

Teen dating violence: The need for early prevention^{*}

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Summary. *Teen dating violence is a common experience with severe consequences for the psychological and physical health of those affected. The purpose of this paper is to review current empirical studies and reviews about this issue and to evaluate the need of developing programs designed to prevent violence. Given the acceptance of violence in adolescent romantic relationships, preventive interventions should be directed at younger adolescents before negative interpersonal attitudes and behaviours become established, with the aim of reducing the continuity of aggression in future relationships. The majority of prevention programs have shown positive short-term effects in terms of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. Therefore, future research should assess longer-term follow-up to determine the strong effects of the prevention programs in behaviour changes.*

Keywords: *teen dating violence, risk factors, prevention, school-based programs*

Romantic relationships generally start in adolescence and are a hallmark of this period of life (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Adolescent romantic relationships can positively influence personality construction, self-esteem, and social skills development during the transition to adulthood because they help to satisfy two central needs of youth: identity and intimacy (Kamp, Dush, & Amato, 2005). The importance of high-quality romantic relationship development is highlighted by the findings of multiple studies that have consistently demonstrated that a significant proportion of dating

^{**} *Received: 15/03/2012 - Revision: 01/05/2012 - Accepted: 14/05/2012*
Self-declaration of compliance with ethical standards: 04/05/2012

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Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies, XVII, 1, 2012

relationships are characterized by partner violence (Kaestle & Halpern, 2005). Many studies have in fact shown that dating violence often starts in younger couples (Kury, Oberfell-Fuchs, & Woessner, 2004) and such aggression among dating couples usually increases the likelihood of experiencing future relationship violence (Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2010; O'Leary & Slep, 2003). Of particular concern is the extent to which adolescents develop attitudes and beliefs suggesting that violence is normal in close relationships, increasing the likelihood of these patterns being repeated in future relationships (Connolly & Josephson 2007; Sears, Byers, & Price, 2007).

Dating violence victimization among youth is a public health concern and an alarming social problem that has wide-ranging consequences for the physical and psychological well-being of those affected. (Chiodo et al., 2011; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). According to Noonan and Charles (2009), it is important to prevent this kind of abuse before it starts. Given the promising results of preventive interventions with young people regarding the issue of dating aggression (Wolfe et al., 2009; Woodin, & O'Leary, 2010) and especially in comparison with the discouraging results of its treatment (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004), the prevention of violence within intimate relationships is an important contribution to public health (O'Leary & Slep, 2011). Prevention strategies by health care providers are essential in reducing adolescent dating violence (Close, 2005).

This review will examine the problem of teen dating violence, risk factors, consequences, gender differences, and current prevention strategies. The review concludes by identifying promising directions for further prevention interventions.

Definition and Prevalence of Teen Dating Violence

In recent years, there have been numerous attempts to define teen dating violence, but there is no universal consensus on the definition of this construct (Ismail, Berman, and Ward-Griffin, 2007). In our view, a contemporary definition that demonstrates the complexity of the problem is the one proposed by Lavoie, Robitaille and Hébert (2000). The authors define teen dating violence as “any behavior that is prejudicial to the partner’s development or health by compromising his or her physical, psychological, or sexual integrity” (p. 8). As pointed out by Cornelius and Resseguie (2007), to understand and study dating violence, it is important to focus on different forms of violence because physical, psychological, and sexual violence are usually interrelated.

Violence within adolescent dating is a common experience, and, indeed, most teenagers admit to experiencing mutual violence in their dating relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Manganello, 2008). Although estimates of

its prevalence vary widely, multiple studies show that at least a third of adolescent experience some form of dating violence (Kaestle & Halpern, 2005; McDonnell, Ott, and Mitchell, 2010). Moreover, some studies demonstrates that when the prevalence of dating aggression is examined separately for high school and college students, the rates increase slightly from high school students to college students (Sharpe and Taylor, 1999; Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998). Consequently, adolescent groups are an at-risk subsample of the population and form a potentially useful target for early preventive and intervention efforts (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007).

