Examining Dating Violence in Adolescent Relationships

and Prevention Program Options for Educators

by

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ABSTRACT

Dating violence is a significant issue affecting today's youth. Dating violence can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, intelligence, and socioeconomic status. This study examines and identifies the different types of dating violence, predictive factors, and risk factors associated with teen dating violence. Research has illuminated a variety of possible risk factors. Thus, risk factors were broken down for further clarification including psychological variables, behavior variables, and demographic variables.

Additionally, a review of prevention programs was conducted. Specifically, two prevention programs stood out and are known for producing positive results. Safe Dates and the Youth Relationship Project have undergone rigorous evaluation and have consistently shown their effectiveness in reducing and preventing adolescent dating violence.

Educators who have a solid grasp of the recent research regarding adolescent dating violence will possess the knowledge, understanding, and tools necessary to serve as an effective and valued resource. Becoming aware of the prevalence of dating violence and knowing which prevention programs are effective and how to implement them are essential steps to successfully address this significant issue.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The teenage years can be an exciting yet tumultuous time filled with self-discovery, testing boundaries, and dealing with newfound independence. Learning how to navigate through this web of changes can be difficult, confusing, and sometimes harmful with devastating consequences. In the midst of adolescence, dating begins, relationships surface, and the overall social piece in a teen's life usually becomes an important driving force. With that said, there is a problem present in today's society relating to dating violence among adolescent relationships.

Currently, there are several studies related to adolescent dating violence, so pinpointing the exact prevalence of dating violence is difficult to accurately capture. However, the Centers for Disease Control now regularly monitors dating violence trends through the Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance System, and more specifically through the Youth Risk Behavior Study. According to a national survey conducted in 2006 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost "1.5 million high school students experience physical abuse in a dating relationship" (cited in Gallopin & Leigh, 2009, p. 17). That number is staggering, yet most statistics are only a conservative estimate, as many abusive and violent acts go unreported.

The reality is that fear of retaliation, ongoing emotional ties, self-blame, and feelings of hopelessness are all possible reasons why victims of abuse choose not to report their cases (Herman, 2009). The 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that almost 1 in 10 teenagers had been victims of dating violence within the previous year (cited in Herman, 2009). The term dating violence can encompass a range of unhealthy behaviors, so the types of dating violence and severity of the incident should be taken into account when researching and reporting dating violence statistics. The National Survey of Adolescents (NSA) conducted in 2005, revealed that "approximately 400,000 adolescents have been victims, at some point in their lives, of serious

dating violence" (cited in Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009, p. 4). Based on the NSA survey, serious dating violence was defined as physical violence (being threatened with a knife or gun or being badly injured or beaten up), sexual violence, or drug/alcohol-facilitated rape (Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009). Serious dating violence is undoubtedly occurring and remains a major issue not only for teens to address, but educators, parents, and communities as well.

Adolescent dating violence is a national health and safety concern, which is acknowledged by its addition to the Healthy People 2000 and 2010 objectives (Howard & Wang, 2003). A targeted effort toward addressing teen dating violence is specifically recognized through the Healthy People objectives. These health objectives are aimed to address "physical partner abuse and assault leading to injury among females as young as 12 years of age" (Howard & Wang, 2003, p. 2). The age at which these health objectives are targeting seems to be consistent with research indicating that dating violence is occurring at younger and younger ages. Students reported that initial episodes of dating violence occur before 15 years of age (Herman, 2009).

According to Champion et al., earlier physical maturation and menarche could be contributing to earlier incidences of dating violence (cited in Herman, 2009). Sears et al. found that among a sample of 7th graders, one third had indicated they had committed acts of aggression—physical, sexual, or psychological—toward a dating partner (cited in Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009). These findings suggest that dating violence is not only a critical issue to address at the high school level, but at the middle school level as well. Recognizing that teen dating violence is a serious issue by its inclusion in the Healthy People 2000 and 2010 objectives creates a foundation for raising national awareness. However, in order for the health objectives

to be effective, the effort to reduce and prevent adolescent dating violence must continue to be a priority addressed in schools and communities nationwide.

Dating violence can be difficult to define as the behaviors and incidences may present in multiple ways. According to Glass et al., dating violence is defined as the "perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried couple within the context of dating or courtship" (cited in Herman, 2009, p. 164). Within the violent relationship, a victim and perpetrator exist. The perpetrator commits an act of violence against the other person, the victim, within the parameters of a dating relationship (Herman, 2009). The balance of power is shifted once an individual has established his or her dominance over the other individual in the relationship and the dominant partner, or the perpetrator, maintains the power and control by using tactics that intimidate and threaten the victim in order to sustain the imbalance of power (Close, 2005).

Dating violence not only includes physical abuse, but sexual abuse and psychological abuse as well. In fact, according to Jouriles, Platt, and McDonald, "psychological violence appears to be much more common than either physical or sexual violence" (2009, p. 4). The devastating effects of physical abuse can be seen on the outside; however, the psychological scars remain deep within the victim. Emotional abuse can have extremely damaging effects on a person's sense of self and personal identity. The common thread that connects the types of dating violence is the establishment of fear within the relationship between the perpetrator and victim (Close, 2005). It is essential not only to understand the types of dating violence and how they present, but it is equally crucial to be knowledgeable of some of the major risk factors and predictive factors of dating violence as well. Awareness of the types of risky behavior that can accompany teen dating violence may help others identify when victimization is occurring. In

addition, knowing what risk factors are associated with dating violence can help aid in providing a comprehensive program to adolescents specifically addressing certain risk behaviors. In general, adolescents may be more at-risk for violence as emerging relationships surface and experimenting with various patterns of adult relationships occurs (Brown, 2007). Additionally, adolescence is a time marked with hormone changes that can result in intense and emotional relationships. All of these elements illuminate the importance of thoroughly understanding the risk factors associated with dating violence, especially when working with adolescents.

