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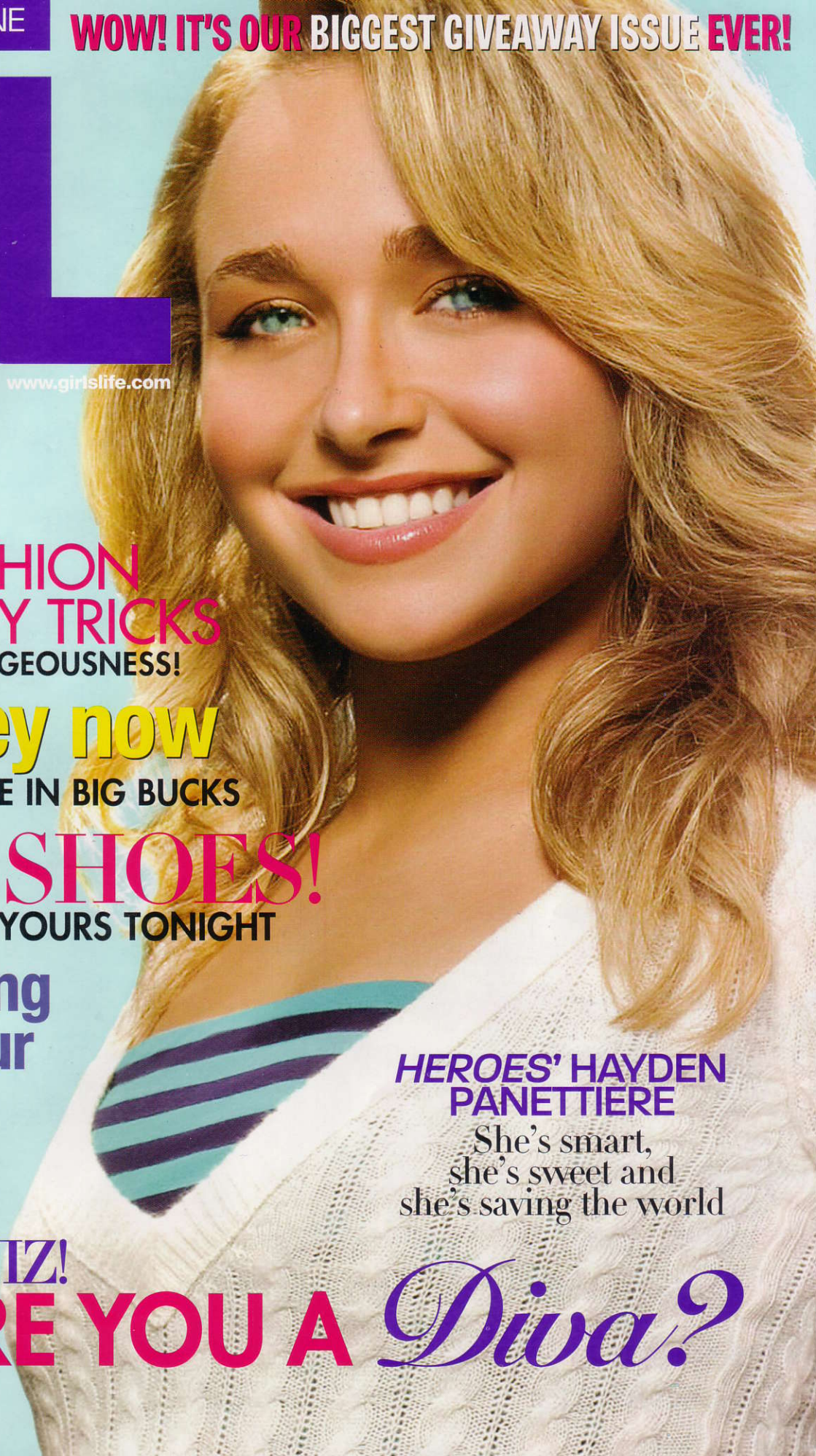
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