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GIRLS WHO BEAT BOYS

We all know it's wrong for guys to hit girls but what happens when the roles are reversed? DOLLY uncovers the scary reality of girls who beat their boyfriends.

Imagine feeling so terrified that if you say the wrong thing, speak to another guy or wear something your boyfriend deems inappropriate, he'll start punching into you. What would it be like to constantly feel that you're walking on eggshells around him? While many girls face this scary reality, we're less likely to hear about young men suffering the same abuse from their girlfriends. But the truth is, it does happen. Statistics show that 22 per cent of those abused within relationships last year were males*. And frighteningly, because most guys in abusive relationships are too ashamed or embarrassed to come forward, this statistic stands as a mere estimation, prompting the idea that there are even more male victims out there.

IN THE MEDIA

Domestic violence has been a problem for a long time, but the issue of girls hitting boys garnered widespread attention after MTV aired footage of *Teen Mom* star Amber Portwood, 20, repeatedly hitting and punching her then-fiancé Gary in the face and screaming obscenities at him. The reality star admitted this wasn't her first violent outburst towards Gary. She was caught on camera on a previous occasion trying to choke him. "When I see myself in that position [re-watching the TV episode], it really opens my eyes. I want to stop it because I really don't want to be like that," says Amber. She was charged with domestic violence and temporarily lost custody of her two-year-old daughter Leah.

WHY SO ANGRY?

Clinical psychologist Sally-Anne McCormack says girls like Amber who lash out at their boyfriends do so for a variety of reasons, including:

SHOCK VALUE: "Girls who beat their boyfriends can have the mentality that 'I can get my point across by hitting him because it will scare him and I know he won't hurt me back'," says Sally-Anne. "The girl won't think twice about hitting because she's safe with the knowledge that 'boys can't hit girls!'"

ANGER ISSUES: "Girls hitting into boys can be the result of an adolescent temper tantrum," says Sally-Anne. "A girl sees her boyfriend as a reflection on herself and if he doesn't act the way she thinks he should, she might take her frustration out on him, sometimes to extreme levels."

THE SPOILT FACTOR: "If a girl was the centre of attention in her own family and was given everything she ever wanted by her parents, she'll want her boyfriend to measure up," says Sally-Anne. This type of girl can begin to hit if her boyfriend isn't worshipping her to the degree she expects him to. "If she beats him to submission, in her mind it will teach him to treat her accordingly."

ABUSIVE PAST: Some girls model their own behaviour on how their parents abused them in the past. "It's a possibility they're

emulating behaviour their parents used on them as they were growing up or behaviour their mum used on their dad," says Sally-Anne.

DOMINANCE: Some girls who violently abuse their boyfriends are wanting to show their partners that they're the ones in control. "She's trying to send the message that 'if you don't respect me, I'll beat you,'" says Sally-Anne.

GUYS VS GIRLS

With so many anti-violence against women campaigns and female support networks, guys know it's not okay to hit a girl. But are girls getting the same message drilled into them? "Girls beating boys up isn't advertised as much, nor is it seen as serious a crime," says Sally-Anne. Similarly, news programs and movies rarely convey a female as the aggressor and, Sally-Anne says, its consequences are less spoken about at the family dinner table. "Because it's less common in the media, it's less spoken about among families and the message doesn't come across," says Sally-Anne.

{ 22% OF THOSE ABUSED IN RELATIONSHIPS ARE GUYS.* }

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FOR A BOY

So what does it actually feel like for a guy to suffer physical abuse from his girlfriend? "Guys find it so humiliating and shocking to be beaten up by a girl," says Sally-Anne. "Their self-image takes a thrashing." Cyrus, who was assaulted by his girlfriend, can relate. When his university crush called him to say she'd broken up with her boyfriend, Cyrus saw it as the perfect opportunity to ask her out. But what started as a "blissful" relationship soon turned sour. "She started getting very upset with my clothes," says Cyrus. "She would call me names and get jealous if I went to get pizza with my mates. She even accused me of looking at other girls." But it didn't stop there. "She hit me twice. I grew afraid; I used to worry that while I was asleep she could hit or even kill me."

THE SHAME FACTOR

"Like Cyrus, young men can find themselves trapped in abusive relationships," says Amy Webster, Partners in Prevention coordinator at the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria. She says that while most guys are brought up to be physically expressive through contact sports, such as boxing or football, this expectation makes them seem unlikely to fall victim to a girl's violent outburst. "Due to this masculinity, there's a shame factor," says Amy. "A lot of them don't deal with it for a really long time or they might blame themselves, pretend it's not happening or keep it a secret. This means they feel really isolated from people and they end up living a double life. What's happening inside the relationship is totally different to what everybody else thinks is happening."

HOW TO DEAL

"Things that are really normal in relationships, like jealousy or wanting to see someone all the time, are the kinds of things that can be negotiated without violence," says Amy.

If you find it difficult to control the urge to physically assault your boyfriend, Amy suggests communicating with those around you. "Talk to a trusted adult, welfare worker or school counsellor. They'll be able to help you to manage those really strong, passionate feelings in a more positive way," says Amy. "Leave it for a night and act out the next day when you're feeling a little less impulsive."

If you know of a boy (or a girl) in an abusive relationship, Amy suggests you speak to the victim and ask them what they think will help them, without putting them in an uncomfortable position. If you're aware the violence is severe, contact the police on 000.

For more information on abuse in relationships and to read more of Cyrus's story, head to lovegoodbadugly.com.