Awareness of the current research on dating violence is only part of the battle. Taking steps to implement effective school-based and community-based prevention and intervention programs is critical to address and reduce teen dating violence. Some schools have implemented prevention and intervention strategies—usually incorporated in a health class curriculum; however, many have not been evaluated to determine whether or not they are effective. Prevention programs including Safe Dates and The Youth Relationships Project have undergone rigorous evaluation and produced promising results on their effectiveness. More specifically, results from the Safe Dates program indicated a "reduction in psychological and physical violence perpetration" (Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009, p. 6). The Safe Dates program is school-based while The Youth Relationships Project is community-based. Both approaches have proven to be effective and successful in yielding positive results in reducing teen dating violence.

Getting a glimpse of the prevalence of adolescent dating violence illustrates the severity of the problem. A concentrated effort should be made for both educators and students to learn about the risks and dangers associated with teen dating violence. In addition, school-based programs proven to be successful should be considered in schools to directly address this ever-present issue.

Statement of the Problem

Statistics clearly shed light on the number of adolescents who are currently experiencing or have experienced some type of dating violence. Teen dating violence is on the rise and a recent report pointed to the current economic crisis as a contributing factor (Children and Youth Funding Report, 2009). Whether teen dating violence is glamorized through the media or influenced through modeling and social learning, the reality is that it happens and the consequences can be long-lasting and absolutely devastating. Increased awareness and education surrounding teen dating violence needs to be established in the schools, so students can learn the risks, red flags, and dangers of this type of abuse.

Initiatives to help facilitate student awareness would include implementing effective school-based prevention and intervention programs. It is an important responsibility of educators to promote the safety of all students. Teen dating violence is a real problem affecting students in every walk of life, whether they are in a rural, urban, or inner-city school. Teen dating violence does not discriminate toward ethnicity, intelligence, or socioeconomic status. Therefore, understanding the complexities of this problem and moving forward to address this issue is imperative to generate change and promote safety for all students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the types of dating violence and the risk factors associated with teen dating violence. In addition, identifying effective school-based and community-based programs that focus on prevention and intervention strategies remains an important piece to this study as well. Research will be conducted spring 2010 through a comprehensive review of the current literature.

Research Questions

Four research questions will be addressed throughout the study:

1. What are the types of dating violence?

2. What are the predictive factors associated with teen dating violence?

3. What are the risks factors associated with teen dating violence?

4. Which school-based and community-based programs are effective in reducing and preventing teen dating violence?

Definition of Terms

In an effort to provide clarity and better understanding, the following terms are defined:

Dating violence: "A constellation of several abusive and violent behaviors, including homicide, physical and sexual assault, theft and property damage, threats and harassment, kidnapping, stalking, economic deprivation, animal cruelty, intimidation, and psychological abuse" (Theriot, 2008, p. 224).

Indirect aggression: Any form of aggression that occurs "behind the scenes" such as spreading rumors, exclusion, telling cruel stories, using sarcasm, or making damaging comments.

Prevention programs: Data based curriculum that is proactive in addressing the issue of dating violence for school age students.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

For the purpose of the study, certain assumptions were made. In researching teen dating violence, it is assumed that the data collected were not only pertinent and credible, but an accurate representation of current research in the field. It is assumed that dating violence is not only prevalent among teenagers, but potentially on the rise as well.

It is also assumed that an understanding of the risks associated with teen dating violence will increase awareness and education, thus reducing future teen dating violence incidents.

Limitations to the study are also acknowledged. Research specifically related to teen dating violence is relatively new, and therefore the researchable information was somewhat limited. Although there is literature pertaining to using technology to stalk, harass or threaten individuals in dating relationships, the focus of this study in not on technology use in dating relationships, but on the physical relationships and preventative programs to reduce the amount of dating violence. Due to limited time and resources, some research may have been overlooked. Also, the research on prevention and intervention programs was relatively scarce.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of current research focusing on adolescent

dating violence. In-depth research was conducted on topics including types of dating violence,

predictors of dating violence, risk factors of dating violence, and effective school-based and

community-based prevention programs.

Types of Dating Violence

Unhealthy and violent relationships can present in many ways. Although prior research

on dating violence has focused more on physical violence, there are unfortunately more aspects

to examine. Dating violence can be conceptualized as "a constellation of several abusive and

violent behaviors, including homicide, physical and sexual assault. . .threats and harassment,

kidnapping. . .and psychological abuse" (Theriot, 2008, p. 224). Therefore, dating violence may

be in the form of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or psychological abuse.

Physical violence is characterized as "being punched, kicked, choked, pinched, slapped;

having hair pulled; and being threatened with a weapon" (Theriot, 2008, p. 225). A national

survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that

prevalence rates of dating violence ranged from 6.9% to 18.1% according to state surveys

(2002). An additional finding from the survey revealed that "9.8% of female high school

students and about 9.1% of male high school students said they had been hit, slapped, or

physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year" (CDC, 2002, p. 7).

Psychological abuse is characterized by actions such as sarcasm and making derogatory

comments (Theriot, 2008). In addition, psychological abuse may include "emotional

withholding, insults and name calling, being treated like an inferior person, being cursed at,

being ignored, and yelling" (Theriot, 2008, p. 227). Verbal abuse and emotional abuse are closely linked with psychological abuse and can include many of the same behaviors. Verbal and emotional abuse is characterized by using words and gestures with the intention to degrade, humiliate, and threaten an individual (Close, 2005). Psychological abuse is a common form of dating violence as the verbal attacks can easily be committed and concealed on school grounds compared to more physical acts of aggression. Adolescent couples have numerous opportunities to interact with one another throughout the school day, which can facilitate many occasions for verbal or emotional abuse to occur (Theriot, 2008).

