

**About Health TV with Jeanne Blake**  
**Teen dating violence**  
**[www.abouthhealth.com](http://www.abouthhealth.com)**

JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake. The words domestic violence conjure up images of women sending out an abusive partner or defending a child from a waving hand. The public health experts warn of an epidemic of violence among young people, young boys and girls, and it's called teen dating violence. In this edition of *About Health TV*, we will talk with a national expert on this issue. Her name is Carole Sousa, she is a consultant to the Massachusetts Department of Education. And we're joined by Kristen Silvano, who will tell us her true story of what she calls teen dating violence. Carole, let's start with you. I think a lot of people who hear about this might be shocked to hear that this is going on to the degree that it is with young people. Forty percent of young people who were surveyed said that they have experienced violence in their intimate relationships. I found this shocking.

CAROLE: I think it's shocking a lot of adults when they hear that statistic. One thing that's typical as adults is that we don't take teen relationships very seriously, so how can we take violence in relationships we don't recognize seriously? But I don't think that statistic is inflated at all.

JEANNE BLAKE: But on the other hand, boys don't grow up to become men and men don't become violent. So if you think of it logically, of course it's going to start when they're younger.

CAROLE: Yes, and I have worked for a number of years in an adult batterer program, intervention program with adult men, and across the board they said they started this behavior when they were 12, 13, 14 years old.

JEANNE BLAKE: So it's nothing new, but we're just recognizing it?

CAROLE: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why do you think that is? Why are we just waking up to this?

CAROLE: Well, I think that the work that's being done in the field of domestic violence has really

given people a way in which to look at it. We're not just talking about physical violence or sexual violence, we're also talking about emotional abuse, verbal abuse, put downs, isolation. I think the work of the awareness raising of domestic violence has led us to look more closely at teen relationships. So the spectrum of behavior is going to be similar to what we see in classic domestic violence. Yet teen dating violence mirrors domestic violence, in that it exists on a continuum of controlling behavior, again ranging from verbal and emotional abuse to murder and rape. It's also that violence, once it's introduced into the relationship, gets more severe, more frequent. The most dangerous time is when the teen victim tries to leave. And it's also on the part of the young perpetrator to also institute the same type of manipulation that an adult would in terms of combining abuse with promises to change and apologies, which makes it very confusing for a teen victim who may not have a lot of experience in relationships to figure out. Is this person treating me this way because I'm special to them or are they treating me this way because they see me as an object of something they loathe.

JEANNE BLAKE: Does this sound familiar to you, Kristen?

KRISTEN: Oh, definitely.

JEANNE BLAKE: What happened?

KRISTEN: When I was in junior high, I met someone and he was great. So I had no suspicion that it was going to turn into domestic violence. Everything was great. We went to the movies, I met his parents, everything was fine. And then we met again in the ninth grade and he had asked me out. And we went out. We went together for about a month, and then the first incident that happened, I was a few minutes late for where I was supposed to meet him in between classes and he said, "Kris, you know you're a few minutes late. Where were you?" And I said I had to go to my locker and then the ladies' room. And he said, "You know, I really worried about you and I wish that you had told me." Then he back-handed me across the face. I was in total shock. What did I do?, that was the first thing I thought. What did I do to deserve that? I had never experienced anything like that in my whole ... it was just new to me. And then I believed him when he said he was sorry, that he would never do it again to me. And he promised he would never do it again. His father had done that to his mother and he didn't want to be like his father. He said, "Please, Kris, forgive me." And I did. And that just opened up a whole new world of four years of domestic violence, physical and emotional, verbal, sexual ...

JEANNE BLAKE: Did you tell anybody?

KRISTEN: A lot of people knew, for I came into school with bruises or I missed two weeks of school at a time. But a lot of the teachers didn't call home. It was a lot different than it is now. We didn't have people come to our schools and talk to us about domestic violence which ... that's what I do now, because of what I didn't have, and it serves the greatest purpose because I can see it working. People would notice. People would notice. The biggest thing that I remember is that they didn't want to get involved. They didn't want to make it their business.

