

POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 13

WORKING TOGETHER TO END TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

Christin D'Ovidio:

Welcome to the Power of Prevention Podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you of people who are working tirelessly for their professions, their families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening. In this case, substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention.

As a young person, it's natural to seek independence and intimacy, but many people face violence when they hit the dating scene. Excessive attention, flattery, rapid commitment might be interpreted as true love at first, and then over time it could feel controlling.

It can be hard for parents and caring adults to talk about the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, especially as relationships take place online or take shape online. In our studio today, we are sitting down with two experts on healthy relationships and teen dating violence prevention, who advise and provide technical support to New Hampshire's Crisis Center educators on school and community-based programming.

We are going to explore the factors that put people at risk, what it takes to form strong and healthy relationships, and we're going to discuss the role of early traumatic experiences and what's being done around the state to help young people, including those in same-sex relationships to navigate dating situations.

So, let me introduce our guests today. We have Joi Smith, and she is a program director at the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. She began this work as an activist through V-Day, that's a global activist movement to end violence against women and girls worldwide. We're also joined by Emily Provencher. Emily is the prevention coordinator at the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. And in this role she leads the coalition's statewide domestic and sexual violence prevention initiatives, and she's responsible for the implementation of the Rape Prevention and Education grant. Welcome, Joy and Emily.

Joi Smith:

Thank you so much. We're so pleased to be here.

Emily Provencher:

Yes, thank you for having us.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I'm excited to have you. Let's take a minute so that we can set the stage and understand what is the work of the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. How are you and the work you're doing connected to these services around the state, where they serve those experiencing any form of violence in relationships or family? And I'll let either one of you take

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that first, please.

Joi Smith:

I'll dive in first. So, the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is the umbrella organization for 12 independent community-based programs. They are crisis centers who provide a broad range of supportive services for anyone who's been impacted by domestic and sexual violence, stalking, and human trafficking. All of our member programs also provide prevention, education, and awareness, and outreach to their local schools and communities around these issues. And our role at the coalition is to provide support and training and technical assistance to our member programs by identifying and sharing best practices, identifying local and national trends, and helping our member programs to implement programming statewide to meet the needs of each of their communities.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I was so impressed by the important work the coalition is doing across the state, including their policy work, which Emily expands on here.

Emily Provencher:

At the coalition, our staff members are working on the local, state, and national levels to influence policy protocols and legislation that might impact victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence. There's also key programs that we house in the coalition, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program for our state. We have an AmeriCorps program. We also have our human trafficking as well as our economic empowerment and housing and economic justice programming.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Thank you. So, there are 12 member organizations. Are they distributed as the public health regions are? Is it similar or are they just in different areas of the state?

Joi Smith:

It's similar to the public health networks, so a lot of them, we look at it as they're divided up by territory throughout the state. So, we have a few programs that have shared catchment areas within counties. So, it's not completely divided by counties, but they're essentially throughout the pocket of the state so that each area has a dedicated crisis center.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Okay. So, now we're jumping a little bit to a question about early childhood trauma. So, this is a concept that people talk a lot about and it helps I think to define it and let our audience understand how it lends into the work that you're doing. So, we now call these adverse childhood experiences or ACEs sometimes. How do these early childhood experiences impact how we form relationships and treat each other in those relationships when we mature?

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Joi Smith:

Yeah, so these adverse childhood experiences really, really impact the way that we experience other relationships, because they're foundational experiences that help shape the way that we see the world around us and whether or not we perceive it to be safe. Children who are exposed to early childhood trauma, they may experience distrust in others, fear of emotional intimacy, which causes them to avoid close relationships in the future. They may also experience fear of abandonment or lack of self-esteem, which can lead them to be over-accommodating in relationships or dependent on others in order to feel loved. It also puts them at a higher risk of being abused by a future partner.

We often hear from survivors that their adult relationships may look very similar to the relationships that they may have had with an abusive parent or family member and that it's a very similar cycle of violence and the abuse often repeating itself into their adulthood.