Recognizing psychological abuse in adolescent relationships may be difficult, as there are no visible signs indicating that abuse is occurring. Rather, the extremely damaging effects of psychological abuse occur inside, continuously chipping away at one's self-esteem and gradually breaking down the spirit and soul. A study by Theriot found a high prevalence of psychological abuse exists in adolescent dating relationships (2008). Additionally, O'Leary and Slep reported that psychological abuse can predict subsequent physical aggression (cited in Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009). Therefore, an even greater importance exists to identify psychological abuse in adolescent relationships as it may perpetuate into other forms of dating violence.

Sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual activity are common forms of abuse that occur in adolescent relationships. These types of abuse vary, but can include sexually explicit jokes or comments, being spied on while dressing or changing, verbal pressure, using deceit to gain sexual activity, and unsolicited acts of kissing, hugging, and sex (Theriot, 2008). Based on the CDC Youth Behavior Surveillance survey, it was found that 7.7% of students, nationwide, had experienced forced sexual intercourse (2002).

These three types of dating violence are often the main ones discussed; however, another form of violence—indirect aggression—can occur as well. Indirect aggression is also known as relational or social aggression. This type of violence is indicative of spreading rumors or telling cruel stories about a dating partner and according to Wolfe, Scott, and Reitzel-Jaffe, may be differentiated from the otherwise more obvious forms of psychological or emotional abuse (cited in Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009).

Since dating violence can occur in many ways and can include a wide range of behaviors, it is essential to be knowledgeable and aware of the defining characteristics for each type of violence. Understanding the different types of dating violence and being aware of the common warning signs associated with the different types can help make the prevention and intervention strategies more effective.

When examining the different types of dating violence, it is important to consider if and how gender plays a role. Based on a metaanalysis conducted by Wolfe et al., it was found that adolescents, regardless of gender, are involved in dating violence, with either males or females in roles as the perpetrator or victim (2003). An additional CDC report from 2008 concurs with this research as both girls and boys reported being involved in dating violence (cited in Herman, 2009). Although the prevalence of dating violence may be occurring relatively equal for both genders, the type of dating violence perpetrated is vastly different. More specifically, according to Foster, Hagan, and Brooks-Gunn, "adolescent females are more vulnerable to violent sexual abuse from dating partners than males" (cited in Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007, p. 312). Additionally, Sears et al., found that dating violence perpetrated by adolescent females will more likely consist of minor physical and psychological abuse whereas acts perpetrated by adolescent males will more likely consist of severe physical and sexual abuse (cited in Herman, 2009).

O'Keefe indicated that abuse committed by adolescent females tend to be minor to moderate abusive acts, which include scratching, slapping, and throwing objects (cited in Herman, 2009). Research by Jouriles, Platt, and McDonald (2009) indicated that females are more likely to experience fear and hurt than males. Additionally, O'Keefe found differences in the actual reporting of abuse with females being more apt to report physical injuries and more likely to experience persistent psychological distress after victimization (Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009).

Predictors of Dating Violence

Although it is difficult to clearly examine all of the components that may contribute to dating violence, it is helpful to investigate some of the commonalities that may exist. Research has highlighted certain predictive factors that may be associated with dating violence occurring in the adolescent and adult dating relationships. One of the major predictors of dating violence is the experience of child maltreatment. Youth who experience maltreatment are not automatically on the track to experience dating violence; however, young people who have experienced forms of maltreatment are at a greater risk for being involved in adult domestic violence (Wolfe et al., 2004). Certain developmental processes are impacted by maltreatment, which can have an effect on an individual's ability to form healthy relationships (Wolfe et al., 2004). According to Coid and colleagues, youth with histories of maltreatment have more than a 3.5 times greater risk to be involved in adult domestic violence (cited in Wolfe et al., 2004). Therefore, not only are maltreated youth at a greater risk for dating violence, but adult domestic violence as well. More specifically, a metaanalysis conducted by Wolfe et al. found that "youths with maltreatment backgrounds report more hostility, lower problem-solving self-efficacy, and more aggression with peers and dating partners than do nonmaltreated youths" (2003, p. 280).

Wolfe et al. also indicated that adolescents with histories of maltreatment may have more generalized attitudes toward typical dating violence norms such as domineering and power and control behaviors (2003). Therefore, taking into consideration the attitudes developed toward violence, maltreated youth are at a greater risk for both perpetration and victimization of dating violence (Wolfe et al., 2003).

Further examining the role of child maltreatment, it was found that children who have experienced maltreatment can have ongoing consequences that may present in the form of trauma symptoms. Elevated trauma symptoms have consistently been found among victims of physical abuse and sexual abuse as well as those who have witnessed parental violence. A recent study conducted in 2004 investigated the connection between child maltreatment and the emergence of dating violence in adolescent relationships. The study explored three risk constructs including "trauma symptoms, attitudes justifying dating violence, and empathy and self-efficacy in dating relationships" (Wolfe et al., 2004, p. 406). The study included 1,317 participants from ten different high schools, which encompassed urban, semirural, and rural communities. Participants were between the ages of 14 and 19 years old. Questionnaires were administered to participants twice—both initially and at a follow-up one year later.

