

## Teen Dating Violence: A Review of Risk Factors and Prevention Efforts

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*“Key risk factors consistently found in the literature to be associated with inflicting dating violence include the following: holding norms accepting or justifying the use of violence in dating relationships (Malik et al., 1997; O’Keefe, 1997); having friends in violent relationships (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004); exposure to violence in one’s family and community violence (Foo & Margolin, 1995, O’Keefe, 1997; Schwartz et al., 1997); alcohol and drug use (O’Keefe et al., 1986; Silverman et al., 2001); and a having a history of aggression (Riggs & O’Leary, 1989, Chase et al., 1998). The one factor that has consistently been associated with being the victim of dating violence, particularly for males, is inflicting dating violence (O’Keefe, 1997).”*

Applied Research papers synthesize and interpret current research on violence against women, offering a review of the literature and implications for policy and practice.

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In the past several decades dating violence has emerged as a significant social and public health problem. Much of the dating violence research, however, has focused on adult couples or college samples and only recently has attention been paid to dating violence among high school students (e.g., Foshee, 1996; James, West, Deters, & Armijo, 2000; Kreiter et al., 1999). Teen dating violence is a significant problem not only because of its alarming prevalence and physical and mental health consequences (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000), but also because it occurs at a life stage when romantic relationships are beginning and interactional patterns are learned that may carry over into adulthood (Werkerle & Wolfe, 1999). Teen dating violence ranges from emotional and verbal abuse to rape and murder and appears to parallel the continuum of adult domestic violence (Sousa, 1999). Adolescents often have difficulty recognizing physical and sexual abuse as such and may perceive controlling and jealous behaviors as signs of love (Levy, 1990). Perhaps due to their need for autonomy and greater reliance on peers, teens involved in dating violence seldom report the violence to a parent or adult; if it is reported, most tell a friend and the incident never reaches an adult who could help (Cohall, 1999).

The focus of the present article is two fold: 1) to provide a critical review of the dating violence literature with respect to potential risk factors for both perpetrators and victims; and 2) to examine the empirical research regarding the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs targeting teen dating violence. Before reviewing the existing literature, two areas are discussed briefly: prevalence rates and the issue of mutual aggression.

### Prevalence Rates

A considerable body of research has been conducted to assess prevalence rates of dating violence. A recent national survey

found that approximately 12% of high school students reported experiencing physical violence in a dating relationship (Center for Disease Control, 2000). However, rates of dating violence in high school samples have been found to be as low as 9% (Roscoe & Callahan, 1985) and as high as 57% (Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, O'Leary, 1994).

The wide range in prevalence rates may be due to several factors. Similar to the research on spousal violence, there appears to be no standard definition of dating violence. Whereas some researchers include psychological and emotional abuse in their definition of dating violence (e.g., intimidation, verbal abuse, and monitoring a partner's whereabouts) (O'Keefe, Brockopp, & Chew, 1986; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001), others use a more restrictive definition that includes only physically violent acts such as slapping, pushing, hitting, kicking, choking, etc. (DeMaris, 1992; Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992). Complicating the matter is that sexual violence is often excluded in the definition of dating violence. Another reason for the variation in prevalence rates is that many studies consider violence in a single or recent relationship and others consider violence occurring in multiple relationships (Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; Stacy, Schandel, Flannery, Conlon, & Milardo, 1994). Confusion regarding rates of violence also arises from the mingling of perpetration and victimization data, that is, any exposure to dating violence either as a perpetrator or as a victim are merely added together (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1990). Some researchers have noted that rates of violence may be inaccurate. For example, since most dating violence research relies on self-report, socially desirable responses or other biases in reporting may affect prevalence rates (Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Males may tend to underreport and deny or minimize their own aggression whereas females may over report to accept blame (Jackson, 1999). Despite the problems in estimating prevalence rates, it is not unlikely that physical aggression occurs in one of three adolescent dating relationships, an alarmingly high rate.

Among high-risk youth, dating violence may be even more commonplace. One study found that among a sample of 14 to 16 year old girls receiving child protection services, over half had experienced sexual and physical violence at the hands of a dating partner (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Another study found that 68% of males and 33% of females attending an alternative school reported being violent against a current or recent dating partner (Chase, Treboux, O'Leary, & Strassberg, 1998).