Previous studies of teenagers' use of violence in the context of dating violence indicate that 10 to 48% of adolescents report experiencing physical aggression; 25 to 50% of teenagers report psychological or verbal aggression; and 3 to 10% of youths report having been sexually abused (Jouriles, McDonald, Garrido, Roselfield, and Brown, 2005; Ozer, Tschann, Pasch, and Flores, 2004).

Some research has revealed no gender differences or higher prevalence rates for adolescent females as aggressors of physical and verbal dating violence, but studies have shown that boys tend to commit more acts of sexual aggression than girls (Hokoda, Del Campo, & Ulloa, 2012; Jouriles, McDonald, Mueller, & Grych, 2012). However, equivalent rates of psychological and physical victimization can mask significant differences in severity and impact (Chiodo et al., 2011; Vézina et al., 2011). Indeed, the perpetration of male-to-female physical dating aggression results in greater and more serious injuries compared to female-to-male violence (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). Moreover, girls report more fear, anger, and feeling upset from being victimized by a romantic partner than boys (Sears & Byers, 2010).

Risk Factors for Teen Dating Violence

The literature on the risk factors for teen dating violence generally falls into the categories of family, individual, contextual, and community factors (Manganello, 2008; McDonnell et al., 2010).

Studies have linked dating aggression in adolescent romantic relationships to some family factors, including having witnessed parental violence, experiencing multiple forms of violence from an adult, parental conflict, and punitive parenting practices (Banyard, Cross, & Modecki, 2006; Ismail et al., 2007; Vézina & Hébert, 2007).

With regard to individual factors, several studies have found that attitudes and beliefs toward violence and sex roles are important predictors of teen dating violence. Indeed, some research has found that a high acceptance of violence is associated with recurrent aggression in adolescents' close

relationships (Fredland et al., 2005; Josephson & Proulx, 2008; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, 2008). Moreover, Sears and colleagues (2007) showed that boys who held traditional views of women's roles and were more accepting of the use of violence in relationships and girls who were disposed to the use of physical and psychological violence in dating relationships were more likely to report having perpetrated dating violence. Sexual behaviours have been associated with youths being victimized by romantic partners. Having experienced dating violence occurs more often for adolescents who report having a higher number of sexual partners, teens who were younger at their first sexual experience or adolescents who engaged in risky sexual behaviours (Alleyne, Coleman-Cowger, Crown, Gibbons, & Vines, 2011). Some studies have reported that ongoing alcohol use increased the risk of adolescent dating violence and, moreover, the teens were more likely to experience more severe dating violence (Banyard et al., 2006; Rivera-Rivera, Allen-Leigh, Rodriguez-Ortega, Chávez-Ayala, & Lazcano-Ponce, 2007). Other individual factors that increase the risk of adolescent dating aggression include a higher level of affiliation with deviant peers (Vézina et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2008), depression or suicidal thoughts and lower self-esteem (Lehrer, Buka, Gortmaker, & Shrier, 2006), knowing someone who has been the victim of adolescent dating aggression (Vézina & Hébert, 2007), poor achievement in school (Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003), and lower socioeconomic status (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, & Hannan, 2003).

With regard to contextual factors, some studies have shown that the seriousness of relationships, dissatisfaction with relationships, and jealousy may instigate the perpetration of teen dating violence (Cleveland et al., 2003; Giordano et al., 2010; O'Leary & Slep, 2003; Sears, Byers, Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2006). Adolescents sometimes perceive aggression as a sign of love or commitment, and fail to see it as a reason to terminate a relationship (Kaestle & Halpern, 2005). Moreover, Ackard and colleagues (2003) found that about 50% of youths affirmed staying in relationships because of fear of physical harm if they left the partner.