Results from the study indicated that based on the initial assessment, "maltreatment scores correlated with all three mediator constructs for girls and boys (with the exception of empathy for boys)" in addition to being correlated with reports of dating violence (Wolfe, et al., 2004, p. 411). Results from the initial questionnaire—specific to males—revealed a significant correlation existed between a history of child maltreatment and dating violence, attitudes justifying dating violence, and trauma symptoms. One year later, the results from males indicated a significant relationship was maintained between trauma symptoms and attitudes

toward violence. Results from the initial questionnaire—specific to females—revealed a strong relationship existed between a history of child maltreatment and trauma symptoms. The first year results also indicated that a history of child maltreatment was less strongly related to dating violence, attitudes justifying dating violence, and relationship empathy and self-efficacy. The follow-up results one year later found that trauma symptoms were consistently related to dating violence (Wolfe et al., 2004). Trauma symptoms were the only construct that predicted change in dating violence from the first year to the second year of the study. The results from the study indicated the role of trauma symptoms was an influential factor in determining whether or not dating violence occurred and was reported (Wolfe et al., 2004).

Additional research has been conducted identifying possible predicting factors of dating violence. Besides a history of child maltreatment and the possible role of trauma symptoms, another element that may make individuals more at-risk for dating violence is the presence of family violence. Research has suggested that previous exposure to violence occurring both within the family and outside of the family was linked with dating violence (Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009).

According to Riggs and O'Leary, "aggressive behaviors are set into motion by situational variables such as a history of personal exposure to violence" (cited in Close, 2005, p. 4). Research has also indicated that families who rely on violence to resolve conflicts where patterns of abuse are present may be associated with dating violence. In addition, other variables such as low levels of parental control and poor-parent childhood attachment may also be associated with dating violence (Herman, 2009).

Risk Factors

Understanding what types of risk factors are associated with adolescent dating violence is an essential component to creating prevention programs that are effective in identifying certain behaviors. There are many risk factors that can contribute to dating violence including demographic, psychological, and behavior variables. In addition, being aware of certain risk factors can help identify target groups that might benefit from a concentrated effort of additional education and awareness focused on teaching about healthy verses unhealthy relationships.

Psychological Variables

One of the major risk factors identified as being associated with dating violence was negative self-esteem. Research has shown that individuals who were victims of dating violence reported having lower self-esteem compared to individuals who were not victims of dating violence who reported having higher self-esteem (Rosen & Bezold, 1996).

In addition to negative self-esteem, a study conducted by Howard and Wang (2003) investigated other potential risk factors that were associated with adolescent females who became victims of teen dating violence. The 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey data were used for this study, which included 7,824 U.S. females between 9th and 12th grade. Independent variables included four elements: violence, suicide, substance use, and sexual risk behavior. The dependent variable was whether or not a participant had experienced dating violence over the past 12 months. Based on the results, it was found that almost 1 in 10 female adolescents reported they had experienced dating violence from their partner within the last 12 months. More specifically, it was found that participants who reported higher rates of emotional distress and suicidal thoughts were more likely to report dating violence (Howard & Wang, 2003).

Females who had experienced dating violence were more likely to report feelings of sadness and hopelessness in addition to considering and attempting suicide. Adolescent females who reported enduring at least one episode of experiencing sad and hopeless feelings for at least two consecutive weeks were 3.62 times as likely to report dating violence victimization (Howard & Wang, 2003). These findings shed light on how psychological factors such as emotional distress and sad and hopeless feelings can be impactful to the prevalence of dating violence.

Behavior Variables

Examining behavior variables, Howard and Wang's study also investigated how other factors such as drug use, engaging in violent activities, and engaging in risky sexual behavior related to dating violence. Based on the results from the study, a risk profile emerged of adolescent females who were seen as being at-risk for dating violence victimization (Howard & Wang, 2003). Howard and Wang (2003) found that females who reported involvement in other violent behaviors were more likely to report being victims of dating violence and being involved in physical fights increased the risk for dating violence to be reported (Howard & Wang, 2003).

Examining substance abuse, Howard and Wang (2003) found that females who reported using a variety of drugs the previous month were associated with an increased report of dating violence. More specifically, drug use included cigarette smoking, binge drinking, and the use of cocaine or inhalants—all of which were associated with an increased likelihood of dating violence (Howard & Wang, 2003).

Howard and Wang (2003) also examined dating violence and its relationship with sexual behavior. Based on the results, it was found that adolescents who engaged in risky sexual behavior, such as not using a condom during their previous sexual encounter, were at a significantly higher risk of experiencing dating violence. The results of this study created a

profile for at-risk adolescent females, in which several variables were found to be significantly correlated with adolescent dating violence. Variables included experiencing a recent and prolonged depressive episode, regular binge drinking, using cocaine or inhalants, having multiple sex partners, and not using condoms during previous sexual encounters (Howard & Wang, 2003).

A similar study by Howard, Wang, and Yan (2007) investigated the same four variables (violence, suicide, substance use, and sexual risk behavior) as the 2003 study by Howard and Wang, and again examined their relation to adolescent physical dating violence. This particular study used more current data from the 2005 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Consistent with previous findings, adolescent females who reported physical dating violence were more likely to also report "emotional distress, violence-related behaviors, substance use, and engagement in sexually risky behavior" (Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007, p. 317). Data from the 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey compared to data from the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed an increase in dating violence prevalence from 9.23% to 10.3% (Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007). Clearly, a risk profile emerges for at-risk adolescent females, which includes psychological and behavior variables. However, in addition to adolescents engaging in these identified risk behaviors, adolescents who have antisocial friends are also at an increased risk for victimization (Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009).

A study by Bergman (1992) investigated how variables such as number of dating partners, grade point average, and dating frequency correlated with dating violence. The results indicated that the number of dating partners a participant reported was positively correlated with reports of dating violence. More specifically, higher numbers of dating partners reported positively correlated with reports of dating violence, while lower numbers of dating partners

negatively correlated with reports of dating violence. The next best indicator was grade point average (GPA). A negative relationship was found between GPA and dating violence, meaning that lower GPAs correlated with higher reports of dating violence while higher GPAs correlated with fewer reports of dating violence. Lastly, the variable of dating frequency had a positive correlation to dating violence, meaning that as dating frequency increased, reports of dating violence increased as well (Bergman, 1992).

