

RESEARCH



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Teen Dating Violence

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Over the last several decades, dating violence has emerged as a significant public health issue. However, until recently most dating violence research has focused on adult couples or college students, not on adolescents. Evidence suggests that dating violence among high school students is more widespread than previously believed, and may have serious developmental consequences. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to this form of violence since it may interfere with two tasks that are integral to healthy social development: 1) establishing caring, meaningful relationships, and 2) developing interpersonal intimacy. Adolescents may be at even greater risk than adults for physical and psychological harm given their lack of experience, desire for independence, and reliance on support from

National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week is February 6-10th.

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inexperienced peers (Callahan, 2003). These factors limit their ability to respond to violence and access effective intervention. Additionally, individuals who experience dating violence during adolescence may be at increased risk for continued interpersonal violence in adulthood both as victims and/or perpetrators.

Scope of the Problem

Although once narrowly conceptualized as involving only physical force, dating violence is now more broadly recognized as a continuum of abuse which can range from incidents of emotional and verbal abuse to rape and murder (Hickman et al, 2004). It involves a pattern of coercive, manipulative behavior that one partner exerts over the other for the purpose of establishing and maintaining power and control. Efforts to measure the extent of dating violence suggest that as many as one in three teens may experience this problem.

Using a national sample, the Centers for Disease Control (2000) reported that the average prevalence of dating violence for high school and college students is 22% and 32% respectively. Recently, Silverman et al (2002) analyzed 1997 and 1998 data from the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey and estimated that one in five adolescent high school girls experienced dating violence. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study



In recognizing the impact of teen dating violence in their lives, teens throughout New York State designed posters and artwork as entries for the 2005 Teen Dating Violence Media Contest. For more information: www.opdv.state.ny.us



of Adolescent Health collected during the 1994-95 school year, Halpern et al (2001) found that 32% of adolescents in 7-12th grade reported experiencing some kind of violence in dating relationships within the 18 months prior to the interview. Other smaller scale studies have found prevalence rates of dating violence ranging from 9% to 57% (O’Keefe, 2005).

Reasons why prevalence rates vary so significantly have to do with the lack of standardized definitions used to assess dating violence. Some researchers include psychological and emotional abuse in their definition while others are more restrictive and only include physically violent acts. Furthermore, sexual violence is often excluded from definitions. Some studies only record violence that has occurred in a single or recent relationship while others consider violence occurring in multiple relationships across longer periods of time. In addition, the reliability of these data is questionable since most dating violence research relies on self-report measures which are subject to socially desirable responses.

The Role of Gender

Studies demonstrate that non-sexual violence in dating relationships frequently involves the reciprocal use of violence by both males and females. In fact, a consistent but counterintuitive finding is that female adolescents inflict more physical violence than male adolescents, with female perpetration rates ranging from 28% to 33% in contrast to male perpetration rates ranging from 11% to 20% (Foshee, 1996; Malik et al, 1997; O’Keefe, 1997). Although this finding supports the general trend of increased aggression among adolescent girls (e.g., Cummings et al., 2000), the context of the violent incident must be taken into account: girls often inflict harm on others in self defense. Reporting biases also come into play. Whereas males may tend to underreport,

deny or minimize their own aggression, females may over report to accept blame and take greater responsibility for initiating violence (Jackson, 1999; Le Jeune and Follette 1994). When sexual violence is examined, however, dramatic gender differences emerge with females sustaining significantly more sexual victimization than males (Foshee, 1996; Molidor et al, 2000).



Gender also appears to influence the reasons why teenagers engage in dating violence. Although anger is the most frequently cited motive for both male and female adolescents, females more often cite self defense while males cite the desire to control one’s partner (Foshee, 1996; O’Keefe, 1997; Watson, 2001). Gender also may influence the impact of dating violence. Given their often greater size and strength, adolescent males are more likely to exert greater harm on their female victims. Compared to boys, girls are more likely to sustain injuries and require medical treatment as a result of dating violence (Makepeace, 1987). Furthermore, males and females may perceive their victimization differently: females indicate



significantly more emotional hurt and fear (Foshee, 1996; O’Keefe and Treister, 1998). For example, Molidor et al (2000) found the majority of adolescent boys in their sample (56%) were not hurt at all by the worst reported incident of dating violence, however, only 9% of girls

reported being unhurt while nearly half (48%) reported being hurt “a lot.”

Risk Factors for Dating Violence Perpetration and Victimization

Studies suggest that certain early childhood experiences may predispose individuals to violent tendencies in their romantic relationships as adolescents and adults. Adolescents who experienced greater family instability, maltreatment, or social disadvantage tend to date at a younger age and experience dating violence at higher than average rates. Among a sample of 14-16-year old girls receiving child protection services, 90% had begun dating and over 50% experienced sexual and physical violence in a romantic relationship (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999).

Young people who witness domestic violence in their family of origin are at a higher risk of inflicting violence upon later romantic partners, although these findings have been somewhat inconsistent. This association appears to be stronger for males than for females. The witnessing of inter-parental violence plays a less significant role in becoming a victim of dating violence for both genders (O’Keefe, 2005).

The relationship between community violence and dating violence has also been documented. Evidence suggests that exposure to violence in one’s neighborhood is correlated with the perpetration of relationship violence for both genders (Malik, et al.1997; O’Keefe, 1997;). For girls, witnessing community violence is also associated with becoming a victim of aggressive male behavior. Community violence may have a spillover effect and increase individuals’ use of violence in intimate settings, possibly by increasing the acceptance of violence as a legitimate form of expression.

A number of psychological risk factors have been identified. For both males and females, low self-esteem is often a characteristic of adolescents involved in dating violence. Males who have low self-esteem are more likely to initiate dating violence while females with low self esteem are more likely to become victims (O’Keefe, 1997). Depression and suicidal thoughts have also been linked to victimization for males and females (Kreiter et al., 1999). However, it is unclear whether depressive tendencies are a cause or consequence of relationship violence.

Evidence suggests that certain risky behaviors are strongly associated with committing or receiving acts of aggression in an adolescent relationship. These include the use of alcohol and other illegal drugs, as well as risky sexual behavior, such as promiscuity and unsafe practices (O’Keefe, 1997).

Prevention Efforts to Combat Adolescent Dating Violence

A number of programs have been developed to prevent dating violence. Most are school based programs which use a group format and target students in grades 7-12. These programs typically try to change attitudes about violence and gender stereotyping, teach conflict management or problem solving skills, and frequently include activities that increase awareness and dispel myths about relationship violence. Only a few studies have empirically investigated the effectiveness of these prevention programs, several of which have shown promising results – especially in increasing knowledge about dating violence, changing norms, and improving communication skills. Although many of these programs may have some impact on attitudes and beliefs related to partner violence, it is not known whether these changes endure or have an influence on behavior during adolescence and into adulthood.

The prevention of dating violence requires an integrated and comprehensive approach in schools and communities — efforts should include community collaboration, education, prevention programs, as well as treatment for perpetrators and support services for victims. Education programs should be implemented not just for students, but for the entire school community – teachers, staff and parents – all of whom play essential roles in promoting the health and well being of young people.



Photos courtesy of the New York State Center for School Safety and their *Please Stand Up!* CD. Available at www.pleasestandup.org

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