Although studies are sparse, rates of dating violence among gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) youth are comparable or even higher than those for heterosexual couples (Elze, 2002; Freedner, Freed, Yang, & Austin, 2002). Threats of outing, such as threatening to reveal lesbian or gay identity to family, friends, ex-partners, or employers are particularly high for bisexual adolescents (Freedner et al., 2002).

### Mutual Aggression

Importantly, the dynamics of violent teen dating relationships appear to differ from those of adult abusive relationships. Studies consistently indicate that non-sexual violence in dating relationships involves the reciprocal use of violence by both partners. Several studies in fact have found that girls inflict more physical violence than boys (Foshee, 1996; Gray & Foshee, 1997; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; Roscoe & Callahan, 1985; O'Keefe, 1997). When sexual violence is examined, however, dramatic gender differences emerge with females sustaining significantly more sexual violence than males (Bennett & Fineran, 1998; Foshee, 1996; Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

It is important to note, that there are fundamental problems in asserting gender parity regarding relationship violence. Most obvious is the greater physical harm that can be inflicted by male violence due to males' often-greater size and strength. Compared to boys, girls are more likely to sustain injuries and require medical treatment as a result of

the violence (Makepeace, 1987). Most of the dating violence research has relied on the Conflict Tactic Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979) an instrument that fails to address the meaning, context, or consequences of the violence (Dekeseredy, 1995). For example, much of the dating violence research overlooks whether female use of violence was in self-defense or in response to male physical or sexual violence.

The few studies that have examined the consequences of the violence have found gender differences with females reporting more negative emotional consequences of the violence including experiencing greater fear for their safety (Foshee, 1996). Molidor and Tolman (1998) found that adolescent boys were less likely than girls to perceive incidents of dating violence as physically or psychologically threatening or damaging. O'Keefe and Treister (1998) found that males and females perceive being the victim of dating violence very differently. Whereas female victims indicate "emotionally hurt" and "fear" as the two primary effects for them, males indicate "thought it was funny" and "anger." Gender also appears to influence motives for violence. O'Keefe (1997) reported that whereas anger was cited as the most frequently mentioned motive by both males and females, self-defense was the second most frequently cited motive for girls, but for boys it was the desire to get control over their partner. Also, Felson and Messner (2000) suggest that the control motive is significantly more likely to occur in male-to-female violence than any other gender combination. Given that fear, intimidation, power, and control are at the core of adult battering relationships, it is critical to understand how these dynamics may be played out in adolescent relationships. Taken together, these studies suggest that despite gender parity in reported rates of partner violence among adolescents, one cannot conclude that partner violence is a gender-neutral phenomenon. More research, particularly qualitative studies, are needed to enhance our understanding of adolescent dating violence including the nature of relationship conflicts as well as the meaning, context, intent, and consequences of the violence.

The next section provides a definition of risk factors and a review of empirical studies on high school samples that investigate risk factors for both inflicting and sustaining dating violence.

### **A Literature Review of Risk Factors for Inflicting and Sustaining Dating Violence**

Risk factors for dating violence may be defined as "attributes or characteristics that are associated with an increased probability of [its] reception and/or expression" (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1990 p.1). Although risk factors are thought to differentiate individuals involved in dating violence from those who are not, it is important to note that they are correlates of dating violence and are not necessarily causative factors. Consequently, these variables may have implications for the primary prevention of dating violence, but they may also be symptoms or outcomes that have implications for treatment.

The following review organizes risk factors into several categories: demographic characteristics, prior experiences/exposure to violence, attitudes towards violence, peer influences, personality or intrapersonal factors, other problem behaviors, and relationship factors.

#### ***Demographic Characteristics***

As with intimate partner violence, teen-dating violence appears to occur in a wide range of socio economic strata (SES). Two studies found higher rates of dating violence in low SES groups (Makepeace, 1987; Sigelman, Berry, & Wiles, 1984); however, no consistent pattern has been found. Rates of inflicting physical aggression against a dating partner appear to vary by region with the higher rates found in urban inner city areas compared to rural areas (Bergman, 1992; Makepeace, 1987). In addition, some differences have been found for race/ethnicity, with higher rates of perpetration found among African Americans and lower rates among Asians and Latinos. Caucasians appear to fall in the middle of this continuum (Makepeace, 1987; O'Keefe et al., 1986; O'Keefe, 1997). Other

researchers, however, report no racial differences in rates of dating violence when SES or other variables were statistically controlled (Malik et al., 1997), indicating that factors other than race may account for the differences. Research on ethnic minority groups is limited due to small sample size. Also, samples have been frequently based on college samples where minorities and lower SES families are underrepresented.