I mean, essentially if you grow up in a home where there's ongoing emotional or physical violence and it's constantly being modeled for you by the adults in the household as a means to resolve conflict, you may find yourself seeking to react the same way when faced with the conflict in your adult relationships and also in your relationships as an adolescent as well, that's how you move throughout the world. You're seeing behavior that's being modeled for you and that's how you're resolving those issues.

The reaction could be passive and it could cause you to shrink away from the conflict and accommodate others in order to keep the peace. You could be passive-aggressive where instead of openly expressing your feelings, you may minimize your reactions, but continue to punish or undermine your partner in other ways. Your reaction could also be blatantly aggressive and placing all the blame on others, attacking them and making them feel badly for the conflict, and exerting control over them.

We also know that a lot of folks that have experienced childhood trauma are more likely to experience long-term health conditions, mental illness, and substance misuse as well. That's something that we see as co-occurring in a lot of these cases.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Although ACEs can be a major risk factor that make young people vulnerable in their interpersonal relationships, you do not have to have a history of adverse events to find yourself in a relationship that becomes violent. And there are also many positive experiences that can happen in childhood that might minimize the impact of the adverse ones. Emily digs into these risk and protective factors for us.

Emily Provencher:

We know that these occur on individual, relational, community, and societal levels. How it's laid out in the CDC's social ecological model. So, some of those risk factors that can occur across those levels might include exposure to sexually explicit media, a family history of conflict and violence, poverty, some of our social norms that we have. And then within our prevention education, we're looking to combat those things with some protective orders, and with that, protective factors are a key component of all of our prevention education practices. Some

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examples of those include empathy, emotional health, and connectedness. Our prevention programming itself can function as a protective factor and our prevention educators and our prevention work advocates to build stronger protective factors across young people's experiences.

Christin D'Ovidio:

And so it sounds like when you're talking about those protective factors and maybe programs that it's not just for people who might find themselves in a domestic or violent relationship, but those... They could be on either side of it. From what you're saying as protective factors around empathy and respect. Are those programs for everyone? Are they in schools or?

Emily Provencher:

Yeah, they're definitely for everyone, I think. We look at our prevention programming as a key component of healthy childhood development. So, we want to incorporate that for all students, whether they've experienced risk factors or not, whether they've shown concerning behaviors or not. All students need this information and these resources.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Great. It reflects some protective factors around, I would say bullying that I've learned about as well. What services are available or where do young people turn to for guidance and support if they're experiencing this?

Joi Smith:

So, certainly, all of our member program crisis centers offer 24-hour services. So, they have a 24-hour hotline. They offer text and online chat support. All of the crisis centers will also meet people at hospitals, police departments, and they'll help people with obtaining orders of protection at the courts. They also provide emergency shelter, housing, and economic supports. They provide support groups for all different ages. So, not only adult support groups for survivors, but many of them will also offer support groups for teens and they may partner with schools in order to provide those types of services.

They may provide one-on-one support for students who've disclosed within the school system. It really depends on what kind of relationship the crisis centers have with their local schools. And then they offer a lot of other ongoing supportive services. Our member program, crisis Center Prevention educators partner with their local schools to provide age-appropriate prevention programming from kindergarten through 12th grade.

And many of them also provide prevention programming for their local colleges and universities as well. A lot of the messaging that the prevention programming is, is really helping kids identify when they may be in an uncomfortable situation. They're able to identify that there is something that's making them feel uncomfortable and really encouraging them to be able to reach out for support and talking about the different supports that are available to them.

Some of their younger-aged programming really helps them identify a trusted grownup to be

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able to reach out to in order to perhaps disclose that something might be happening and really normalizing that it's okay to talk about these things and that you don't really need to be holding onto a secret.

So, there's a lot of great messaging that's being reinforced in the classroom setting, allowing students to understand that it is okay to talk about these things and it is okay to reach out for support and that being able to identify ways that they can reach out for that support as well.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Learning about the many supports and services available to young adults in New Hampshire also made me curious to hear about the mandatory reporting requirements and laws for children under the age of 18, and what happens after a report is made.