With regard to community factors, studies have found that the level of community violence is associated with adolescent dating aggression (Vézina & Hébert, 2007). Other research has shown that teenage peers can be more accepting of reports of dating violence than professionals and other adults, which may account, in part, for the reluctance of youths to turn to adults for help (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Weisz, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Black, 2007). As well, adolescents who do not have an attachment to a school and other community institutions may cut off potential support resources for managing relationship issues and the effects of adolescent dating aggression (Banyard et al., 2006).

Outcomes of Teen Dating Violence

Research suggests that the consequences of being a victim of teen dating violence can be severe (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008). The outcomes of interpersonal violence are numerous and include physical and psychological problems as well as social and academic difficulties (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011).

Among adolescents, a history of dating violence has been associated with symptoms of anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, injuries, mental health problems, substance use, and problems with self-esteem and body image (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Buzy et al., 2004; Cleveland et al., 2003; Fincham, Cui, Braithwaite, & Pasley, 2008; Ismail et al., 2007; Jouriles et al., 2005). Moreover, those who experience dating violence may often repeat these patterns of aggression in their future relationships (Williams et al., 2008).

In addition to the above-mentioned consequences, partner violence has been linked with a variety of sexual health issues, including inconsistent condom use, pregnancy, a high number of sexual partners, and sexually-transmitted diseases (Decker, Silverman, & Raj, 2005).

In light of the preceding data on the high prevalence and the serious consequences of teen dating violence, it is important that research addresses these difficult behaviours and their prevention (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007). Given the discouraging results of its treatment (Babcock et al., 2004), it is necessary to increase prevention programs so as to avoid the development of unhealthy adolescent or adult intimate relationships (Wolfe et al., 2009; Woodin & O'Leary, 2010).

Teen Dating Violence Prevention Programs

Dating violence prevention studies have primarily focused on primary prevention for adolescents (Antle et al., 2011; Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997; Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992; Lavoie, Vezina, Piche, & Bolvin, 1995). This type of prevention is usually addressed to middle and high school students, since teenagers are likely just becoming involved in dating relationships (Foshee, Bauman, & Greene, 2000; Foshee et al., 2004; Jaycox et al., 2006; Taylor, Stein, & Burden, 2010). According to some research (Close, 2005; Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Fredland et al., 2005), primary prevention programs should be initiated before adolescents enter into romantic relationships and before dangerous interpersonal habits become established. Indeed, when a teenager's only romantic experience is characterized by an unhealthy or violent relationship, he or she may think it is the norm and do not seek assistance (Gallopín & Leigh, 2009).

Educating adolescents about dating violence does not mean scaring them about dating, but rather giving them information to keep them safe and become aware that they deserve a healthy relationship (Weisz & Black,

2009). Teaching young people how to interact in positive ways provides them with skills to resolve conflicts with nonviolent approaches and directs them toward positive interpersonal behaviours (Close, 2005). Moreover, Wolfe and colleagues (2003) added that it is essential to teach teens the necessary skills to obtaining and maintaining healthy relationships, and to increasing the likelihood of experiencing more stable and positive close relationships as adults.

Wolfe and colleagues (2009) underlined that universal preventive programs focus on the promotion of well-being and the improvement of resilience. Another study (Jaffe et al., 1992) indicated that it is also important to increase knowledge about violence in intimate relationships, focus on sexist attitudes, increase knowledge of warning signs of potential abuse, and provide information regarding community resources available for victims and perpetrators of violent behaviour. Dispelling myths about abuse and giving information about why abuse happens are the main objectives of the program designed by Krajewski, Rybarik, Dosch and Gilmore (1996). Another program (Avery-Leaf et al., 1997) aims to promote equity in dating relationships by emphasizing the deleterious effects of inequality, acknowledging violence as an unacceptable conflict resolution tactic, encouraging constructive communication, and increasing knowledge of resources available for victims of dating violence. The Safe Dates Project, developed by Foshee et al. (2004) focuses on changing beliefs about dating violence, gender stereotypes, and conflict-management skills, while the program of Lavoie et al. (1995) is designed to deal with issues of control in relationships, to understand the individuals' rights in a dating relationship and to become aware of the responsibility for not engaging in violent behaviour.

