Fact Sheet

DATING VIOLENCE

by Stacey Zapanta

Introduction

Violent behavior that occurs in the context of a dating relationship is not a rare event among adolescents in the United States. In fact, teens are the fastest growing population at risk for dating violence, with estimates that 1 in 8 high school students and 1 in 5 college students will be involved in a violent relationship. Yet, despite these alarming statistics, many teens do not view dating violence as destructive or unhealthy, and some actually believe it can improve a relationship. This perception is worrisome as it may prevent adolescents involved in dating violence from seeking help. Dating violence is not limited to a specific demographic; instead teenagers from all walks of life are vulnerable regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status or sexual orientation. Dating violence can take many forms including psychological, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. In its least severe form, it includes jealousy, possessiveness, verbal put-downs and coercive behavior. In its more extreme forms, dating violence can involve punching, slapping, shoving, pulling hair, threats involving a weapon and rape. While there is limited research on effective strategies for prevention, several programs have shown promise for reducing dating violence in national and local evaluations. Typically, these programs are multidimensional and focus on education and development of effective relationship and conflict resolution skills. 1-3

Scope of the Problem

Adolescent dating violence is a common occurrence with estimates of incidence ranging from 28% to 96%.4 Studies that include emotional and verbal abuse in their definition of dating violence report the highest incidence rates. Studies that limit their definitions to overt physical or sexual violence report somewhat lower rates.

Both male and female adolescents can be victims of dating violence. Forty-five percent of females and forty-three percent of males reported experiencing physical violence in a dating relationship.5 In this instance, while the rates of those reporting experiencing violence in a dating relationship were similar, the nature of the violence experienced was different. Girls were more likely to report more severe forms of violence such as being punched or forced to engage in sexual activity, boys were more likely to report being pinched, slapped, scratched and kicked. In addition, girls reported that their
boyfriends initiated the violence seventy percent of the time, whereas boys reported that their girlfriends initiated the violence only twenty-seven percent of the time.\textsuperscript{5} Girls and boys also had different reactions to violence experienced in dating relationships. For girls, the most common response to the violence was fear. However, boys were more likely to respond that they thought the violence was funny or that it made them angry.\textsuperscript{5}

In the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1 in 5 girls from grades 9-12 reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by a date, with 1 in 10 reporting physical abuse and 1 in 25 reporting sexual violence.\textsuperscript{6} Males also report experiencing sexual violence. Eight to 16\% of college males report being pressured and/or forced to have sexual intercourse with a dating partner.\textsuperscript{7,8} When young people are asked about their experiences with emotional and psychological abuse, 96\% say they have experienced this in a dating relationship.\textsuperscript{9}

In a review of the dating violence literature by Sugarman and Hotaling, 39.3\% of females and 32.9\% of males report being violent in their dating career.\textsuperscript{10} Some studies have found that more females than males report engaging in violent behavior in dating relationships. In one study, 51\% of high-school females reported behaving violently with their romantic partners, in contrast to 20\% of males.\textsuperscript{11} While rates of perpetration for males and females may appear similar, and in some instances even higher for females, males far exceed females in the use of severe violence in dating relationships. Males are two to four times more likely than females to use weapons against a dating partner, and to use physical violence that results in serious injury.\textsuperscript{10,12,13,14}

### Risk Factors

Adolescent dating violence is a complex phenomenon resulting from a combination of individual, familial, and societal factors.

**Individual and Peer Influences**

Low self-esteem, prior antisocial and aggressive behavior, and prior exposure to violence in the home, have all been associated with an increased likelihood for victimization by and perpetration of dating violence by adolescents.\textsuperscript{15,16} Alcohol and substance use are another risk factor for dating violence.\textsuperscript{17,18} In one study, 33\% of the adolescents reported that both partners were drinking at the time of the violent incident, and 25\% reported use of other controlled or illegal substances.\textsuperscript{19} Negative gender identities also increase risk for dating violence. Adolescents who ascribe to stereotyped perceptions of males as dominate and aggressive, and females as submissive and victims are more likely to be involved in violent dating relationships. Finally, peer group norms can be a powerful influence. Young people whose friends are in violent dating relationships, are themselves more likely to be involved as perpetrators or victims of dating violence. This finding that is especially true for females.\textsuperscript{20}

**Family and Community Factors**


Family plays a critical role in influencing adolescent dating behaviors. Parents model behaviors, values and attitudes regarding the management of conflict in intimate relationships. Children, especially males, who are exposed to family violence, are more likely to use aggression in their relationships with peers and romantic partners later in life. Exposure to community violence has also been linked with increased risk for involvement in dating violence.