Emily Provencher:

We have mandated reporting laws here in New Hampshire for any of that abuse of any person under the age of 18. And that applies to everyone. So, anyone who suspects that abuse under our state law is required to report that. The Granite State Children's Alliance provides a wonderful training on this. They have sessions specifically for teachers, and teachers are getting a much more robust education around this as well as any other individuals who are working with children.

But they also have online trainings that anyone can view. If folks just want to learn more about their mandated reporting requirement under our law once those reports are made with supportive services available to those students so they can get support through the full process, the family can also get support from a crisis center and from agencies across the state looking to provide these services to children.

And also for folks who native experience this abuse as a child and had it go unreported. We do have a different statute of limitations for these offenses when they occur in childhood. So, someone has until their 40th birthday, no matter whether this abuse occurred when they were 10 or 17 to report the incident. And they can still receive support from an advocate when they're coming forward at that time, because that can be really traumatic and really difficult for them.

Joi Smith:

I'd like to also add that the prevention educators at the crisis centers also provide a lot of great support to teachers and counselors and faculty at the schools around trauma informed response to student disclosures, as well as being able to help guide them a little bit through the mandated reporting process in the moment as well. So, the crisis centers can provide that as an additional layer of support to the schools that they have relationships with.

Christin D'Ovidio:

And what about for, I think you've kind of touched on this too, Emily, about for families. So, say you find one of your older children is in a relationship now you're finding out is not a healthy relationship. A couple of questions there. The young person goes and tells someone else, but

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not you as a parent. How does that... Another person's a young person too, they're not over 18 or 17 or whatever. Maybe they could be another 15-year-old or whatever. What happens in that situation? And then what kind of supports are there for the parents who now have to navigate? What do we do when we just found out that our child was in an abusive relationship?

Emily Provencher:

Our crisis centers have quite a few supports for that. Several of them have parent support groups, so they can have some of that community with one another, but the parents can also talk to the confidential advocates. Child victim is always at the center of that, but parents can call and ask questions about the process, call and process some of what's going on with them as well. And you don't have to be in crisis to call a crisis line.

So, if you're just finding out that your child's experiencing this and you have no idea what's out there to support them, that parent can still call a crisis center and talk to an advocate about what that process is going to look like for their child and what supports are there. If its Title IX report that's happening, if it's a police report that's happening, what that's going to look like, what their child's going to experience so that parent can be a support throughout that process.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I want to ask about a recent law that was passed. One, I'm going to refer to it as a house bill, I think HB 1263 that talked about having schools deliver prescribed studies on health, physical education, wellness, and personal finance literacy in the school setting. Can you walk us through that legislation, how it's being implemented and where does that dovetail into why we're speaking with you today and the work you're doing?

Emily Provencher:

Of course, our public affairs team worked alongside legislators and advocacy groups to provide technical expertise in reviewing the draft legislation, organizing testimony and handouts, and advocating for the state to include sexual violence prevention as a core requirement in the health curriculum in public schools.

We also conducted outreach to legislators to provide education on the importance of this policy and work to raise awareness in communities across the state. So, stakeholders understood the significance of this change. Before this, it was just up to schools to determine if they wanted to provide this education if they wanted to partner with their local crisis center. So, this is going to ensure that students across New Hampshire all get the opportunity to receive this education.

Joi Smith:

On our end, in our programs team at the coalition, we've been working very closely with our member programs in creating guidance for the schools on how to implement sexual violence prevention, who may not already have an established relationship or partnership with the crisis centers or whether or not some of the schools may choose to wish to implement these new requirements on their own. So, we really wanted to provide some guidance with them around what sexual violence prevention looks like and the foundation of this prevention work, but really

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truly encouraging the schools to partner with their local crisis center in order to provide that prevention programming.

Christin D'Ovidio:

That's great. I mean, I know over the past couple years schools have got a lot of things that have been layered onto their plate, and so some of them, as you said, may not be connected with their local crisis center. So, that's great to know that this has been passed into law and that the coordination is there to put best practices into place, I think that's great. So, February is Teen Dating Violence Month. It's to bring awareness to this, because if we don't think it's an extreme situation, then we don't talk about it, right? What are some of the things that are going around in school? What are some of the activities that they have on tap to increase awareness around this issue?