The study by Bergman provided insight to creating a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to effectively address adolescent dating violence. Being aware of risk factors such as number of dating partners, GPA, and dating frequency can help educators create initiatives that encompass academic, social, and relationship elements. Therefore, effective school-based programs can be provided and tailored accordingly.

Demographic Variables

Howard and Wang (2003) investigated the prevalence of adolescent dating violence and its relationship to the demographic variables—grade and ethnicity. Overall, 9.23% of adolescent females reported dating violence, with the highest number of reports made by 12th graders. However, although 12th grade females had the highest prevalence of reported dating violence, there were no statistically significant differences found across the four grades. The study further revealed slightly different results regarding the relationship between dating violence and grade level. Overall, 10th and 12th graders were significantly more likely to report being victims of dating violence compared to 9th graders. However, similar to the initial study by Howard and Wang, no systematic pattern was found between grade level and physical dating violence (Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007).

An additional trend related to age and dating violence that has emerged is earlier physical maturation in adolescents and earlier dating behaviors (Close, 2005). A concern still remains regarding when to integrate school-based programs designed to educate and prevent dating violence. Due to the widespread reports of dating violence spanning 9th through 12th grades, school-based prevention efforts should be implemented earlier, beginning in 8th or 9th grade.

Although additional research is needed, a possible relationship might exist between dating violence and ethnicity. The study conducted by Howard and Wang revealed that based on their results, Caucasian females had the lowest reports of dating violence, while African American females were twice as likely to report dating violence (2003). These results held consistent with the findings from Howard, Wang, and Yan where African American female adolescents were about 50% more likely to report dating violence compared to Caucasian females (2007).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2006), dating violence occurred more frequently among African Americans than Caucasians and Hispanics. Further studies are needed to examine whether or not ethnicity correlates with dating violence. The studies by Howard and Wang (2003) and the CDC (2006) reinforced how culture and ethnicity can be linked with adolescent dating violence. Therefore, addressing cultural differences should be highly considered when developing and implementing prevention efforts within a school.

In addition to ethnicity, other demographic variables may be related to teen dating violence including regional differences and socioeconomic status. Research from Marquart et al. found differences in the prevalence of dating violence based on region. The findings from Marquart suggested that adolescents living in southern states are at a greater risk for being

involved in dating violence compared to adolescents in other regions of the United Sates (cited in Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009). Extending beyond the parameters of adolescent dating violence, it is interesting to note that the prevalence of overall violence is higher in the South than in other areas of the country (Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009). There may be a variety of causes that contribute to higher rates of violence in the South, but making a concentrated effort to reduce teen dating violence could help break the cycle of violence and thus, decrease incidences of overall violence.

A study by Bergman (1992) investigated the prevalence of dating violence among suburban, inner-city, and rural schools. Results indicated that higher rates of dating violence was found consistently more in suburban schools compared to inner-city and rural schools (Bergman, 1992). The next highest prevalence rates for dating violence were found in inner-city schools followed by rural schools (Bergman, 1992).

Additional research needs to be conducted investigating the possible link between socioeconomic status and risk of dating violence. However, Chase, Treboux, and O'Leary found that adolescents living in poverty or from disadvantaged homes are at an even greater risk for dating violence (cited in Herman, 2009).

There are a host of potential risk factors that can be associated with dating violence in adolescent relationships. Understanding these risk factors and being aware of the possible relationship that may exist between these risks and dating violence is imperative in order to implement early and effective intervention programs.

Dating Violence Prevention Programs

Recognizing that teen dating violence is a significant problem affecting today's youth unveils a critical need to address this problem by implementing effective prevention programs.

However, a study that was conducted to examine teen perceptions on dating violence and the role of schools revealed that the school response to dating violence has been less than ideal (Gallopin & Leigh, 2009). Students who participated in the study all reported that their schools lacked a school policy specifically related to dating violence (Gallopin & Leigh, 2009). Students also indicated frustration with their schools' response to dating violence and identified it as being inconsistent and ineffective (Gallopin & Leigh, 2009). Although dating violence prevention programs are an essential piece to a comprehensive curriculum, it is clear that not all students are receiving this type of education. Therefore, researching the types of prevention programs and choosing one that has strong psychometric properties among other important factors is important to the overall initiative for reducing and prevention teen dating violence incidences.

Prevention programs can be school-based, community-based or a combination of both. According to Wolfe and Jaffe, there are three levels of prevention efforts aimed to address dating violence (cited in Close, 2005). The three levels include primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and range from prevention to intervention initiatives. The three levels are further explained now. Primary prevention programs are designed to reduce the problem before it actually occurs. Secondary prevention steps attempt to intervene fairly early after the problem has been identified. Tertiary prevention strategies are offered as a response to a problem that has already caused some type of harm.

A metaanalysis conducted by Close (2005) examined dating violence prevention efforts, which found that primary prevention was usually the underlying focus for programs geared for high school and college age students. This is an encouraging piece of information as primary prevention initiatives are viewed as the most effective at reducing teen dating violence and are geared to target all students (Theriot, 2008).

Safe Dates Program

Upon researching and reviewing current programs designed to reduce and prevent teen dating violence, the Safe Dates program was highly regarded compared to others for having withstood continued rigorous evaluations. Safe Dates is an evidence-based program designed for 8th and 9th grade students that focuses on primary and secondary prevention of adolescent dating violence. The Safe Dates program offers school and community activities to provide a well-rounded curriculum for students. School activities often include a theater production performed by peers, a 10-session curriculum, and a poster contest. Complementary to school activities are community activities, which include a variety of experiences such as helping to assist a crisis line, being active in a support group, and receiving community service provider training (Foshee et al., 1998).