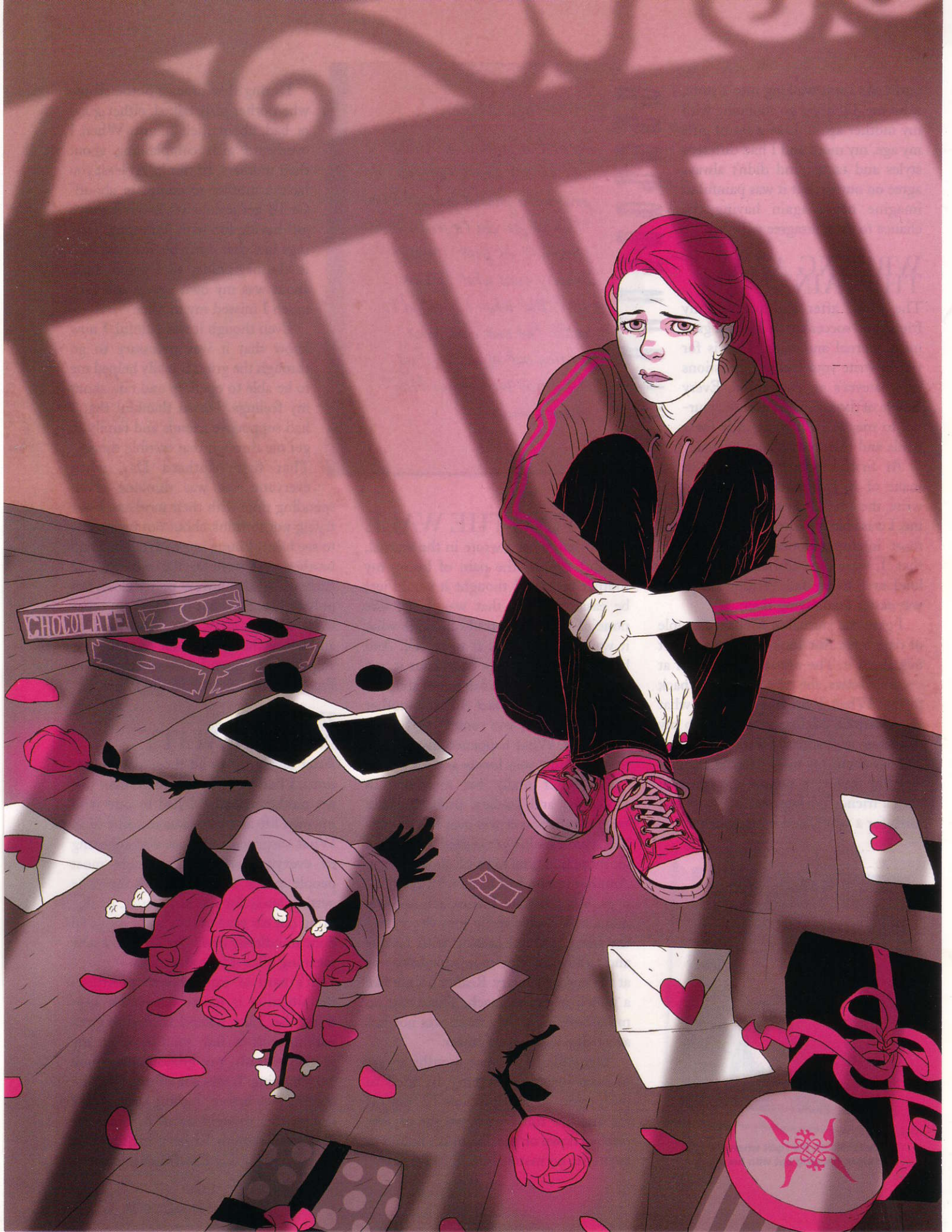
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QUIZ!
ARE YOU A *Diva?*





