



Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence

Response to Dating Violence

By Erin Boguski, Coordinator/Trainer, Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence

Celebrity news has been buzzing about Chris Brown's alleged assault on Rihanna which occurred at the beginning of this month. On the internet, and in the sound bites from other celebrities, the response has ranged from condemning violence against women, to "hoping for the best" for both parties, or even wondering what Rihanna did to "provoke" Chris Brown. Even Harvey Levin, from TMZ, wonders why more people aren't speaking out against violence against women. Certainly this and similar domestic violence incidents in the press strike a cord with teens and young adults throughout the nation and in Maryland. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2001), 16 to 24 year old women experience the highest rate of domestic violence. Pregnant or parenting teens are especially at risk for abuse. Last year in Maryland, there were two teen girls who were killed by their boyfriends, and both deaths occurred in Baltimore City (MNADV, FY 2008). Certainly, the context of one's social environment and community can influence how violence against women is perceived.

Children and teens learn about dating relationships and gender roles through their families, peers, media, community, and values they are taught. In effect, many young people are socialized to believe that forms of dating abuse—including physical violence, verbal abuse, threats, or sexual assault—are acceptable... particularly against women. We often hear how domestic violence is an intergenerational cycle of violence. After the assault, Chris Brown interviews were circulated detailing the domestic violence he witnessed as a child. While, of course, not every child who has witnessed domestic violence becomes an abuser later in life, these early experiences help shape children's expectations about what a relationship is supposed to be and how conflicts should be resolved. Music, media, and celebrities also help shape these values in young people today.

Although the sound bites and internet chatter range from condemning to condoning the actions of Chris Brown, the criminal justice response to arrest him is a step in the right direction towards accountability. As a young person who is obviously conscious of his past, we hope that the legal system, the public, his family, friends, and spiritual community will support and encourage him to change. He has an opportunity to demonstrate to many young men and women who look up to him that the cycle of domestic violence can be broken. While many abusers are "sorry and saddened" (in Brown's words) for their abusive actions towards their partners, a real man will admit that he is wrong, accept responsibility, and will make major cognitive and behavioral changes to match their lip service: Brown has yet to take those steps. Self-reflection and prayer is an insufficient response to assaulting the woman you supposedly love. Many domestic violence and community groups are taking this as an opportunity to speak out against violence against women and to promote healthy relationships. On the national level, resources are available: www.loveisnotabuse.com has lots of resources; the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline is 1-866-331-9474 and live chat is available at www.loveisrespect.org; and there are new interactive materials at www.thatsnotcool.com.

The Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence (MNADV) began a Children and Teens Initiative to address teen dating abuse and healthy relationships in Maryland. MNADV is a statewide coalition working together with local domestic violence programs, criminal justice and law enforcement personnel, legal advocates, health care and social service providers, faith-based groups, educators, businesses, community groups, and concerned individuals to promote a coordinated community response to end domestic violence. On February 27, MNADV is hosting Shaping Future Generations: Round Table on Children and Teens, for professionals and community leaders working in domestic violence or working with children and teens. To join this initiative, email info@mnadv.org or call 301-352-4574.