The school activities offered by the Safe Dates program addresses the primary prevention level and works to educate, reduce, and prevent dating violence by "changing norms associated with partner violence, decreasing gender stereotyping, and improving conflict management skills" (Foshee et al., 1998, p. 45).

The community activities in the Safe Dates program not only complement the school activities, but strive to enhance awareness of the services that are available when dealing with dating violence. The Safe Dates curriculum and activities target both genders in an effort to reflect the research that indicates both males and females are victims and perpetrators of dating violence (Foshee et al., 1998).

A thorough study was conducted by Foshee et al. to evaluate the Safe Dates program (1998). Fourteen public schools in North Carolina with 8th and 9th graders were stratified and matched by grade and school size. Between each matched pair, one member was assigned a

treatment condition, while the other member was assigned a control condition. Treatment conditions were indicated by school and community activities, whereas control conditions were indicated by only community activities. Baseline data were collected via questionnaires and were completed by 1,886 (81%) of eligible students (Foshee et al., 1998).

According to Foshee et al. (1998), the results indicated that adolescents in the treatment groups reported significantly less psychological abuse and dating violence perpetration compared to individuals in the control condition. Additionally, the follow-up found that there was "25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual violence perpetration, and 60% less violence perpetrated against the current dating partner in treatment schools than in control schools" (Foshee et al., 1998, p. 49). In addition to the reported decrease of dating violence perpetration, the results indicated that program content from Safe Dates changed mediating variables such as dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, and conflict resolution skills.

A goal within the secondary prevention parameters was to encourage victims as well as the perpetrators to seek help. Although individuals in the treatment group reported being significantly more aware of services compared to individuals in the control group, there were no between-group differences found in help-seeking behavior. In fact, only 35% of victims and 34% of perpetrators reported seeking help from anyone with friends and family being utilized as resources rather than relying on community resources and services (Foshee et al., 1998).

Foshee et al. conducted a follow-up study one year after the initial study to further examine the effectiveness of the Safe Dates program (2000). Results indicated that although the short-term behavior effects such as reducing dating violence perpetration were no longer present, effects on the mediating variables were maintained. Mediating variables were dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, conflict resolution skills, and awareness of community services for

dating violence. According to a metaanalysis of the study, results are similar to other studies evaluating adolescent behavior prevention programs, which have indicated that although behavioral effects decrease, cognitive changes are retained (Foshee et al., 2000).

Four years after the initial study, a subsequent study was conducted to determine post-intervention effects of the Safe Dates program. A booster intervention was implemented to a random half of the adolescents who received the treatment condition from the original study. A booster is often a briefer version of the original intervention with the objective to reinforce concepts from the initial program (Foshee et al., 2004). The booster used for the Safe Dates program was a newsletter and telephone call made by a health educator (Foshee et al., 2004).

Significant differences were found between treatment and control groups in the four-year follow-up study. More specifically, adolescents who were part of the treatment group compared to adolescents in the control group reported a 56% to 92% decrease in dating violence victimization and perpetration (Foshee et al., 2004). Due to the long period of time that passed between both studies, it is unlikely that the favorable responses to Safe Dates are a result of social desirability effects, but rather a result of the Safe Dates intervention itself. The Safe Dates program is designed for 8th and 9th graders presumably at the early stages of dating relationships. Therefore, the positive long-term results might be due to early exposure to the Safe Dates program, which provided the opportunity for individuals to learn new information and gain important skills regarding healthy relationships (Foshee et al., 2004). By providing Safe Dates early in the 8th grade, individuals had the chance to apply their newly learned content and skills to their dating relationships throughout high school, which facilitated experience and practice of forming healthy dating relationships.

Although the overall long-term effects of Safe Dates indicated positive results, the booster intervention was not as effective (Foshee et al., 2004). The booster seemed to have a contradictory effect on individuals as those who were exposed to the booster reported "significantly more psychological abuse perpetration and serious physical and sexual victimization" compared to individuals who were only exposed to Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 2004). A possible reason for this increase might be that the booster served as a prompt for victims to leave abusive relationships, which can be associated with an increase in partner violence (Foshee et al., 2004). It is important to note due to the nature of boosters and their limits, they might not be appropriate for secondary prevention of dating violence (Foshee et al., 2004).

Youth Relationship Project

Besides the Safe Dates program, another effective dating violence prevention program is the Youth Relationship Project (YRP). According to Wolfe et al., the YRP program has produced promising results and is also noted for its success and effectiveness in preventing and reducing adolescent dating violence (2003). YRP is not a school-based program, but rather a community-based group intervention. This particular intervention targets at-risk youth, ages 14-16, who were maltreated as children. As previously stated, risk factors for dating violence include a previous exposure to violence in addition to experiencing child maltreatment. Therefore, this particular prevention program is focused on a high-risk group of adolescents to stop the cycle of violence from occurring in the future. The goal of YRP was not only to prevent adolescent dating violence, but to promote the concept of healthy relationships (Wolfe et al., 2003).

The study further investigated the effectiveness of YRP by conducting an in-depth study and analysis of the program. A total of 191 adolescents participated in the YRP study—92 males and 99 females. Adolescents were recruited from Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies and appropriate screenings were enforced. The majority of the adolescents came from lower socioeconomic households and over half of the participants lived outside the family home (Wolfe et al., 2003). Adolescents represented urban, rural, and semirural areas.