GL Special Report!

Dangerous Liaisons

by Christina Alex

Dating is supposed to be fun, right? Not if your crush is a control freak. Or worse.

Illustration by Asaf Hanuka

One in five high-school girls has reported being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner, and almost half of girls ages 14 to 17 say they know someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend. Then there are the girls who are not included in these statistics because they are too afraid to speak up. They are the ones who suffer in silence.

At 15, Alexandra* fell hard for the star football player at her new school: "He brought me flowers. He wrote me poems or little notes. We'd go out where I wanted to go. He'd exclude himself from his friends and focus on me."

But after a few weeks, her dreamy romance became a real-life nightmare. "He started telling me what to do. 'I don't think you should wear this,' or, 'Don't hang around that person—she has a reputation.' I didn't know anyone at school, so I thought he knew what to look out for."

But his controlling ways turned into jealous rage when he saw Alex talking to her new guy friends. "A shove here or a push there, and then it would escalate," Alex recalls. "He would throw things, and he tried burning me." She felt ashamed and hid the abuse from her family. "I didn't have anyone to run to," she says.

When a school counselor spotted Alexandra's bruises, she told Alex it was imperative that she break off the relationship before she wound up a statistic, paralyzed...even killed.

Mr. Star Athlete beat Alex so severely for talking to the counselor that she had to be hospitalized. Eight months after meeting him, she finally broke up with him—in the counselor's office with a security guard present. Alexandra, now 17, tells her story because she wants girls to know the warning signs of potentially dangerous dating situations. She doesn't want it to happen to you.

"It couldn't happen to me"

Yeah, Alex thought the same thing: "I didn't even know somebody could do that." But, truth is, it can happen to anyone. "Research shows that it happens across race and class and gender, whether you're gay or straight. It happens in every school district," says Kerry Moles, author of the *Teen Relationship Workbook* and director of Children's Aid Society Family Wellness Program in New York City.

And, yes, some guys are even abused by girls. But girls are more often seriously injured, according to Moles. And if someone is violent once, chances are he'll do it again—and it will probably get progressively worse. So why would a girl go out with a person who hurts her?

Getting sucked in

Abusers are masters at turning on the charm in the early stages of a relationship. That's why many girls think they've found the perfect guy. Laura* met her boyfriend when she was 16. "He was really cute," she tells us. "We hit it off and started dating really fast. When my mom broke her ankle, he would come over and cook for us. He'd give me love letters telling me how much I meant to him and how happy he was with me. He was always there for me. I felt very safe with him." Ironically, Laura was not at all safe with this boy. It wasn't long before she learned he had another side.

"Some describe it as a Jekyll-and-Hyde kind of experience," says Sheryl Cates, chief executive officer of the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline and Texas Council on Family Violence. "They start out being funny, witty and attentive, then change into someone you don't know and use control tactics." These tactics are about gaining power by breaking down a girl's self-esteem.

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12 WARNING SIGNS

- He comes on strong, saying, "I love you," early on and wanting to spend every second he can with you.
- He can't go 10 minutes without IMing, calling or paging you.
- He's way jealous and blows up if you say "hi" to another guy.
- He tells you what to do, what to wear and who to hang with.
- He puts you down, threatens you and calls you names.
- His moods yo-yo from one extreme to the other—so nice one day, completely cruel the next.
- He blames other people for his own mistakes and failures.
- He disses your friends and family.
- He guilt-trips you into feeling responsible for his well-being, and says, "I can't live without you."
- He expects you to jump to it when he wants something and treats you like a possession.
- He pressures you for sex, not caring if it makes you uncomfortable.
- He's mean to pets.

*For reasons of privacy and safety, these girls' names have been changed.

Continued from page 65

Laura, now 19, remembers how her boyfriend isolated her: "I would spend all my time with him and wouldn't hang out with my friends. I was unhappy. He was very controlling, and he put me down. He didn't want me to talk to any guys. He'd go through my phone and delete numbers, or call guys in my phone book and cuss them out. He said he loved me and didn't want to share me."