Because boys and girls both report experiences of dating violence during adolescence, as victims and as perpetrators, it is appropriate to extend intervention to both genders (Taylor et al., 2010; Wolfe et al., 2009). Some researchers have debated over which is the best setting: mixed-gender or single-gender groups. A mixed-gender classroom offers a safe, facilitated environment for students to ask questions and receive accurate information. The school counsellor can encourage boys and girls to discuss the problems together after receiving the same information (Weisz and Black, 2009). Single-sex groups also inadvertently suggest that romantic relationships are always heterosexual and that boys and girls cannot share dating experiences (Noonan & Charles, 2009). According to these authors, if males are educated apart from females they will not hear females' perspectives on dating. The intervention designed by Wolfe et colleagues (2009) instead used a gender-strategic approach to dating violence: different exercises and activities were used for boys and girls to maximize interest and minimize defensiveness from participants.

Dating violence prevention curricula have primarily used didactic approaches to make students familiar with the different ways in which abuse

and violence may be expressed and to have them reflect on their own attitudes and gender role stereotypes (Avery-Leaf et al., 1997; Foshee et al., 1998; Lavoie et al., 1995). Recently, prevention programs have become increasingly active, including more participatory and involving activities (Wolfe et al., 2003). Most of the interventions included some structured curriculum that provided didactic presentations, discussion groups, and other activities aimed at educating and changing attitudes and beliefs about partner violence (Whitaker et al., 2006).

In the Youth Relationship Project (Wolfe et al., 2003), classroom activities included didactic presentations, guest interventions, videos, role-playing, and skill-building and community-based activities, including action planning and community awareness. The curriculum also provided activities that aimed to increase awareness, dispel myths about violence in relationships, and develop conflict management or problem solving skills.

The Safe Dates Project (Foshee et al., 1996) included a theatre production, poster contest, community-based activities, and training for community service providers. Close (2005) underlined the importance of strategies like performances, interactive-games, and art-related projects.

Wolfe and colleagues (2009) added to his program examples of peer and dating conflicts experienced by teens and role-plays designed to increase interpersonal and problem-solving skills. His aim is to have adolescents develop positive strategies for conflict resolution without abuse or violence.

Prevention programs were generally of limited duration; they varied from as brief as a half day to one full day (Jaffe et al., 1992), or 2 1/2 to 5 hours (Lavoie et al., 1995) to much longer sessions. The longest courses were 10 1-hour sessions (Foshee et al., 1998) and 21 lessons of 75 minutes each (Wolfe et al., 2009).

Interventions were carried out mainly by teachers who were sometimes accompanied by community-based professionals, including social workers, lawyers, police officers, and abuse survivors (Wolfe et al., 2009). In some programs, counsellors are also involved (Krajewski et al., 1996).

Findings of Teen Dating Violence Prevention Programs

Ball, Kerig, and Rosenbluth, (2009) have found that receiving dating violence prevention education can facilitate students in helping themselves (as victims or perpetrators), and others around them. Both victims and perpetrators will benefit from the interventions because both parties present reduced self-esteem and a high level of self-blame, anger, hurt, and anxiety (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007).