JEANNE BLAKE: Kristen, when you said that after the first time he apologized and you wanted to believe him, so he stayed. But a lot of people might think that four years, I mean, what happened?

KRISTEN: A lot of people do say that. That's so long. But you do fall in love with that person, and a big factor that I always talk about is that my friends always told me, that you either pick him or me. And of course I picked him, because one, I loved him, and two, I was afraid. So I stayed with him and then he was my only friend. I mean, he was my boyfriend and my friend.

JEANNE BLAKE: What were you afraid of?

KRISTEN: I was afraid of what he would do when I left, because he would threaten me. So a lot of people do say that, you know, Why don't you just leave? That's the biggest question that I would always get. But you don't know how it feels to be afraid of someone.

JEANNE BLAKE: So how did you finally get out?

KRISTEN: I had told someone. I had told someone in my family and we talked about it. He had threatened to murder me, and that just scared me so much. I always wanted to go to college and I always wanted to have kids and get married someday. I always had that in the back of my head, and I knew it was wrong. I knew I had to do something. So I told someone in my family and they were great. We went to family counseling with all of my sisters. It was awesome. I was so embarrassed. At that age you just think that's so uncool, you know, to do that, to go to family counseling, but it was the best thing I ever did, because I got to express everything and tell stories that I hid for so long. I became a compulsive liar ... you know, where the bruises came from and why I missed so much school. I got to tell the truth, to tell what happened.

JEANNE BLAKE: Carole, what Kristen was saying, that shame that she felt really keeps a girl from getting help?

CAROLE: Yes. And young women also can worry about telling a parent. They worry that their parents will think that it's their fault. I've heard this even from victims of sexual assault, that they don't want to disappoint their parents. They perceive that they'll be grounded. They'll lose some privileges by telling. So it's very difficult for a young person, as Kristen has said, to tell an adult in your life.

JEANNE BLAKE: So what are you doing for it in the Department of Education here in Massachusetts? I know that there are programs in other states nationally. What are you doing here that's going to help others that work with young people identify people that are in situations such as Kristen's, but also make it more okay for a girl to reach out for help?

CAROLE: Well, the Department of Education instituted seven years ago a program called Teen Dating Violence Prevention and Intervention Program, and what that is, is a grant-based program. We provide grants to school districts and community agencies to develop comprehensive programs on teen dating violence. Some of the components of these programs are what other states are also working on. When I say comprehensive, I mean adopting preventative education, curriculum, and activities, going into the classrooms, retraining educators and police officers to talk with young people about the warning signs and also the legal ramifications of committing these kinds of acts. Setting up school-based victim support groups for someone like Kristen today, who would know a person they could talk to, go into a confidential support group to get the help they needed. But we also don't want to ignore the young man who may be at risk of doing this. We also encourage them to do groups with them.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was just thinking about that. And do you know of a case where a young man has stepped forward and said that to mean, I need some help?

CAROLE: Yes. And I think that what's really different between the adolescent perpetrator and the adult is that the adolescent sometimes does recognize that he has a problem. We've had kids through classroom presentations and other presentations in schools come forward and say, "I recognize some of these things in myself. I want to get help."

JEANNE BLAKE: Kristen said that her boyfriend said, "My dad hits my mom. I don't want to be like that."

CAROLE: That would have been a point of intervention, when you have a young man who is in that kind of angst, because he doesn't want to become like the dad but doesn't know quite how else to do it. That's the place. Now, whether setting good intentions would maintain him coming to a group may or may not happen, and so that's why we also work with the courts and also with the schools to make it part of the disciplinary process, that if a young person does this type of violence or shows disrespect to a female it can become part of either being suspended or expelled if they don't engage in a group.