With regard to other demographic factors, two studies examined the effects of family structure on dating violence. Malik and colleagues (1997) found that family structure was a correlate of dating violence for girls, whereas O'Keefe et al., (1986) found that family structure was not associated with perpetrating or victimization of dating violence.

### ***Prior Experiences/Exposure to Prior Violence***

An important variable examined repeatedly in the literature on both dating and marital violence is exposure to models of aggression in intimate relationships. Studies hypothesizing a predictable relationship between family of origin violence and inflicting dating violence have produced inconsistent results with some studies indicating that teens, particularly males, who witness interparental violence are at higher risk for inflicting dating violence (DeMaris, 1990; Foo & Margolin, 1995; O'Keefe, 1997), and other studies finding no effect for witnessing interparental violence on the likelihood of inflicting dating violence (Schwartz, O'Leary, & Kendziora, 1997). Compared to its association with inflicting violence, witnessing interparental violence appears to play a less significant role in being the victim of dating violence for both genders. Likewise, the link between experiencing parent-child abuse and dating violence appears to be equivocal with some studies indicating that being hit by parents is associated with later use of dating violence and others finding no association (Malik et al., 1997; O'Keefe, 1997). One study found that family violence variables (witnessing interparental violence and parent-child violence)

were significantly correlated on a bivariate basis with receiving dating violence for both genders, but were not significant in multivariate analyses where more proximal variables (i.e., those closer in time or more related to the context in which the violence occurred) such as relationship or attitudinal factors became more powerful influences (O'Keefe & Treister, 1998). A recent longitudinal study (Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998) found that although corporal punishment by a parent was not associated with later delinquency, it was associated with later teen dating violence, suggesting that corporal punishment specifically "teaches that it is both legitimate and effective to hit those you love" (p. 475).

Exposure to community violence has also been associated with perpetration of dating violence for both genders (Malik et al., 1997); for females, it has been associated with being the recipient of dating violence (O'Keefe & Treister, 1998). Exposure to violence in the community may have a spillover effect and increase one's use of violence in intimate relationships, perhaps by increasing one's acceptance of violence. Also, the more violence in one's community the more likely a female is to become a victim of violence (O'Keefe, 1997).

There has been consistent support in the literature for a positive association between dating violence and aggression against peers (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989). That is, adolescents who show a general tendency towards aggression or who use physical aggression against peers are also more likely to use aggression with a dating partner. Whereas some studies found this association for both males and females, another found that general interpersonal aggression only predicted male use of dating aggression (Chase et al., 1998). Not surprisingly, a strong positive association has been found between prior use of aggression against a dating partner and present dating aggression suggesting that this behavior may persist over time across relationships (Cano, Avery Leaf, Cascardi, & O'Leary, 1998).

***Attitudes Regarding Violence.*** One of the most consistent and strongest factors associated with

inflicting violence against a dating partner is the belief that it is acceptable to use violence (Malik et al., 1997; O'Keefe, 1997; Tontodonato & Crew, 1992). In some studies, this association has been found to be stronger for males (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983). Furthermore, males who initiated violence against their partner were more likely to expect positive consequences whereas non-violent males were more likely to expect violence to dissolve the relationship (Riggs & Caulfield, 1997). Interestingly, several studies found that the relationship between witnessing parental violence and use of dating aggression was mediated by acceptance of dating aggression, but that this was true for males only. In other words, for males, witnessing parental violence is associated with dating violence through its link with acceptance of dating violence norms (O'Keefe, 1997). Similarly, Foshee, Bauman, and Linder (1999) reported that the association between exposure to family violence and perpetrating dating violence was mediated by both acceptance of dating violence as well as an aggressive conflict response style. This relationship held for both males and females.

