

Dating Violence: Why Does It Occur and How Does It Fit in the Cycle of Violence?

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Much has been written about spousal violence and its effect on children in families who witness such violence. More recently, dating violence among the high school population has been studied. Depending on the methods used, studies have indicated that 20% to 50% of high school students have experienced violence in a dating relationship (Johnston, 1992, p. 331; Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998, p. 467; O'Keefe, 1997, p. 546).

In a recent study, Molidor, Tolman, and Kober (2000) looked at the rates of dating violence for high school boys and girls, as well as the circumstances leading to and the outcomes of dating violence. In questionnaires distributed to over 600 high school students, youth between 13 and 18 years of age were asked about the frequencies of any past dating violence and in their most recent or current dating relationship. The researchers discovered that 36.4% of the girls and 37.1% of the boys reported that they had experienced some physical violence in the dating relationship. The degree of violence reported differed by gender. Girls were more likely to be punched or forced to engage in sexual activity. Boys were more likely to be pinched, slapped, scratched, and kicked. Forty-two percent of the males and 43% of the females reported that the dating abuse occurred in a school building or on school grounds. Furthermore, 40% of the time when girls experienced abuse and 49% of the time when boys experienced abuse, someone else was present—either another individual or a group of people.

When asked about their reaction or response to the violence, boys' and girls' responses differed markedly. Over half of the boys said that they laughed at the physical altercation. One-third of the boys reported ignoring it. Forty percent of the girls reported crying, and nearly 36% reported fighting

back when confronted with violence in a dating relationship.

When asked for reasons why the abuse occurred, 17.1% of the boys reported that the violence occurred because they had been making sexual advances to their partner, whereas 37% of the girls cited their partner's sexual advances as the reason they were subject to physical violence. Nearly 37% of the boys who experienced physical abuse reported that they were drunk at the time. This figure was cited differently by girls—55% of the girls said that their partners were drunk when the violent incident occurred. Nine percent of the girls reported being drunk when physical abuse occurred.

Students were asked whom they told about the incidence of dating violence. No significant differences between the sexes were found in this area. Fewer than 3% of the students reported the incident to someone in authority (e.g., police officer, counselor, or teacher). Six percent of the physically or sexually abused high school students told a family member, 61% told a friend, and over 30% told no one about the abusive incident.

Molidor, Tolman, and Kober (2000, p. 4) suggest that boys often begin abusive behavior toward their female partners before they are adults, which suggests the need to intervene during adolescence to end "gendered violence." Other research supports the relationship between adolescent dating violence and later spousal abuse (Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998, p. 467; Johnston, 1992, p. 5; Foshee et al., 2000, p. 5). The pattern of abuse between high school dating partners and later marital partners continues to have deleterious effects. Research indicates that children who are exposed to family violence are more likely to use aggression in their

relationships with peers and romantic partners later in life (Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998, p. 468; Johnston, 1992, p. 5). Hence the cycle of violence continues.

Interrupting this harmful cycle is clearly in the best interest of all. How can we influence patterns of adolescent dating violence? What are some of the predictors of using violence in dating relationships?

In a study of 1,012 racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse students enrolled in various high schools in Los Angeles, O’Keefe (1997) found that violence in dating relationships was a frequent occurrence: 43% of the females and 39% of the males reported that they had inflicted some form of physical aggression on their dating partners at least once (p. 555). In considering the factors that best predicted inflicting dating violence, O’Keefe found that being a recipient of violence was the strongest predictor of inflicting dating violence. In other words, acts of violence create a risk for a violent response or for future violent acts. O’Keefe found this predictor to be stronger for females, who were more likely than males to hit in retaliation or self-defense (p. 563).

Other strong predictors of dating violence included the justification or acceptance of dating violence (those students who viewed violence as an appropriate response to conflict were more likely to behave violently), the presence of conflict in the dating relationships, alcohol or drug use, and witnessing interparental violence. O’Keefe found this last predictor—viewing spousal violence—stronger for males than females (p. 564).

Interrupting the cycle of abusive behavior is difficult. Research suggests that education is most effective in altering abuse in relationships when it emphasizes that violence is not an acceptable or normal part of interpersonal relationships (McNulty, Heller, & Binet, 1997, p. 26). Many schools are incorporating curriculum that addresses what constitutes normal levels of conflict in relationships, what constitutes violence, and what skills are needed for resolving

conflict within a relationship nonviolently (McNulty, Heller, & Binet, 1997).

Parents play a critical role in influencing adolescent dating behaviors. They do so by the example they provide in managing their own conflict (Patten, 2000). They do so in the broad pattern of parenting they use, which can either increase or decrease the probability of their child using aggression with others (Steinberg & Levine, 1997; Darling, 1999). Finally, parents help to interrupt a pattern of violence by intervening when they suspect their adolescent is involved in an abusive dating relationship (Steinberg & Levine, 1997, pp. 339-340).

A Partial List of Web Resources on Teen Dating Violence

Teaching Guide: Dating Violence
http://www.nnfr.org/adolsex/inform/adolsex_violtg.html

Dating Violence: Sexual Integrity for Teens
http://www.nnfr.org/adolsex/fact/adolsex_viol.html

Eastside Domestic Violence Program
<http://www.eastside.net/edvp/>

Love Doesn’t Have to Hurt
<http://www.apa.org/pi/pii/teen/>

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/>

National Coalition against Sexual Assault
<http://www.ncasa.org>
 [Editor’s Note: (9/12/00) This URL not currently available.]

National Crime Prevention Council Online Resource Center
<http://www.ncpc.org>

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network
<http://www.rainn.org>

Sexual Assault Information Page
<http://www.cs.utk.edu/~bartley/saInfoPage.html>

Trust Betrayed
<http://meb.marshall.edu/trust/trust.htm>

When Love Hurts: A guide for girls on love, respect, and abuse in relationships
<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~girlsown/>

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