As detailed in the review written by Shorey et al. (in press), all studies reported that prevention programs have positive short-term effects. Some researchers found that primary prevention programs produced significant

gains in dating knowledge and positive attitudes toward couple violence, and participants reported a significant improvement in communication and conflict resolution skills (Antle et al., 2011; Lavoie et al., 1995; Jaffe et al., 1992; Martsof, Draucker, Bednarz, & Lea, 2011). From the research done by Avery-Leaf and colleagues (1997) emerged encouraging intervention effects regarding the justification of interpersonal violence. Jaycox et al. (2006) found that students participating in the program showed less acceptance of female-against-male violence, more extensive knowledge about legal rights toward intimate partner violence, a greater perception that others would help them, and higher likelihood that they would seek help. Their research also revealed that the program did not reduce the acceptance of male-on-female violence after a provocation, but they discovered short-term changes in the acceptance of female-on-male violence. Foshee's safe dates program (1996) for adolescent dating violence perpetration has demonstrated an ability to moderate aggression across time; adolescents were less accepting of dating violence, perceived more negative consequences from engaging in dating violence, and were more aware of victim and perpetrator services.

While all studies reported that programs increased participants' knowledge and changed attitudes about dating violence immediately following the end of the programs, only four studies carried out follow-up evaluations to examine if the changes were sustained. From the study conducted by Krajewski and coll. (1996), it emerged that differences were not stable 5 months later, instead other studies have shown that some modifications were maintained at the 6-weeks (Foshee et al., 1998), 6-months (Jaffe et al., 1992), and 1-year (Weisz & Black, 2001) follow-ups. Moreover, some research found that the programs had positive effects on the beliefs and attitudes about dating violence, but it entailed no significant behaviour changes at follow-ups (Foshee et al., 1996; Jaycox et al., 2006). From the study conducted by Wolfe et al. (2009), it emerged that physical dating violence had increased from 1.1% when students were 13 to 14 years old than when they were 11, and to 8.5% when students were 16 to 17 years old, but it was significantly higher for students in a control group at follow-up than for those in the intervention group (9.8% vs. 7.4%).

Regarding the gender difference, some research found that prevention programs have similar effects on both girls and boys (Antle et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2010), even if boys' participation in voluntary prevention programs is less likely. Instead, other research underlined the difference between females and males: girls demonstrated a greater awareness of dating violence both before and after the intervention (Lavoie et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 2010) and showed a more positive attitude and more determined behavioural intentions than males (Jaffe et al., 1992). Additionally, Wolfe et al. (2003) had found that only boys obtained undesired results after the intervention, which may suggest that some males reacted defensively at the

program or that some males were already engaged in abusive relationships and the program amplified their negative responses. The authors also discovered that at the 16-months follow-up, intervention effects are stronger for girls than for boys in terms of physical abuse. In another research, Wolfe and colleagues (2009) found that boys in an intervention group were less likely than boys in a control group to engage in dating violence (2.7% vs. 7.1%), while girls had similar rates of physical dating violence in both groups (11.9% vs. 12.0%). In regards to the choice between mixed-gender or single-gender groups, Noonan and Charles (2009) have demonstrated that males experience greater improvements in their attitudes and beliefs about respectful sexual behaviour when they are a part of a mixed group.

Sources of Support: School Counsellors and Peers

Some authors have directed their studies toward the figure of the school counsellor because he or she is often looked upon as a good source of information and support (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Weisz & Black, 2009), even if adolescents have raised concerns about privacy and confidentiality issues (Noonan and Charles, 2009). Adolescents have often expressed that they are unaware that there are adults available to talk to about dating violence and they do not seek out assistance from knowledgeable adults because they are afraid of being blamed for the abuse or of being questioned by adults from whom they seek help (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008; Gallopini & Leigh, 2009). Having the school counsellor address this topic encourages youths to one-on-one communication with the counsellor outside of classroom in a private, safe space, like the counsellor's office (Weisz & Black, 2009). Individuals at the highest risk of behaviours are often the least likely to be engaged in prevention programs (Cornelius, Sullivan, Wyngarden, & Milliken, 2009). The school counsellors should go to the students directly because teens rarely consult their parents or their teachers to speak about dating violence experiences (Black et al., 2008; Noonan and Charles, 2009). Moreover, opening discussions provides the school counsellor the opportunity to learn what students already know or believe about dating violence and to deepen what they do not yet know (Ball et al., 2009).