### ***Peer Influence***

Related to attitudes justifying dating violence, Arriaga and Foshee (2004) explored whether adolescents follow in their friends' footsteps. Findings indicated that having friends in violent relationships was associated with an adolescent's own experience as both a perpetrator and victim of dating violence. In fact, this variable was more influential than the effects of witnessing interparental violence. In their longitudinal analysis (one of the few studies that used a longitudinal design) friend violence statistically predicted later inflicting dating violence for both males and females, but friend violence statistically predicted becoming the victim of dating violence for females only.

Research findings regarding beliefs about traditional sex roles show mixed findings. Theoretically,

patriarchal beliefs and gender socialization processes are thought to groom females for victimization and males for aggression in intimate relationships. A few studies supported the view that females who maintain traditional views regarding women's roles in society were more likely to be victims of dating aggression, while males who adopt traditional beliefs about men's roles are more likely to perpetrate dating violence (Currie, 1983; Sigelman et al., 1984). One study showed unexpected effects, that is, females' use of dating violence was associated with traditional views of women's roles while males' use was associated with less traditional views on men's roles (Bookwala et al., 1992). This finding is particularly difficult to explain and requires further research examining the meaning and intent of the violence.

### ***Personality or Interpersonal Variables***

A number of intrapersonal variables have been correlated with relationship violence. Low self-esteem was found to discriminate between males initiating dating violence and their non-violent controls, but this pattern was not significant for females (O'Keefe, 1997). Similar to domestic violence victims, low self-esteem was found to be associated with being the victim of dating violence for females, but not for males (O'Keefe & Treister, 1998). Depression, more specifically sad and hopeless feelings, and suicidality were found to be associated with victimization for both males and females in a nationally representative sample of high school student (Kreiter et al., 1999; Howard & Wang, 2003a; Howard & Wang, 2003b). Notably, examination of low self-esteem and depression raises the question of causation and whether they are risk factors, consequences, or related to dating violence through a third variable.

Coping styles may be viewed as a psychological resource that assists individuals to cope with conflict. From a social learning theory perspective, skill deficits, such as poor problem solving abilities, difficulty managing anger and communicating feelings would increase the likelihood of resorting to

violence to solve problems. Indeed, among a sample of college freshmen, Bird, Stith, and Schladale (1991) reported that confrontive coping strategies characterized by anger, blaming, and trying to get the partner to change differentiated between partners in violent and non-violent relationships. Respondents in violent dating relationships more often resorted to insults, swearing, or cold and silent withdrawing to motivate the partner to act according to their wishes.

### ***Other Problem Behaviors***

Adolescents who engage in one problem behavior are likely to engage in other problem behavior and this appears to be the case for dating violence. Use of alcohol and drugs has been consistently found to be strongly associated with inflicting and being the recipient of dating violence for both genders (Burcky, Reuterma, & Kopsky, 1988; O'Keefe et al., 1986; O'Keefe, 1997; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). An association between substance use and females experiencing sexual aggression from dating partners has also been noted (Koss & Dinero, 1989). It has been hypothesized that sexist rape myths, suggesting that females who consume substances on a date are "fair game" and are partly responsible for their assault, may increase the risk of sexual victimization by a dating partner (Marx, Van Wie, & Gross, 1996). Clearly, altering sexist beliefs and attitudes that blame the victim need to be a focus of prevention programs.

Other problem behaviors associated with females experiencing dating violence include engaging in risky sexual behaviors (e.g., having multiple sex partners and nonuse of condoms), pregnancy, and unhealthy weight control (Silverman et al., 2001). The same risky sexual behaviors were also found to be associated with males experiencing dating violence. Again these correlational findings need to be more fully understood. Future research is needed to determine the nature of the relationships between experiencing dating violence and these health risk behaviors and whether one form of behavior may trigger another or whether all are part and parcel of a risk lifestyle.

### ***Relationship Variables***

A number of relationship factors have been associated with both inflicting and receiving dating violence. Similar to college samples, greater relationship conflict and a greater number of dating partners was positively associated with inflicting dating violence for both males and females (Bergman, 1992; O'Keefe, 1997). It is likely that arguments or conflicts may set the stage for use of violence among some adolescents. For females, greater relationship conflict and less relationship satisfaction were significantly associated with being the recipient of dating violence (O'Keefe & Treister, 1998). Again, given the cross sectional design of most of the research on dating violence, it is difficult to determine whether greater relationship conflict and less relationship satisfaction are risk factors or consequences of the violence.

