

# Program brings domestic violence awareness to forefront

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**D**omestic violence has no boundaries and that includes young people.

In an effort to educate teens about the national issue, the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) has initiated a program called Turning Boys into Men. Coaches of all sports are spending time in the classroom and in the locker room to bring awareness.

"Even if we had just one instance of dating violence in our schools," EPISD superintendent Juan Cabrera said, "that's one instance too many."

National statistics show that one in five teens who have reported to be in a serious relationship say they have been hit, slapped, or pushed by their significant other.

A victim herself as a teenager, Olivia Cruz now volunteers her time to help those who experience domestic violence.

"Domestic violence was a taboo subject when I was younger," she said. "It was happening, but no one talked about it. I was too in love with my partner to leave him even after the abuse. Girls don't realize how toxic a relationship is, which is scary. Domestic violence is something that should never be taken lightly because it affects your life in so many ways. I'm happy to see that the district has decided to increase domestic violence prevention in high schools because the more it is talked about, the more awareness is raised."

Campus coaches have begun to touch on the domestic violence topics such as respect and the effects of social media on relationships.

Last week, district attorney Jaime Esparza, who has partnered up with the Victim Assistance Program, spoke to coaches and administrators about the three main causes for domestic violence—alcohol, jealousy, and money.

"This is not just a problem in teen relationships but in all relationships," head football coach Marcus Graham said. "This topic has become so much more exposed over the last years



Inspired by the subject, junior Mary Ann Marquez and sophomore Jose Molina work to raise awareness about domestic violence in their health class. "We wrote down statistics on our poster about domestic violence between men and women," Marquez said. "This is a touchy subject, and I feel that this was a good way to prevent and bring attention to it in school." Students spent two days working on posters, which are hung around the school.

through social media, which makes it more available to teens. Kids need to learn to respect themselves and respect others the way they want to be respected. If a relationship ever gets to the point where you don't feel safe, the best decision is to walk away and look for help."

Although male and female athletes will go through the program, the males will be asked to sign a pledge promising to take a stand against abusive relationships and denounce violence against women and girls. Coach Connie Vaughan says it's important to note that females aren't the only victims.

"People need to realize it's also the female who can start the abuse in a relationship," she said. "That doesn't mean that it gives the male a reason to 'fight back' but rather get out and seek help."

Dartez Hamlin, a varsity track athlete, said the program is a good idea.

"When kids are young and see domestic violence at home, they grow up thinking that it's okay to beat their significant other," he said. "This is a real issue in teen relationships because if it can happen right now, who knows what they

could do five to 10 years from now."

The district's partnership with the El Paso Center Against Sexual and Family Violence will help to develop a program to help reach as many students in secondary schools as possible.

At our age we are so naive," basketball player Daniela Lopez said. "When a teen's significant other becomes controlling, overprotective, or begin to say hurtful things, they will make excuses for their actions and say that they do what they do because they 'love' them. It's sad to see so many people blinded by their words rather than looking at their actions."

Cabrera said one of the district's priorities is to provide a safe environment to learn. He said students who feel threatened are not fully engaged.

"We want to give our boys and our girls the tools they need to cope and thrive," Cabrera said. "The Coaching Boys into Men program will take the focus of showing boys how to respect girls into the locker room, where we know that boys learn valuable lessons."