YRP provides a comprehensive program consisting of eighteen sessions with three main components: education and awareness of abusive relationships and power dynamics, skill development, and social action (Wolfe et al., 2003). YRP relies on a health-promotion approach to teach adolescents about the differences between healthy and unhealthy dating relationships. The program curriculum effectively targets adolescents as a variety of teaching and learning methods are utilized. YRP is an interactive prevention program that includes guest speakers, videos, behavioral rehearsal, among other techniques (Wolfe et al., 2003). During the study, sessions focused on education and awareness, which taught adolescents how to identify abusive behavior in addition to addressing aspects of power and control in male-female relationships (Wolfe et al., 2003). Sessions also focused on skill development, which built upon the knowledge gained from other sessions to reinforce certain points (Wolfe et al., 2003). Skills such as listening, empathy, and emotional expressiveness were all addressed and applied to various scenarios and situations. Lastly, the social action piece connected individuals in the program with external community resources with an aim to try and improve help-seeking behaviors (Wolfe et al., 2003).

Results from the study conducted by Wolfe and colleagues found that specific to abuse perpetration, a significant reduction in physical and emotional abuse against a dating partner

occurred (2003). The results shed light on the significant role gender had on abuse perpetration as well. Although females initially reported higher levels of physical abuse perpetration, they showed a sharper decline in physical abuse perpetration over time compared to boys (Wolfe et al., 2003). Two factors—the degree of involvement in treatment and listening skills—impacted the level of change experienced from the program.

More specifically, adolescents who had high rates of listening showed greater reductions in physical abuse compared to those with lower rates of listening. Results for abuse victimization revealed significant decreases in all types of abuse—physical, emotional, and threatening behavior. Also important to note, youths with a history of high levels of child maltreatment initially reported greater levels of physical abuse and emotional abuse victimization; however, they also showed the most change in physical abuse victimization over time (Wolfe et al., 2003).

Overall, the Safe Dates program and The Youth Relationship Project have undergone evaluations and prevailed compared to other types of prevention programs. Depending on the target audience and history, either program could be effective in reducing and preventing adolescent dating violence. Regardless which program is used, it is undeniably critical to incorporate some type of prevention program into the school and community to help combat the prevalence of dating violence and ensure the safety of all adolescents.

Clearly, research has indicated that adolescent dating violence is a realistic and prevalent problem occurring in adolescent relationships. Although additional research needs to be conducted to further investigate the dynamics of dating violence, the different types, predictors, and risk factors of dating violence have been initially identified. Also, certain noteworthy prevention programs have been reviewed and withstood rigorous evaluation for their consistent

positive results and effectiveness. Increased awareness, additional research, and a collaborative effort among teachers, parents, and school counselors can serve as a solid foundation and catalyst to reduce and prevent teen dating violence incidences. As more preventative programs are being tested and feedback is available, schools should consider updated versions of programs and select the one that best fits their needs. In summary, communities, parents, and educators all have a role in supporting and informing students about the risks of dating and assisting students with making healthy and safe choices.

Chapter III: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

Introduction

Although it is difficult to fully grasp the magnitude and prevalence of adolescent dating violence, it is undeniably a major issue that is present and threatening to today's youth. School-based and community-based initiatives that educate students about the dangers of dating violence are critical components in addressing this issue. This chapter will include a summary of the information presented in the literature review. In addition, a discussion is offered regarding the types, predictors, and risk factors of dating violence. The discussion concludes with effective prevention programs aimed to reduce and prevent dating violence. Lastly, recommendations are presented to educators and other professionals in the field who work with adolescents and dating violence.

Summary

Dating violence is a serious issue present in many adolescent relationships. Although statistics can vary, a report by the CDC indicates the prevalence of teen dating violence ranges between 6.9% and 18.1% (2002). There are several types of dating violence including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. According to Theriot, physical violence is characterized by acts such as kicking, punching, choking, or slapping (2008). Psychological abuse is another form of dating violence and is characterized by actions such as sarcasm, making derogatory comments, name calling, and being ignored (Theriot, 2008). Lastly, sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual activity are all indicative of abuse that may occur in adolescent dating relationships (Theriot, 2008).

After examining the research, certain predictors of dating violence have been identified. Young people who have experienced child maltreatment are at greater risk for dating violence

(Wolfe et al., 2004). Additionally, trauma symptoms exhibited by individuals can be a significant factor in dating violence and can play an influential role in determining whether or not dating violence will continue (Wolfe et al., 2004). Lastly, previous exposure to violence both within the family and outside of the family was linked with dating violence (Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009).

There are several risk factors that can be associated with dating violence, which can be further divided into psychological variables, behavior variables, and demographic variables. Psychological variables included having negative self-esteem, having high rates of emotional distress, and experiencing suicidal thoughts (Rozen & Bezold, 1996; Howard & Wang, 2003). Behavior risk factors included engaging in risky sexual behavior, using a variety of drugs the previous month, and engaging in other violent behaviors (Howard & Wang, 2003). Additionally, Bergman (1992) found that the number of dating partners, grade point average (GPA), and dating frequency were found to be correlated with dating violence. Risk factors for demographic variables shed light on how ethnicity, regional differences, and socioeconomic status may be related to the onset and frequency of teen dating violence.

The final element of research examined effective prevention programs including Safe Dates and The Youth Relationships Project. Safe Dates is an evidence-based program designed to reduce teen dating violence through providing students with school and community activities. Primary and secondary levels of intervention are addressed through the Safe Dates curriculum. Initial results from the Safe Dates program found a reduction in dating violence perpetration in addition to reported changes in mediating variables such as dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, and conflict resolution skills (Foshee et al., 1998). However, results from a follow-up study revealed that the short-term behavioral effects disappeared, while the changes in

mediating variables were maintained (Foshee et al., 1998). Besides Safe Dates, The Youth Relationships Project (YRP) has also been noted for its positive results. YRP is a community-based program that targets at-risk youth, ages 14-16, who have experienced maltreatment as children. This particular program offers an 18-week comprehensive curriculum, which encompasses three main areas: education about abusive relationships, skills development, and social action.

