

BAD LEARNING



Teachers who **get romantic with students** are crossing a line—and, in some cases, **committing a crime**. Teen Vogue investigates these illicit couplings.

Artwork by トシ (Toshi).

In her sophomore year of high school, Jessa* got Mr. Burke* as a teacher, and her crush was instantaneous. When he asked her to help him out after class the following year, she jumped at the chance. By the end of her junior year, she suggested they watch a movie he liked together. He agreed, and soon afterward she says they began to engage in make-out sessions all around the city they lived in, including the home Mr. Burke shared with his family. Eventually, Jessa says, the two had sex there. "I felt uncomfortable at first but wanted to be with him, so it didn't matter," she adds. A few weeks later, however, the police showed up at Jessa's house. One of her friends had reported Mr. Burke to the authorities. Jessa denied everything because she didn't want to get him in trouble, and she blamed herself. "I thought I seduced him," she admits. Jessa was 16, and Mr. Burke was more than twice her age.

It took Jessa a long time to view herself as a victim of sexual abuse. The criminal laws on teacher-student relationships differ from state to state, and some prohibit instructors from having sexual contact with students, even those of consenting age. And schools in the United States that receive federal funding are bound by Title IX laws

instructor in Texas. The next year they started hooking up. "I knew the way I was interacting with him was inappropriate, but the way he was interacting with me was more inappropriate—he was the adult," she explains. The inexperienced teen liked the feeling of superiority and social clout she thought their coupling gave her. Lara*, who had a sexual relationship with her 11th-grade English teacher in California, says she convinced herself that she was in control. "I 1 million percent thought of myself as an adult, and he played that up tremendously," she states.

But Jessa, Ashley, and Lara weren't adults when these relationships started, and were left with devastating emotional scars when they ended. Lara struggled with bulimia and continues to deal with suicidal thoughts; Ashley was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder; and Jessa battles depression.

Virginia White, a therapist who works with sexual abuse survivors at Pittsburgh Action Against Rape, points out that in the absence of counseling, victims can have a difficult time recovering. Some feel ashamed or have anxiety about sex or relationships; others may question their judgment of people. It's also common for victims to wrestle with

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that protect students from sexual harassment or assault by educators or anyone else employed by or attending the school. Recent high-profile cases at prestigious institutions such as the Marlborough School in Los Angeles have helped bring attention to educator misconduct, with victims coming forward and demanding that offenders and the schools that employ them be held accountable. Still, some don't know how to report what happened, or whether the incidents qualify as sexual assault, as they might believe they were willing participants.

"We're not necessarily talking about teachers surprising students with violent crimes," notes Kristen Houser, of the National Sexual Violence Resource Center in Pennsylvania. Instead, most of these situations evolve gradually, and the adult ensures that they mimic a normal courtship. It's often not until later that the minor might realize his or her naïveté was exploited. These teachers make a point of selling their access to things teenagers don't necessarily have—a car, money, sexual experience—Houser says, and that can be attractive to many young people. She adds that these incidents aren't limited to heterosexual relationships or female students, as boys can be victims too, their encounters no less damaging than those of girls.

Ashley* was 13 when she met her eighth-grade history

eating disorders and cutting, or they may display a lack of care about hygiene. "Sometimes they try not to be noticed," White explains.

Speaking up isn't easy, but it's worth it, according to Jules Irvin-Rooney, J.D., who is based in Richmond, Virginia, and works to find justice for survivors of abuse. Victims often second-guess themselves, but chances are if something feels bad, it's for a reason. Warning signs from teachers with inappropriate intentions might include excessive flattery and gift giving, confiding about personal matters, setting up alone time in a classroom or car, and isolating a student from friends and family. (An example of this type of grooming can be seen in the film *Palo Alto*, starring Emma Roberts and James Franco.)

Jessa's friend did the right thing by reporting Mr. Burke. If you think someone you know is involved with a teacher, Irvin-Rooney suggests approaching your friend, hearing what he or she has to say, and being honest about your concerns. You can also talk to a trusted parent or teacher on your own. "That's not ratting; it's just saying, 'I don't feel comfortable with this,'" she notes. "One day they'll look back and say, 'I'm really glad I was taken out of that situation.'" —ALYSSA GIACOBBE

*Name has been changed.

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