### ***Summary and Directions for Future Research***

Dating violence among young adolescents is all too commonplace. The physical and emotional consequences are well documented and it is likely that its occurrence has implications for intimate adult relationships. The methodological limitations such as reliance on cross sectional designs and non-representative sampling will need to be addressed in further studies. The available data indicate that dating violence is multi-determined and that numerous factors interact with one another to affect a particular outcome. However, the mechanisms by which various factors are associated with dating violence or how they may relate to each other are not fully understood. Practitioners tell us that adolescents do not perceive of dating aggression as deleterious to the relationship nor do they view violence as a cause for ending the relationship. Research to enhance our understanding of gender and its importance in victimization and perpetration of interpersonal violence as well as the meaning, context, and consequences of dating violence is needed. Also, there is a paucity of research examining the experiences of dating violence among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents as well as high-risk adolescents, for example

those with known involvement in criminal related activities or with substance abuse. The latter have been particularly neglected in the research literature and given that they are a population at high risk for perpetration and use of violence in adult intimate relationships, this gap is troubling. Also, research identifying resiliency factors that may interrupt the development of aggressive behaviors in dating relationships is needed.

The extant research does provide enough information to guide professionals to design prevention programs and target high-risk individuals. Taken together the research points to several key factors amenable to change that should be targeted to prevent dating violence. Altering norms associated with dating violence, including dispelling myths that underline the acceptance and justification of violence, should be a priority. Having friends in violent dating relationships is predictive of one's own involvement as well as use of violence highlights further the need to alter social norms that condone, justify, and glamorize violence. A primary prevention program should include education regarding the different forms of relationship violence, early warning signs, understanding the dynamics of intimidation, power, and control that underlie relationship violence, and teaching skills for building healthy relationships such as communication and conflict resolution. Further, despite some equivocal findings, exposure to family and community violence, alcohol and drug, a history of aggression appear to be vulnerability factors that should be considered when targeting high risk groups. Importantly, given the possible spillover effects of community violence on intimate partner violence, programs that focus on reducing community violence will likely reduce violence in adolescent dating relationships. The next section provides a discussion of programs and reviews the research evaluating the effectiveness of specific dating violence prevention efforts.

### **Prevention and Intervention Programs**

There are only a handful of studies that have empirically investigated the effectiveness of

programs to prevent teen dating violence. Most are school based and use a group format. Program length varies from less than a day to more than 20 sessions. Whereas a few programs frame the issue of dating violence using a feminist perspective, others use a more skills-based and gender-neutral approach. Most of the prevention programs attempt to target correlates of dating violence such as attitudes about violence and gender stereotyping or teach conflict management or problem solving skills. Activities aimed at increasing awareness and dispelling myths about violence in relationships are often included in the curriculum.

The program *Skills for Violence Free Relationships* (Levy, 1984) is a multi-session curriculum for adolescents, which uses a gendered perspective, i.e., it is an adaptation of programs for battered women and focuses on males as perpetrators and females as victims. Two evaluations of this prevention program have been undertaken (Jones, 1987; Levy 1984), but neither demonstrated change in students' attitudes toward use of violence.

*In Touch with Teens* (Aldridge, Friedman, & Giggans, 1993) is an eight session curriculum covering such topics as roots of violence, power and control, cycle of violence, and building blocks of a good relationships to name a few. An evaluation conducted on this program using a pre/post test design demonstrated expected change on several items pertaining to knowledge regarding healthy relationships and knowledge regarding sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Using a skill-based program focusing on attitude change, skill enhancement, and support for help-seeking; Avery Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, and Cano (1997) implemented a five-session dating violence prevention curriculum Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together (BRIGHT). Health classes in a high school were randomly assigned to receive the prevention program or no intervention. Findings revealed that students in the treatment group showed significant reductions in their attitudes justifying dating violence as well as a significant

increase regarding intention to seek help compared to those in the no treatment group.

Two interventions that did not use a comparison group have also been evaluated. One included an evaluation of a one-day violence prevention program involving community presentations targeting high school students in Canada (Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992). Findings indicated significant increased knowledge regarding dating violence for both males and females. However, there was a backlash effect among some boys' attitudes, that is, at posttest male students reported being more supportive of dating violence norms. Another involved an evaluation of a two or four session intervention (using a didactic and activities format) in a Canadian high school (Lavoie, Vezina, Piche, & Boivin, 1995). Findings indicated significant change in student's attitudes in the desired direction.