JEANNE BLAKE: So at its core is basic respect. I'm wondering about the more insidious signs that you train educators to look for, because so many times, and I don't think it's different today, in the '80s, you know, not that long ago on this issue, I think that a lot of young people find themselves in this situation would be ashamed, and I'm wondering what the signs are the educators are encouraged to look for.

CAROLE: I think that Kristen, you can speak about that also, because Kristen does much of the speaking in the classrooms.

KRISTEN: I work for Domestic Violence and Intervention Project now at the transition house and I go in and I talk to the kids on what they should look for and what they shouldn't ignore. I talk to the teachers about warning signs.

JEANNE BLAKE: Can you share some of those warning signs that you told your teachers about?

KRISTEN: Yes. Because I feel that the teachers are with the kids more than the parents are, and I try to tell the teachers to, if a child is out for two weeks, call home, ask why. If they come to school with a bruise on their face, don't ignore that. Ask why they have that. Be really supportive. If they see something in the hallway with a boy, you know, even if it doesn't become physical, they're just fighting, call them into the office. Talk to them. You know, you really have to get into their lives. And I know teachers now. They have their own lives. They have their own family. You can't come down hard on the teachers with that job, but this comes along with it. They really have to make themselves available to the kids. It's part of teaching now.

JEANNE BLAKE: Would you add anything to the three or four that Kristen mentioned, Carole?

CAROLE: Sure. If you notice that the student is becoming more isolated. This is also for parents. If this young person has stopped hanging out with their friends, if they're missing school, if they've stopped their extracurricular activities, if their grades start going down, if they're showing signs of depression. All those can be warning signs. Also, if they're involved with an older person, often there's a big age difference, and that can be one of the warning signs as well.

JEANNE BLAKE: Kristen, you've been able to have successful relationships. You're married now. I'm wondering about that long road back from that. How did you come out of that primary relationship, an early relationship ... I'm wondering how you were able to get to a place where you could have a healthy relationship.

KRISTEN: With time. With time and counseling. And with my friends. And just with time, it really helps. I met a great guy, so he really helps me too. And my family. My family still is supportive of me. And by doing this ... doing this work for the transition house. It's not just a job to me. It helps me mentally for myself. When I go in and talk to the kids, I'm helping them, but when I leave there I have this feeling in my stomach that even if I got through to one child, and I have, because they mail me letters like, Wow, Kristen, you said that one sentence about so-and-so ... you know, I think my girlfriend's going through something like that with her boyfriend, and I think that I'll go to her parents and tell them that. So that means it's working and that keeps me going every day.

JEANNE BLAKE: Carole, in the program you've been involved in for seven years, I'm wondering what kind of shift you've seen, or have you, in how young men speak about and treat young women. I work with young people a lot through some of the documentaries that I produce, and I'm just curious, and I hear a lot of young men speak about this and I think there's still a lot of work to be done on getting guys to treat girls better, and I'm just wondering, in the seven years that you've been involved with young people and working in the schools, whether you've been able to see a measurable change.

CAROLE: I've seen a big change within the last seven years with this program, but I've been working with domestic violence for the last 20 years, both with adults and kids. One of the things we constantly hear back from schools that we've funded is that it's actually helped them change the culture of their school, where it would not be tolerated to see an act containing violence and some of the things that Kristen has pointed out. Both teachers and students are starting to help. A health education coordinator I had met the other day was saying that if there was a person in her school that was acting a certain way in the hallway, like pushing a young woman against the wall or even using bad language, the

teacher in the next class that person went into would hear about how that's not acceptable. But also, the next teacher and the next teacher and the home-room teacher, so there's an echelon, a whole chain of the culture.

JEANNE BLAKE: A vigilance needs to be there. Kristen, we're going to bring your dad on. I can't wait. I think it's so great that he's willing to talk with us about this. But as we wrap up this part of the program, if there are young people listening that find themselves in your shoes, what would your words to them be?