An abuser often tracks his victim through excessive phone calls. He'll call many times, demanding to know what his girlfriend is doing and who she's with. "We'd get into these really big arguments," Laura continues. "When I wouldn't be with him, he'd accuse me of cheating and lying. He'd get mad and yell a lot. He said he couldn't control his anger. After the arguments, he'd tell me how much he loved and needed me."

The fights became physically violent. "He'd throw me, push me, choke me and hold me down. I'd try to fight back, but he was a lot stronger. I was so afraid of being alone that I couldn't leave him."

Why girls feel stuck

The reasons girls stay with abusive partners are complicated. The most common one? Purported love. "The girl believes this person loves her, and they *have* experienced happy times together," explains Moles. "That person has made her feel good, so she's attached. She has a tremendous amount of faith and hope that the relationship is going to change."

Alexandra says, "It's so hard trying to leave because you know the person who was abusing you is generally good.

Five forms of a buse

Abuse isn't always about physical violence. Listed below are the most common types of abuse. Learn them so you'll know if it's ever happening to you.

Verbal Yes, name-calling can be abusive. If he often insults or uses foul language toward you, you are being abused. This can wear at your self-worth, and it's not OK.

Emotional An abuser might cleverly tailor his tactics to tap into his partner's weak spots. "If you are self-conscious about your weight, he might make comments about how good other people look who have another body type," says Moles. "If you're afraid of spiders, he might rent the movie *Arachnophobia* to play on your fears."

Physical Besides hitting and slapping, this can be pushing, pinching, restraining.

Sexual Is he pressuring or forcing you to do things you don't want to do?

Financial An abuser might pressure his partner to work and give the money to him. Or, he might forbid you to work or go to school. Either way, it's about controlling you.

That's what hurts the most." It's hard for a girl to break away when she has seen her boyfriend's vulnerability and pain.

"It was hard," says Laura. "He kept saying he needed me. His father had abused him, so I wanted to help him. He gave *me* unconditional love. No matter what, he'd come back, even when I tried to break up." Self-blame also keeps some girls from breaking free of their abusers.

"The victim wants to believe her partner loves her and has her best interests at heart, so she makes excuses," says Moles. "When a partner says, 'I'm angry because you're flirting with some guy,' even if she wasn't flirting, she believes she must have done something wrong, and she tries to change to keep her partner happy. The reality is, changing her behavior won't stop the abuse because it's not about what she's doing. It's about

her partner trying to justify the abuse. Even if she *were* flirting, that doesn't give her partner the right to hurt her."

Safety first

If you are being abused or feel you are in a dating situation that could take a turn in that direction, it is important to tell someone you trust. The more people you talk to, the better—a school counselor, peer leader, parent, neighbor, friend's mom. When in immediate danger, call 911 and file a police report, which will help you get an Order of Protection.

Breaking up is hard under any circumstances but is particularly difficult with an abuser. Staying with him absolutely can be life-threatening, but leaving him is tricky so it's crucial to get an adult involved. Call one of the resources listed here so you can make a plan to stay safe. Losing his girlfriend is the abuser's greatest fear. To avoid a breakup, he might threaten to hurt or even kill his girlfriend or her family. "If he knows you love your dog Muffy more than anything in the world, he might threaten your dog," says Moles. Threats of suicide are common, as well, because it is yet another form of manipulation.

The longer you are in such a relationship, the more difficult it is to end. That's why it's important to recognize patterns of abusive behavior *before* a crush turns serious. ❁

Need help?

loveisrespect.org National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline, 1-866-331-9474

dayoneny.org Day One New York, 1-800-214-4150

ncdsv.org National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence

loveisnotabuse.com Liz Claiborne Love Is Not Abuse

uhavetheright.net U Have the Right to a Healthy Relationship

seeitandstopit.org Teen Action Campaign

teenrelationships.org Teen Relationships Website

ncvc.org/ncvc The National Center for Victims of Crime

safeyouth.org National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center