One of the largest attempts to evaluate a dating violence prevention program was conducted by Foshee et al. (1998) and included school and community based activities for 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders in a rural county in North Carolina (N = 1886). Fourteen schools were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. The Safe Dates program included school and community activities aimed at changing attitudes about violence and gender stereotyping, conflict management, and providing support for help seeking when violence occurred. Data collected at a short one-month follow-up indicated that the Safe Dates program was effective in preventing psychological, physical, and sexual abuse perpetration against dating partners as well as in changing mediating variables such as attitudes about violence, gender stereotyping, conflict resolution, and awareness of community services for dating violence. Unfortunately, the behavioral effects of the program faded at a one-year follow-up. However, the effects of the program on risk factors such as decreasing pro-violence norms, conflict management skills, and awareness of community services were maintained over the year following the program.

Foshee and her colleagues (Foshee et al., 2004)

recently undertook a four-year post intervention evaluation study. Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year follow-up, a randomly selected half of the adolescents receiving the program also received booster sessions. Findings indicated that adolescents who received the Safe Dates program reported significantly less psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence perpetration and victimization than the control group. The booster, however, did not improve the effectiveness of the program. This study was the first to test the long-term effects of an adolescent dating violence prevention program and one that shows exceptional promise.

In addition to school-based programs, one community-based program designed to help teens at risk for dating violence was evaluated. The Youth Relationship Project (YRP) (Wolfe et al., 2003) is a community-based intervention delivered in small groups over 18 weekly two-hour sessions. The curriculum focuses on education about healthy and abusive relationships, conflict resolution and communication skills, as well as social action activities. The evaluation study included 158 participants, ages 14-16, with histories of child maltreatment. Participants were randomly assigned to the intervention group or a no-treatment control group. Findings indicated that those receiving the intervention had significantly fewer incidents of physical and emotional abuse as well as reduced symptoms of emotional distress compared to the control group.

Data is accumulating indicating that students consider having their first boyfriend or girlfriend sometime between 9 and 12 years of age (Avery-Leaf, et al., 1997) and that between 28% and 45% of students in this age group have experienced some form of sexual harassment by a peer or group of peers. More programs are beginning to target middle and elementary schools, but only a few have reported evaluation results.

For example, Macgowan (1997), using a program developed by Domestic Violence Intervention Services, reported that a five-session prevention



program was successful in changing attitudes about non-physical violence and knowledge about dating violence in a sample of 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Students who received the intervention made significant improvement from pretest to posttest on items related to knowledge about relationship violence and attitudes about nonphysical violence, whereas those who did not showed no changes.

A promising primary prevention program for elementary school children is the Expect Respect School Project (Rosenbluth, 2002), a program that addresses abuse, bullying, and sexual harassment. The program is based on the belief that bullying and sexual harassment are precursors of dating violence. The program has several components including counseling and support groups for students who have experienced abuse or witnessed domestic violence, a bullying prevention program, and content on dating violence, sexual harassment, and healthy relationships. The program was implemented in several public elementary schools in Austin, Texas, and an evaluation was conducted at the end of the first and second years. Findings indicated that compared to students who did not receive the program, those who received the intervention demonstrated an increased knowledge of sexual harassment and awareness of bullying behavior; also, those who received the intervention were significantly more accurate in identifying examples of sexual harassment than students who did not receive the curriculum. At the end of the second year, results indicated that students in the intervention schools were significantly more likely to report bullying than those in the comparison group.

**Summary.** A number of programs targeting physical and verbal abuse in teen dating relationships have been developed that show promising results, particularly in the areas of increasing knowledge about dating violence, changing norms, and improving communication skills. Given that many of these prevention programs have only been short-term interventions, the results are particularly encouraging and demonstrate a potential to impact public health.

Especially encouraging is the fact that one program demonstrated long-term behavioral change, an important achievement that bodes particularly well for future relationships of these youth.