KRISTEN: I always tell the kids, Don't take the road that I did. If someone says that they are going to change, let them change on their own, let them get help, but don't be that person that has to stand by them the whole time that they want to change. Tell their parents. Tell somebody in the school. Don't try to be, because you love that person so much and I totally understand that, but don't try to be at 15 years old a counselor. Just have them get help and don't believe that they're not going to do it again, because with the statistics, that's not true.

JEANNE BLAKE: Those are very wise words and learned the hard way. Here is the National Domestic Violence hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE. I called it myself this morning and asked if we could put this on our screen today and are you able to handle teen violence dating questions, and they said yes. So you can call this number. We're joined now by Kristen Silvano's father, Vito Silvano. Thanks for coming in as a father to talk about this issue. I think it's so important to bring it out into the open. How did your daughter hide this from you for four years?

VITO: I have no idea. She hid it, because we were always together and it was hidden. Everything was underneath her clothes. So I never saw anything on her face, I never saw anything anywhere else, because it was always underneath her clothing. She played a good part. She did a good job.

JEANNE BLAKE: And when you found out what was going on?

VITO: When I found out what was going on ...

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, how did you find out?

VITO: How. Well, her mother called me one day and she said that she couldn't find Kristen anywhere, but she thought that she was over this person's house, so I said okay and left work and went over to this person's house, and her older sister was there and I said, "Where's Kristen?" She said, "I don't know." They had him. They were trying to talk to him, and I asked him, "Is Kristen here?" He said no. I said, "I don't believe you." So I went looking around the house, looking around the house, and I found her in the back hallway crumpled up in, like, a fetal position, crying, shaking. She said, "Leave me alone! Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" But I took her out of there, you know.

JEANNE BLAKE: I imagine that is was really hard to ...

VITO: Yeah, I had to ... my older daughter just kept me away from him.

JEANNE BLAKE: And so, what did you think about when you started to hear the reality, what had gone on?

VITO: Well, first of all, Kristen and I are very close, and I remember saying to her, "Why didn't you come to me?" Because I would have done something. She said, "I was afraid. He said that he would kill you and Ma and stepmother and he would kill the whole family. That's what he said." So I said, "You know that's not true," because, you know ... But I was afraid. I was afraid that he would.

JEANNE BLAKE: Kristen, what do you say to other parents who are listening? You believed that your whole family was at risk. Now, with a little of perspective on what happened to you, what would you say to other parents, what to look for? Your dad said there were no signs. How might you have been able to get out any earlier?

KRISTEN: Well, I would say to parents, if you suspect anything, don't think that it couldn't be happening to your kid, because I became a professional liar. Didn't I, Dad? I hid everything so well, and a few things did come up. My mother is a very sensitive person and a few things did come up. She would turn her head, not because she didn't care but because she was so afraid for me, and everyone had their own life, and my parents both worked, my sisters went to school. Everybody just tries to go on with their day, and thinking that Oh, well, if that did happen, it won't happen again. It'll stop tomorrow. Kristen can't be this naive to stay in a relationship like that. So just tell your parents if you suspect anything, even if you think you're wrong. If you suspect one percent that it could be happening, confront your child, because even if you're wrong, the kids will know that they're aware and they're starting to suspect something.

JEANNE BLAKE: You're nodding a lot, Vito. Say what you're thinking.

VITO: I was very nice to this kid. I used to give him money and everything to take my daughter out, so I couldn't believe that this would happen with him. But I knew the history of his parents and of his mother getting abused by his father, and I only got suspicious once when she was coming over to my house, and do you want me to tell you?

JEANNE BLAKE: Sure.

