



MY OPINION

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Loves Me, Loves Me Not

I can't begin to describe how proud I am of my daughter, Channelor. She is a smart, young student with a bright future ahead of her. At this point, boys, the hottest clothes, and being the right weight are not issues, but she is only 11 years old. In a few years, though, she might be interested in more than just school and soccer — dating, fitting in, and all those terrible things that come with being a teenager. I can only do my best to prepare her for the challenges she will face.

In a way, the Texas Young Lawyers Association is doing its part to help prepare Texas' youth for the challenges ahead. TYLA has done its best to educate youth about their civic responsibilities (*VoTexas, They had a Dream Too: Young Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement*, and *Vote America! Honor the Fight, Exercise Your Right*), as well as cyber safety (*R U Safe? — Protecting Yourself in Cyberspace*). Now TYLA is focusing on teaching Texas teens about teen dating violence.

Today's teens deal with dating violence at an alarming rate. Thirty-three percent of all teens have been affected by teen dating violence. Of those, females between the ages of 16 to 24 experience the highest rate of dating violence. One in four teenage girls who have been in a relationship reveal that they have been pressured to perform sexual acts. To say that teen dating violence is a problem is an understatement.

To address this issue, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution in January designating February as National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. Texas was ahead of the game: In 2007, the Texas House of Representatives passed a law mandating that all

school districts in Texas adopt and implement a dating violence policy.

TYLA has created a handbook, *Loves Me, Loves Me Not*, to educate teenagers about healthy teen dating, the misconceptions of what teen dating violence is, and to encourage teens to seek help if they are ever in an abusive relationship or know someone who is.

The brochure first identifies what teen dating violence is and what it is not ("Teen dating violence is not an argument every once in a while or a reaction from your boyfriend or girlfriend who is in a bad mood after a bad day."). *Loves Me, Loves Me Not* also describes the different types of abuse that are considered dating violence, including physical abuse; emotional and verbal abuse; sexual abuse; and threats, isolation, or harassment. The brochure also includes important questions to help teens recognize dating violence:

- Has your partner ever said things to insult you or put you down and then told you that he or she loves you?
- Has your partner constantly called or sent you text messages to see where you are and who you are with?
- Has your partner ever made you feel afraid to break up because he or she says they can't live without you?
- Has your partner ever not allowed you to do things with your friends or family?

The idea for the handbook originated with a DVD project of the Houston Young Lawyers Association, *It Shouldn't Kill a Texas Teen to Date*. The goal was to build awareness about a problem that is widespread and growing fast. Forty-four percent of all students have been in an

abusive relationship by the time they graduate from college and 40 percent of teenage girls, ages 14 to 17, know someone their age who has been hit or beaten by their partner. Those numbers are too high. Children and teens — both boys and girls — must learn to respect each other and themselves if we want those numbers to go down.

TYLA's *Loves Me, Loves Me Not* brochure is an effort to do just that. It is our hope that every teen in Texas will have access to this important resource and will learn how to recognize and prevent teen dating violence. Rollouts across Texas are being planned. The handbook is available through TYLA's website, www.tyla.org.

Members of the TYLA Family Law/Children's Rights/Seniors Committee who worked on the handbook include **Jeff Armstrong, Lisa Guerra, Jill Johnston, Natalie Cobb Koehler, Sarah Kownacki, Celina Lopez, Erin O'Driscoll, Jobe Rodgers, and Rebecca Vela**. Half of these are TYLA directors; the other half are young lawyer volunteers. The committee received a tremendous amount of help from the Houston Young Lawyers Association in completing this brochure.

Loves Me, Loves Me Not asks teens to do their part by pledging to never commit, condone, or remain silent about teen dating violence. Make a pledge to help eradicate teen dating violence. Participating in TYLA's efforts to curb teen dating violence doesn't take much. At the very least, it involves simply being there or lending an ear to a teen who may be in trouble. So, take a moment today to talk to the teen in your life about teen dating violence. It just might save theirs. ✪