### Policy Implications

It is naïve to think a change in attitudes or behavior can occur unless a long term, integrated, and multi-dimensional approach is launched at all system levels. Prevention of dating violence will require a clear commitment (both financial and otherwise) with the goal of establishing a consistent, coordinated, and integrated approach in every school and community. Dating violence prevention programs need to be incorporated into systems and institutions serving youth including schools, recreational programs, juvenile justice programs, the foster care system, etc. Schools are particularly well positioned to develop a comprehensive response to teen dating violence. Components of a comprehensive school based response should include community collaboration, education, and prevention programs, as well as treatment for perpetrators and support services to victims. For example, an advisory board on teen dating violence could be established in each school district consisting of teachers, parents, students, law enforcement, and community groups to develop specific policies for promoting a positive, safe, and violence free environment. Education and training programs need to be implemented not just for students, but also for the entire school community including teachers, administrators, and staff and most importantly parents, with programs tailored to the needs of each group. A clear policy stating that bullying, sexual harassment, and dating violence will not be tolerated needs to be developed with explicit guidelines addressing consequences for perpetrators of violence, such as disciplinary action and mandated counseling services. Intervention and referral services should be developed that include mandated intervention programs for teen perpetrators, support groups for victims as well as group programs for those considered at high risk of inflicting violence. Clearly, creating an environment that promotes

safe, respectful, and violence free relationships will require the efforts of all, but the potential benefits are enormous.

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## In Brief: Teen Dating Violence: A Review of Risk Factors and Prevention Efforts

Maura O'Keefe

Violence in teen dating relationships is alarmingly commonplace. It occurs in heterosexual and same-sex relationships and cuts across racial/ethnic and socio economic lines. Although there are methodological problems accurately determining prevalence rates, a conservative estimate is that one in three adolescents has experienced physical or sexual violence in a dating relationship (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997). These rates are higher when verbal abuse is included in the definition. Teen dating violence appears to parallel violence in adult relationships in that it exists on a continuum ranging from verbal abuse to rape and murder (Sousa, 1999). Teen victims may be especially vulnerable due to their inexperience in dating relationships, their susceptibility to peer pressure and their reluctance to tell an adult about the abuse (Cohall, 1999). Further, many adolescents have difficulty recognizing physical and sexual abuse as such and may perceive controlling and jealous behaviors as signs of love (Levy, 1990).

This article provides a critical review of the research literature with respect to risk factors for both perpetrators and victims of dating violence and examines the research on the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs. Risk factors have been defined as "attributes or characteristics that are associated with an increased probability of [its] reception and/or expression" (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1990 p. 1). Risk factors are correlates of dating violence and not necessarily causative factors. Thus, they may have implications for prevention program, but they may also be outcomes that have implications for treatment. Key risk factors consistently found in the literature to be associated with inflicting dating violence include the following: holding norms accepting or justifying the use of violence in dating relationships (Malik et al., 1997; O'Keefe, 1997); having friends in violent relationships (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004); exposure to violence in one's family and community violence (Foo & Margolin, 1995, O'Keefe, 1997; Schwartz et al., 1997); alcohol and drug use (O'Keefe et al., 1986; Silverman et al., 2001); and a having a history of aggression (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989, Chase et al., 1998). The one factor that has consistently been associated with being the victim of dating violence, particularly for males, is inflicting dating violence (O'Keefe, 1997).

There is considerable controversy regarding whether violence in teen dating relationships involves mutual aggression and indeed several studies report higher rates of inflicting violence for females (Foshee, 1996; Gray & Foshee, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997). Fundamental problems exist, however, in asserting gender parity regarding relationship violence. Most obvious is the greater physical harm that can be inflicted by male violence due to males' often greater size and strength. Compared to boys, girls are more likely to sustain injuries and require medical treatment as a result of the violence (Makepeace, 1987). Moreover, the emotional consequences of the violence are more harmful for females than for males. Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of adolescent dating violence including the nature of conflicts, as well as the meaning, context, intent, and consequences of the violence and the role of gender.

A number of school based programs focusing on reducing violence in teen dating relationships and promoting healthy respectful relationships show promising results. The majority of these programs have focused on increasing students' awareness and knowledge about dating violence, changing attitudes and norms that condone violence, and building conflict resolution and communication skills. Given that many of these prevention programs have only been short-term interventions, the results are particularly encouraging and demonstrate a potential to impact public health. Especially encouraging is a program demonstrating long-term behavioral change. Clearly the prevention of dating violence requires a commitment (both financial and otherwise) with the goal of establishing a consistent, coordinated, and integrated approach in every school and community.

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