Societal Factors

Adolescents receive many messages about how males and females should behave, and how intimate relationships should be conducted from the media. Much of the content in movies, videos, song lyrics, comics and television shows are violent, and contain stereotyped and negative images not only of gender roles, but also of different racial and ethnic groups. On television alone, 57% of programming contains violence. Many studies have found a link between depictions of violence and stereotyped gender roles in the media with increased rates of interpersonal aggression.

Promising Strategies

Interventions that define violence as an unacceptable part of dating relationships and provide education and training in effective relationship and conflict management strategies show promise for reducing dating violence among adolescents.

The Southside Teens About Respects (STAR) includes classroom-based education for students in grades 7th - 12th, teacher workshops, parent workshops, peer leadership/activism training, a community-wide public awareness campaign and community-based workshops for out-of-school youth. Preliminary evaluation findings show an increase in youths' knowledge about dating violence and an increase in intention to seek help for violence. Participants also showed a decline in attitudes supportive of dating violence.

The Dating Violence Prevention Program focuses on promoting equity in dating relationships, challenging attitudes toward violence as a means of conflict resolution, improving communications skills, supporting victims of dating violence and seeking help for those involved in violent experiences. In 1998, the OJJDP Annual Report on School Safety identified it as a model program based on evidence of attitude changes among youth about the use of violence in dating relationships and on the program’s focus on developing positive relationship skills in participants.

The Boston's Dating Violence Intervention Project (DVIP) has been recognized as an outstanding program by the Federal Department of Health and Human Services and the National Department of Education. DVIP's programs include assemblies and performances built around the theme of respect, and three-session courses in which former victims and abusers train students to identify abusive behaviors, engage in respectful communication, and manage conflict. Other initiatives include weekly counseling groups for male students who abuse or threaten a female peer, training for school staff and police officers, and a 24-hour hotline and counseling service. The
curriculum has been used in other Massachusetts communities as well as in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.\textsuperscript{34}

The Safe Dates Project targets 8\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} graders and is a combination of school (a ten-session curriculum, a play and a poster contest) and community components (training for service providers, a crisis line and a support group). Initial evaluations of the program show a 25\% reduction in self-reported psychological abuse perpetration, 60\% reduction in sexual violence perpetration and 60\% reduction in violence perpetrated against a current dating partner.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{References}


5. See http://www.itisyourbusiness.com/


33. OJJDP. *Annual report on school safety*, 1998. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. For more information on this program contact: K.D. O'Leary, Department of Psychology, State University of New York; (516) 632-7852, E-mail: doleary@psych1.psy.sunysb.edu


35. Foshee VA, Bauman KE, Arriaga XB, Helms RW, Koch GG, Linder GF. An evaluation of Safe Dates, an adolescent dating violence prevention program. *Am J Public Health*. (1998); 88(1): 45-50. For more information contact: Vangee Foshee, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; 919-966-6616 or 919-966-6353, E-mail: vfoshee@sph.unc.edu

**Internet Resources**
Dating Violence:  http://www.itisyourbusiness.com/

National Network for Family Resiliency:
http://www.nnfr.org/adolescence/fact/adolescence_viol.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fact sheet:
http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/datviol.htm

Dating Violence among Adolescents (Advocates for Youth):
http://www.cyfernet.mes.umn.edu/youth/sexuality.html

Recognize the early warning signs of a violent teen relationship and what parents need to know:  http://ww2.mms.org/pages/violent_teen_relationships.asp

What you need to know about dating violence - a teen's handbook:

2001: A Parent's Guide to Teen Dating Violence: Questions to start the conversation:

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