Some authors have studied the importance of peers' support. Ashley and Foshee (2005) have found that victims and perpetrators identified friends as the first resource for help. Because peers are so often the first to hear about dating violence in a teen's relationship (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Weisz et al., 2007), it is important for youths to know how to help a friend who has been victimized (Weisz & Black, 2009). In addition, Black and colleagues (2008) underlined that the first step to help friends, who have experienced violence in a relationship is by talking with them; it is important to listen and

let them know that you believe them and you are supportive. Since it is easier for someone outside of the relationship to recognize the warning signs, Weisz and coll. (2007) underlined the importance of talking and sharing dating experience with friends.

Conclusions and future directions

Teen dating violence is a serious health issue with wide-ranging consequences for adolescents' physical and psychological well-being. Indeed, research suggests that this type of abuse is one of the most prevalent forms of youth violence (Chiodo et al., 2011). In addition, aggression that occurs in the context of close relationships is associated with a variety of harmful effects in the context of the present relationship, and it predicts future interpersonal risks for unhealthy and dangerous relationships (Giordano et al., 2010). Therefore, reducing dating violence among young adolescents may reduce the incidence of future domestic violence (O'Leary & Slep, 2011).

In view of what has been shown by recent studies that highlight the high prevalence and the severe implications of this issue (McDonnell et al., 2010), future research will need to develop and implement programs designed to prevent teen dating violence. Particularly, preventive interventions should be directed at middle school students (Antle et al., 2011; Jaycox et al. 2006) because primary prevention should be directed at young adolescents before they become involved in dating relationships (Fredland et al., 2005).

The results of some studies show a general acceptance of violence in intimate relationships among adolescents (Gallopini and Leigh, 2009; Williams et al., 2008). These findings reveal the necessity to begin intervention at an early age to avoid the development of these negative attitudes and beliefs that could turn into negative behaviours. Furthermore, there is the need to recognize the problem of teen dating violence at both individual and community levels and to bring changes in community norms about aggression in teenage couples, sending the message that intimate partner violence should not be tolerated.

To date, the majority of prevention programs are usually offered through the school system (Taylor et al., 2010). Most studies reported positive short-term effects (Antle et al., 2011; Shorey et al., in press); indeed, at the end of the programs, significant positive changes in knowledge and attitudes, and behavioural intentions in regards to dating violence emerged (Lavoie et al., 1995; Martsolf et al., 2011). However, it is important to underline that only a few studies carried out a follow-up evaluation, finding lasting effects of the prevention programs (Foshee et al., 1998; Jaffe et al., 1992; Weisz and Black, 2001). In addition, other authors have demonstrated that programs will not likely be effective in changing behaviour (Foshee et al., 1996; Jaycox et al.,

2006). In light of what emerged from the literature, we believe that one of the most important directions for future researchers is to assess longer-term follow-up to determine the possible lasting effects of the prevention efforts. Moreover, given that the majority of studies analyze only self-report intentions that are likely highly influenced by social desirability (Cornelius and Resseguie, 2007; Wolf et al., 2009), future programs should provide more objective measures of effective behaviour changes. In addition, it is important that youths receive more training to modify their behaviours in couple relationship, developing constructive conflict solution behaviours and strategies to cope and manage strong emotions that close relationships may evoke.

As suggested by past research (Ashley and Foshee, 2005; Weisz and Black, 2009), teens typically seek friends for help with dating violence problems, while few adolescents report dating aggression experiences to adults because they often do not know how to access formal help. Future prevention programs should make adolescents aware of the complexity and variety of dating violence so that they know when it is better to seek help from peers or from significant adults, like school counsellors, parents or teachers. Thus, it is important that upcoming interventions pay attention to improving interpersonal communication skills, including negotiation and problem-solving abilities, and teach youths how to ask for and offer help to others.

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