The national conversation on domestic abuse is ignoring the most vulnerable victims
Abuse is a learned behavior that often starts in teenage years.

By Zerlina Maxwell October 31, 2014
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Janay Rice, left, looks on as her husband, former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice, speaks to the media following the release of security footage showing him punching her. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky, File)

The first time Shenna’s partner hit her, it began the way many domestic violence cases do: with a lovers’ quarrel. But this argument was different. This time, it escalated and turned violent: “He slapped me and slammed me on the bed. He duct taped my mouth, my eyes, my arms, and my legs. I thought I was gonna die. I thought he was going to kill me.” Shenna gave her first-hand account of dating violence on a special segment on NBC’s “Today” show. Host Tamron Hall followed up with a common question: “Why did you go back?”

Shenna response was a common one: “I loved him.”

For healthy adults, it can be difficult to comprehend a connection between love and violence. But for young women — and teenagers, especially — the newness of romantic emotions can leave them especially vulnerable to abuse. That partially explains why girls and women between 16 and 24 years
old experience the highest rate of domestic violence and sexual assault, almost triple the national average. The high-profile cases of Rihanna and Janay Rice, both in their 20s, launched national conversations about intimate-partner abuse. But for both abusers and victims, the problem often starts in teen years.

To cure the nation’s domestic violence epidemic, we must get to the root of the problem: abuse in teenage relationships. Almost 1.5 million high school students are physically abused by a dating partner in a single year. By teaching them about healthy relationships and telling them what abusive dating behavior looks like, we can prevent new domestic violence situations before they start. But right now, intimate-partner abuse in teen relationships is highly underreported and rarely discussed. Data shows that violent behavior typically doesn’t begin in adulthood. Often, acting out violently is a learned behavior witnessed in childhood and first repeated between the ages of 12 to 17. In partnerships, the behavior typically begins with emotional and verbal abuse and with controlling behavior, such as telling one’s partner what to wear or whom he or she can be friends with. From there, the abuse can become violent and even deadly.

ONLY ABOUT 3 PERCENT OF TEENS IN A SURVEY SAID THEY WOULD ALERT AN AUTHORITY FIGURE IF THEY WERE INVOLVED IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP.

Without the right information, teenage girls often fail to recognize the warning signs of an abusive boyfriend, misinterpreting his behavior as a sign of love or commitment. “A lot of young ladies mistake jealousy over someone caring for you,” said Zelene, another domestic abuse survivor, in the “Today” show interview. “It gives you a sense of importance, like ‘I’m important to this person!’ It’s also the main reason why it’s so hard to get out of it because this person brings down the moon and hands it to you on a golden plate, and this same person uses that same love to destroy you.”
In observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October, I joined New York City’s first lady Chirlane McCray touring domestic violence centers and speaking to officials and advocates who work with victims in New York City. The prevalence is startling: One in three women and one in four men have been victims of violence by an intimate partner. More concerning, prosecutors told us that they are seeing an increase in cases in which both the victim and the abuser are under 18 years old. Similar to adult domestic abuse cases, teenagers often avoid police because the victim hasn’t been taught that such violence in a relationship is wrong. When victims don’t contact police, they may leave no record of the violence until the abuser murders the victim.

The key to stemming this trend, officials and advocates told me, is teaching youth at younger ages about healthy relationships, especially boys. “If we send a strong message to men that this behavior is unacceptable, then men will adjust their behavior,” one of the assistant district attorneys told McCray. “But we have to start much younger.” The Bronx Family Justice Center, a resource center in New York City for domestic violence victims, is seeking to do that. It teaches young people that healthy relationships are defined by: mutual respect and support of each other’s goals, decisions and opinions; equal trust, honesty and respect; and a safe space for both partners to express their feelings.

These ideas need to be conveyed not only to victims of intimate-partner abuse, but all youth. Alarmingly, only about 3 percent of teens in a survey of some New York City classrooms said they would alert an authority figure if they were involved in an abusive relationship. That survey was conducted by domestic violence awareness organization Day One. Deputy Director Margarita Guzman said that statistic emphasizes the need for programming that teaches teens how to talk to each other about healthy relationships, “The key is young people educating other young people and creating models of health relationships themselves,” Guzman told me. “The key to shifting
behavior is starting at much younger ages so that by the time we are older we are reinforcing positive messages, instead of trying to introduce them.”

Guzman said that the number of people coming to the center has increased 30 percent in the past year, but it’s especially difficult to get its message to young people. “Our client’s median age is about 35 years old but it’s getting younger and younger as time goes by,” she said. Day One Executive Director Stephanie Nilva said that the Ray Rice story has helped the center get out its message, generating even more discussion than Chris Brown’s 2009 attack on then-girlfriend Rihanna. Because it is such a powerful American cultural institution, the National Football League has managed to put the issue in the spotlight across generations. While the young people who attended their workshops in the wake of the Rihanna incident brought it up in discussions regularly, Nilva said the conversation around Rice’s abuse video has been universal and obsessive. “Most adults couldn’t give a crap about pop stars,” she said. “But football and the NFL, you are talking about the sweet spot of American demographics. There is a huge crossover.”

To stem intimate-partner violence, both adults and teenagers must participate in the conversation. If we don’t teach young people what healthy relationships look and feel like, they will perpetuate negative examples around them. Too often, adults are avoiding uncomfortable conversations with teens about sex and dating. In doing so, we are doing a disservice to ourselves, our children and our society. During my time touring domestic violence centers and speaking to people who work with the victims, everyone — prosecutors, mental health professionals and advocates — reiterated the same message: Intimate-partner violence is a learned behavior that young people can avoid perpetrating only if they get the right messages, early and frequently, about how to interact in healthy relationships.