Discussion

Understanding the types of dating violence is an important piece to working as a competent and effective educator. Certain types of dating violence such as psychological abuse may be more difficult to identify as the symptoms and effects are not externally visible. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the predictors and risk factors associated with dating violence to assist in determining if dating violence is present. Research has shown that high levels of psychological abuse exist in teen relationships (Theriot, 2008). Thus, an emphasis should be placed on educating teens regarding the typical warning signs indicative of psychological abuse, since this type may not be as obvious or understood. Furthermore, a comprehensive program encompassing all types of dating violence should be provided to students before or during 9th grade. Effective school-based programs designed to reduce and prevent teen dating violence should be implemented early as a preventative measure.

Awareness of either a history of child maltreatment or early exposure to violence is essential as both are possible predicative factors of dating violence. The study by Wolfe et al. (2004) suggests it is important to recognize these warning signs because it not only added to previous research on examining predictors of dating violence, but identified the role and risk that trauma symptoms have in the possibility of dating violence to occur in adolescent relationships.

It is imperative to be aware of how trauma symptoms present in adolescents to be able to identify and screen for this predictive factor. Also, the YRP program would be important to consider as a prevention measure since the program is specifically tailored to adolescents who have been maltreated as children.

Understanding the psychological risk factors of dating violence such as low self-esteem, high levels of emotional distress, and suicidal thought patterns can serve as a warning and red flag to help those students who exhibit one or more of the risk factors by providing an efficient and effective intervention. If individuals with low self-esteem are more at-risk for experiencing dating violence, an extra effort should be made to address this construct by implementing educational initiatives that promote positive self-concept and self-esteem. Therefore, the result of such programs tailored to increase self-esteem may be advantageous as both a prevention and intervention measure. Educational programs should be focused, not only on teen dating violence, but on healthy dating relationships as well.

Behavior risk factors including the number of dating partners, low grade point average (GPA), and dating frequency are critical when planning a tailored approach that addresses these specific components. Additional support focused on raising academics for certain at-risk students may be an important supplementary piece in the overall effectiveness of prevention programs.

Demographic variables including ethnicity, regional differences, and socioeconomic status may also play a role in dating violence. Research has indicated that African American females experienced dating violence more than Caucasian females (Howard & Wang, 2003; Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007; CDC, 2006). Thus, it is essential to further investigate the possible role that ethnicity plays in dating violence. Regional differences were found to be

associated with the prevalence of dating violence, where individuals living in southern states may be more at risk. Examining if this regional difference is accurate and figuring out why it is true may be useful in determining how to end this regional trend.

Lastly, consideration for how socioeconomic status (SES) relates to dating violence is essential to reach the at-risk students early to try and attempt to fill in the gaps that may occur as a result of low SES such as providing education, community resources, and specific agencies for help. It is imperative to understand the potential connection between these demographic variables and dating violence in order to provide intervention programs that specifically target and address those factors. When designing educational initiatives, it is important to factor in elements such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status in order to ensure the intervention program is sensitive to both cultural and diverse needs.

In addition to addressing variables such as self-esteem in a dating violence prevention program, another component to include would emphasize the available resources to encourage help-seeking behaviors. According to the results from Safe Dates, there was not a significant difference between treatment and control groups regarding help-seeking behaviors. Participants looked to family and friends for help rather than utilizing community services and resources. Based on these results, it is essential to include teaching modules—within the dating violence prevention program—about where to go for help and emphasize the particular services that are offered specifically geared for helping individuals in unhealthy relationships.

School-based programs aimed to reduce and prevent dating violence are often incorporated in mandatory health classes. However, according to Jouriles, Platt, and McDonald (2009), many of these school-based programs have not been thoroughly evaluated or assessed to determine their effectiveness. On the contrary, the Safe Dates program has undergone rigorous

evaluation and has yielded promising results. The Safe Dates program targets 8th and 9th graders, which reflects the suggested grade and age at which dating violence programs should be implemented. If dating violence programs are intertwined with health classes or added to preexisting curriculum, it would be important to consistently monitor progress and create evaluation procedures. Based on the results, the program could be modified or altered to be more effective. If schools are willing to offer a dating violence program external to the preexisting curriculum, the Safe Dates program may be considered with its positive reputation and evidence-based research to support its effectiveness. If a school does not offer curriculum for dating violence prevention or the need extends beyond the scope of the classroom, another option may be The Youth Relationships Project, which is still an effective prevention program, but is specifically tailored to at-risk youth.

Recommendations

Based on research, the following recommendations are presented to assist educators and other professionals in the field to be competent and effective helpers in dealing with teen dating violence. It is recommended that all educators be knowledgeable of the types of dating violence, and prior case history of students to determine if child maltreatment or other possible predictive factors of dating violence exist. It is also important to address dating violence before 9th grade and possibly again in the early high school years to reinforce the awareness of relationships violence. Educators need to be aware of risk factors of dating violence and address any students who are identified as at-risk through early intervention and education programs. Finally, it is recommended that educators be aware of the possible role that ethnicity plays in dating violence.

In summary, school counselors, parents, and other educators need to have a proactive program in place to raise awareness in schools and communities regarding safe dating practices.

Recognizing the warning signs may enable parents, students and educators to seek outside assistance in reporting relationship aggression and to get the support and help they need to process the incidents. Schools and communities should consider updating curriculum to reflect current trends to meet student needs to assure personal safety and academic growth. Dating violence is an issue that is best addressed in partnership with others to help raise young adults who are well-informed and knowledgeable on this very important topic.

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