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## Abuse Helpline Goes Tech-Savvy for Teens – Texas Takes a Youthful Approach to Effort to End Dating Violence

By Sarah Viren [sarah.viren@chron.com](mailto:sarah.viren@chron.com)

AUSTIN — The high school student on the other end of the line had a problem. He was in one of his first relationships, he told Nicci Avey, and he worried he might be an abuser.

“He noticed he had an anger problem and was asking for ways to help,” 19-year-old Avey summarized after hanging up the phone at the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline late last Wednesday night. “Really, a lot of teens don’t know what a healthy relationship is.”

Avey herself had little idea four years earlier when her first love began criticizing her appearance, getting jealous of her friends and then, one day, hitting her. After confiding in her mom, the petite Austin art student filed for a protective



*Rosemary Estrada, an intern with the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline, chats with a client on [www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org). The group has fielded more than 8,000 calls and online chats in its first year.*

**DEBORAH RAE  
TURNER: FOR THE  
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order against her high school beau, sought counseling and joined a then-nascent campaign to help teens in relationships similar to hers.

The battered women’s movement, which began changing laws as well as mindsets more than 30 years ago, is now tackling a new animal: teen dating violence. Once again, Texas is at the forefront of the movement.

The Texas Council on Family Violence, founder of the only national domestic abuse hotline, last year added a more tech-savvy, youthful version for the adolescent set. Housed in a florescent-lit room on the ground floor of the council’s Austin office, the new helpline more closely resembles a college dorm room than a national nerve center for teen dating abuse counseling. IKEA desks and artwork line the walls, and a couch is available for napping in the back corner.

It is a stark contrast to the general domestic abuse hotline two floors up, where phone operators, called advocates, sit in a large room filled with cubicles while a white noise machine drowns out their individual conversations.

“We are just trying new things,” said Candice Kesling, director of the teen line, called Love Is Respect. “We didn’t want to have such a corporate environment.”

### **Internet playing bigger role**

Perhaps the room’s most telling detail, however, is the computers, which outnumber phones nearly two to one. While a toll-free number is available for youth to call, Kesling said one of her big pushes is to reach youth in the ways they are increasingly reaching each other — via the Internet. The helpline just sponsored a YouTube informational video contest and also has Facebook and MySpace pages and a Twitter account to send out mass text messages.

Last week, as Avey got off the phone with her caller, Rosemary Estrada, 21, sat at her computer chatting with a teenager who said she had been sexually assaulted. While Estrada messaged the teen, supervisor Veronica Sharpe, 31, monitored the discussion from another computer, sending her interoffice messages with questions or advice.

“Do you think she’s in college?” Sharpe asked at one point while trying to find resources for the girl.

Over the past year, the center has received more than 5,400 calls and 3,000 online chats. These include parents worried about the boys their daughters are dating, teens trying to deal with the controlling behavior of boyfriends or girlfriends and, at times, high school and middle school students being beaten, stalked or abused by their school-age love interests.

Youth working the Austin helpline offer everything from relationship advice to assistance finding local shelters or emergency services in a caller’s area. These advocates all get at least 40 hours of training, including lessons on the dynamics of power and the intricacies of Internet technology, before manning a phone or chatline.

Domestic abuse workers have long known younger women are victims of such abuse. From 2001 to 2005, women ages 20 to 24 reported the highest rates of domestic and dating non-fatal violence, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Teen girls had rates similar to women ages 25 to 34.

### **Facing different problems**

But only as the movement progressed have organizations developed better ways to reach these youngsters, advocates say. That’s because school-age victims grapple with different problems than adults.

At the teen helpline, callers often seek advice not on filing a protective order, but on telling their parents about being hit or arranging safe places at school away from an abusive classmate they had been dating. Others call with questions about Web stalking or being harassed through text messaging.

“I think we realized some time ago that the violence happens earlier than we were admitting,” said Debby Tucker, one of the council’s founders. “But it’s taken a long time to arrange services for young people and figure out effective strategies.”

When Tucker and others formed the organization 30 years ago, Texas had fallen behind other states in trying to change the laws and open shelters for battered women. But in three decades, that has changed.

### **National awareness**

Nearly 11 years ago, the council opened the National Domestic Violence Hotline, which fields close to 18,000 calls a month.

Last year, the leaders of that hotline, together with the Department of Justice, spearheaded a national plan for reducing domestic violence rates by 2017. A big part of that is prevention and reaching youth.

“We were realizing we had to do more education and not just when people got into marriage or were in a situation that was violent,” said Sheryl Cates, chief executive officer for the council and hotline. “We had to start at a younger age talking about what is a healthy relationship.”

Last week marked the third National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week, an outreach effort sanctioned by Congress and publicized by groups and businesses. Starting this year, all Texas school districts must have policies in place for handling dating violence.

The boy who spoke with Avey last week had learned about the helpline from a magnet his sister, a survivor of dating abuse, put on the refrigerator. Avey talked to him for more than an hour about his relationship, advising him on other outlets for his anger before sending him to a Web site that helps teens evaluate their dating behavior. “It’s crazy because sometimes when teens call I will go back to when I was 15,” she said. “(But) there is just so much more than there was four years ago. There are resources and teens are talking about it.”

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### **ARE YOU A VICTIM?**

Does something about your relationship scare you? Take this quiz to see if you might be in trouble. If you answer yes to even one, you may be in an abusive relationship.

**Does your boyfriend/girlfriend:**

- Look at you or act in ways that scare you?
- Act jealous or possessive?
- Put you down or criticize you?
- Try to control where you go, what you wear or what you do?
- Text or IM you excessively?
- Blame you for the hurtful things they say and do?
- Threaten to kill or hurt you or themselves if you leave them?
- Try to stop you from seeing or talking to friends and family?
- Try to force you to have sex before you're ready?
- Hit, slap, push or kick you?

**To get help:**

- [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org)
- 1-866-331-9474
- 1-866-331-8453

*Source: [Loveisrespect.org](http://Loveisrespect.org) , National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline*

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