VITO: We were on the way to my house. We lived in Lynn, on Lakeshore Drive. One day we were on our way over there and she was crying. I asked, "What are you crying about?" She said, "Nothing, nothing." So I said, "Something's wrong." She said, "Well, I wasn't supposed to wear this dress." I said, "What do you mean you're not supposed to wear that dress?" She said, "I was told not to wear this dress by this person." I don't want to give names. I said, "He doesn't tell you what to do, does he?" She said, "Well, yeah, he tells me what to wear if I look good in it, whatever." And I said, "Nobody tells you what to do. Nobody tells you what to wear. Nobody tells you where you can go. Nothing." So that's what started it, I think, and she went to Chris, my current wife. She talked to her first because she's a nurse. You have to know her.

KRISTEN: She's very understanding.

VITO: She's a very understanding person. And then it came to me. I told Chris when I got home that night. I said, "Something's going on. I don't know what, but something's going on."

JEANNE BLAKE: So it was shortly after that Kristen would come to you. So I guess there's a clue there for parents, and I'm hoping that other parents who hear this will know what you felt or what your instinct was that they might look for that.

VITO: I would be looking for that now if I had another child.

JEANNE BLAKE: Or another chance, right?

VITO: Another girl. Another chance, yeah. I would probably look for the same thing that I told

her about somebody telling her what to do and what to wear. Now, that's the first thing that hit me, when she told me that, Well he told me not to wear this because it's too short. I said, "He has no right to tell you anything." And then she started crying and everything, so I would look for that. If I was a parent I would look for that. I'd look to see what my daughter was wearing, and she's bound to say something like, "Well, I'm not sure I should be wearing this." Well, why shouldn't she be wearing it, you know ... it's dictation ... your child being dominated by somebody else. You know, not free to do what she wants.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think that Carole Sousa said earlier in the interview, there is much greater awareness of teen violence now because of our collective awareness as a society about domestic violence as a whole. So I think parents, wouldn't you agree, just need to be aware of what their child's relationship with a boyfriend or a girlfriend is like.

VITO: We couldn't have been any closer, her and I, really. She went everywhere with me, so we couldn't have been any closer than we were, so I would have picked it up until ... Did I tell you you were a nice kid?

KRISTEN: I just want to say one thing just for an example, to show the parents how easy that it can happen ... something that I'm going to talk about on TV that I've never told you.

VITO: Good.

KRISTEN: Remember the time that you came and took me home and you asked me to stay at your house? Me and my father would always go out for ice cream. I got to your house and I talked to him a few times on the phone. And then I said, "Dad, I want to go home."

VITO: Yup. I remember that.

KRISTEN: And you said, "Why? You just got here." And I said, "I just want to go home." And you couldn't understand, and you talked to Joyce and said, "Kris wants to go home and I don't know why." That was because when my brother, my brother was a baby then, and he had given me a time to get to my father's house. He said it takes from where I lived to where he lived about 45 minutes with traffic, and you had to stop and get diapers for my brother, so we were a little off time. So when I had called him from your house, he had told me, "You can stay at your dad's, but you know that you're late being there, so that means I had to worry an extra 10 minutes, so I'm going to beat you when you get home, so

you can either come home now and get it or you can stay the night.” So you drove me home. You didn’t know.

VITO: I had to take you home. You wanted me to drive you home. I wasn’t going to keep you ...

JEANNE BLAKE: That’s a pretty good example.

KRISTEN: It’s so hidden.

JEANNE BLAKE: It’s so hidden.

KRISTEN: I must have felt that I just wanted to go home because I was either homesick or I just wanted my own bed. You can’t blame it on the parents. It’s so hard.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, I don’t think there’s a lot of blame going on here. I think that both of you are incredibly courageous for speaking out and helping others understand. Oh, I love it ... you guys are doing great. I’m really happy that you’ve been able to get it together.

VITO: She’s come a long way.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, she’s had a lot of love and support, and that’s what it takes. So thanks to both of you for coming in.

VITO and KRISTEN: Thank you.

JEANNE BLAKE: We thank you for joining us for this edition of *About Health TV*. I’m Jeanne Blake, and we’ll see you next time.

*About Health TV* is sponsored in part by  
Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation.  
Improving health through medical education,  
clinical research and community service.