing their mind and deciding to go to court. Even so, it is important to encourage your teen clients to preserve any electronic communication that could be evidence in a legal case. Saving voicemails, text messages, and emails will arm them with the tools they will need if they do decide to pursue civil or criminal remedies in the future. And if they never decide to go to court, no harm was done. Voicemails can be recorded with a digital voice recorder; text messages and emails should be printed to avoid unintentional deletion. Any communication made on a website should be immediately printed because the content can be changed in an instant and the relevant piece of evidence lost.

Technology is not the enemy. Advances in technology have improved all of our lives and have allowed teens greater freedom and creativity than ever before. It is important to remember that although these tools can be manipulated by abusers, they are merely the tools of abuse; the underlying power and control remains the real problem. Dating violence will not be overcome by restricting access to technology but by teaching teens how to use it safely and productively. These same technologies offer service providers a tremendous opportunity to reach teens who are experiencing dating violence. Encourage your organization to offer online resources for teens, such as interactive educational materials, discussion boards, and email advice lines. Visit Break the Cycle at <http://www.breakthecycle.org> and <http://www.thesafespace.org> for teen-centered resources on ending domestic and dating violence and building healthy relationships.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, Alexandra Rankin Macgill, and Aaron Smith. "Teens and Social Media: The use of social media gains a greater foothold in teen life as they embrace the conversational nature of interactive online media." *PEW Internet & American Life Project* (December 19, 2007), [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Social\\_Media\\_Final.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Social_Media_Final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Lenhart, Amanda and Mary Madden. "Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview." *PEW Internet & American Life Project* (January 3, 2007), [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_SNS\\_Data\\_Memo\\_Jan\\_2007.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_SNS_Data_Memo_Jan_2007.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Macgill, Alexandra Rankin. "Parent and Teenager Internet Use." *PEW Internet & American Life Project* (October 24, 2007), [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teen\\_Parents\\_data\\_memo\\_Oct2007.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teen_Parents_data_memo_Oct2007.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Picard, Peter. "Tech Abuse in Teen Relationships Study." *Liz Claiborne Inc* (January 2007), [http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/surveyresults\\_2007mstr.htm](http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/surveyresults_2007mstr.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Macgill, Alexandra Rankin. "Parent and Teenager Internet Use." *PEW Internet & American Life Project* (October 24, 2007), [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teen\\_Parents\\_data\\_memo\\_Oct2007.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teen_Parents_data_memo_Oct2007.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, Alexandra Rankin Macgill, and Aaron Smith. "Teens and Social Media: The use of social media gains a greater foothold in teen life as they embrace the conversational nature of interactive online media." *PEW Internet & American Life Project* (December 19, 2007), [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Social\\_Media\\_Final.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Social_Media_Final.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Picard, Peter. "Tech Abuse in Teen Relationships Study." *Liz Claiborne Inc* (January 2007), [http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/surveyresults\\_2007mstr.htm](http://www.loveisnotabuse.com/surveyresults_2007mstr.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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