Emily Provencher:

One of the activities that I'm really excited about, because I'm very involved in our planning process, is Granite State Respect Week. So, the coalition and our member programs will be running this as our sixth annual time [inaudible 00:20:29] awareness campaign. So, that'll take place from February 13th to 17th. It's run as like a spirit week-style campaign for students. So, each day has a different name and different activities that schools can facilitate. So, those will include bystander intervention, healthy relationships, understanding their rights under Title IX. We really try to encourage some student leadership in this process. Our theme for respect week this year is, "Lead with respect." So, we'll be adding a contest for students to submit writing, poetry, artwork, music, however they express themselves to showcase how they want to foster the ideas of Respect Week and the ideas of standing strong against teen dating violence in their community.

We really try to support this as a way to build on prevention education that may have already happened earlier in the school year or as a way to prepare students for a visit from the crisis center prevention educators later in the year. Many of our prevention educators will table at schools or will present at schools during this week, but there are a lot more schools than prevention educators in the state. So, we encourage those who might not be able to get educators in during Respect Week to still bring them in at some point during that academic year.

Christin D'Ovidio:

We're always telling adults there's so much power in them having a conversation with young people around substance use. How does a parent or a caring adult start this conversation with a young person around violence in relationships and where should they go to, if not at the Crisis Center? Or maybe that is the best place to go to get some of those resources.

Joi Smith:

The Crisis Center is a great place to go to get some of those resources. A lot of our prevention educators do provide parent education and are able to work with community programs as well as their schools in order to talk about how to have conversations with your kids around these, how to normalize these types of conversations around uncomfortable feelings and healthy

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relationships and being able to create that culture within your home environment. Because again, I think traditionally these have been very taboo subjects, right?

We see in society that these have always traditionally been very difficult things to talk about. And the more you can normalize that within your own home and in your own communities, to be able to say that these are issues that we do want to talk about. We want to be able to make sure that everybody feels healthy and safe at all times. And being able to open up those conversations can be challenging. But absolutely our prevention educators and folks that work in outreach at our member programs, that the crisis centers can really help with that, and that's a big part of their outreach efforts and their education efforts, is helping their communities really normalize talking about these issues.

Christin D'Ovidio:

So, we like to ask our guests at the end of the interview the same question, which is, what's your definition of prevention? Joy, I'm going to ask you first if you don't mind.

Joi Smith:

Sure. It's a pretty daunting question. So, I really believe that prevention has the power to completely eradicate violence. When we prioritize social-emotional learning, it creates a culture of empathy and respect for one another. And it models strong communication and builds really wonderful interpersonal skills, which results in healthier relationships.

Raising awareness around gender-based violence dynamics and providing students with intervention skills through prevention education helps students better identify red flags and inappropriate behaviors in relationships that can eventually help empower them to take action when they may be confronted with these issues in their lives. And it's something that they can carry with them throughout their entire lives in every relationship that they have. So, I really, really, really believe in the power of prevention and I really think that it is truly the answer to ending violence.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Emily, I'm going to ask you the same question.

Emily Provencher:

Mm-hmm. I made that really hard to follow. I think of prevention as a form of empowerment for the folks who are receiving this knowledge and these tools. This is giving them the resources they need to eliminate violence in their communities and to be prepared if they experience this form of violence, to know what to do and where to go, and what is and isn't okay. And it's also really important if someone close to them experiences this kind of violence. I think like Joy said, this prevention is a key to eliminating violence. We're here to work ourselves out of a job if we're doing prevention work. I think that's really important.

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Christin D'Ovidio:

As young people grow and mature. An important developmental task is to gain independence and establish intimacy. However, many young people struggle with having safe and unhealthy relationships. I was so glad to be able to connect with Joy and Emily to highlight this important topic for our audience and equally grateful to the coalition and their 13 member organizations for teaching these important skills to our youth starting in middle school.