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The Need for School-Based Teen Dating Violence Prevention

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The Need for School-Based Teen Dating Violence Prevention

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Introduction

Federal and state education agencies, school districts, and individual schools have several competing demands. While the primary goal is the education and socialization of students, many schools are tasked with implementing programs to address a variety of important issues, such as alcohol and drug use, mental and physical health, physical fitness, obesity, sexual education, and bullying. Each of these examples – and countless others – are critically important to the development of children and adolescents. While we must strive to develop educated, healthy, and well-rounded students, schools have a finite amount of time and a limited set of resources. Thus, the introduction of a relatively new topic into the school system must be met with convincing evidence that 1) a need or problem exists and is relevant to the education of students, 2) the problem is amenable to change, and 3) addressing the problem is in the best interest of educators and students. The purpose of this paper is to present a case for the inclusion of teen dating violence prevention programs in middle schools and high schools.

Is there a need?

Prevalence

The public health importance of teen dating violence, defined as physical, sexual, or psychological abuse within dating or intimate adolescent relationships is becoming increasingly apparent. In their biannual national survey of high school students, the Centers for Disease Control has consistently found that about 10% of adolescents report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend; a rate that has remained mostly unchanged since 1999.¹ A statewide survey of Massachusetts's high school students revealed similar rates, with 8.9% of adolescents reporting physical dating violence victimization, 3.8% reporting sexual dating violence, and 5.3% reporting physical *and* sexual dating violence.²

Higher rates of dating violence have been reported in regional and at-risk samples, when violence questions are more comprehensive, and when psychological abuse is considered. For example, in their sample of middle school and high school students, Holt and Espelage³ found that 43% of males and 32% of females had been physically victimized in a dating relationship. Moreover, 61% of males and 63% of females in this sample had been psychologically abused in a dating relationship. In a subsample of adolescents with a history of child maltreatment, Wolfe and colleagues⁴ found that 53% of female and 49% of male participants

reported sexual dating violence victimization, and 25% of females and 40% of males reported physical dating violence victimization.

Consequences

Accumulating research has detailed the potential consequences of teen dating violence. Specifically, adolescents with a history of dating violence, compared to those without, exhibit higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance use, post-traumatic stress disorder, risky sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, disordered eating, and injury.^{1,2,5-10} A recent national representative sample of adolescents found that experiencing teen dating violence victimization predicted a range of adverse health outcomes for females (heavy episodic drinking, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and smoking) and males (antisocial behaviors, suicidal ideation, and marijuana use).¹¹ These negative consequences undoubtedly impact school performance. In fact, national data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicate that nearly 20% of high school students in violent relationships received “mostly Ds or Fs”, whereas only 6% received “mostly As”.¹² Conversely, in the sample as a whole, 31% of students reported receiving “mostly As” whereas only 6% reported receiving “mostly Ds or Fs.” This is consistent with data from our ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent health,¹³ in which 13% of adolescent victims of dating violence received failing grades, versus 8% of adolescents in nonviolent relationships.

Perhaps more alarming than the mental and physical health consequences of experiencing dating violence is the long-term impact on the quality of intimate relationships and the likelihood of being revictimized. One study found that victims of adolescent dating violence were three times more likely to be victimized in college, relative to students who were not victimized as adolescents.¹⁴ Similarly, O’Leary and colleagues have demonstrated that violence in adolescent relationships may lead to more severe forms of violence in adult relationships.^{15,16} In their longitudinal study of adverse health outcomes, Exner-Cortens and colleagues¹¹ demonstrated that dating violence victimization in high school predicted adult partner violence victimization for females and males.

Can teen dating violence be prevented?

The prevalence of adverse mental, physical, and relationship health outcomes associated with teen dating violence underscores the need for prevention programs. Although limited in number, empirically evaluated programs have demonstrated some potential in eliciting change.¹⁷ For example, several studies have shown that adolescents who undergo a

school-based prevention program exhibit increased knowledge of and more appropriate attitudes about partner violence.¹⁸⁻²⁰ In a study of urban adolescents, Weisz and Black²¹ found that a 12-session dating violence and sexual assault prevention program effectively improved participants' attitudes and increased their knowledge of dating violence. These effects were maintained at six-month follow-up. Similarly, Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzel, and Killip²² found that a classroom-based prevention program had an immediate and long-term impact on improving adolescents' knowledge (eg, about rape, prevalence of partner violence), attitudes about dating violence, and behavioral intentions about hypothetical situations in which the participant witnessed dating violence. Avery-Leaf and colleagues²³ found support for a five-session school-based dating violence prevention program, in which youth in the treatment group evidenced decreased acceptance of and justifying attitudes about the use of dating violence, relative to their baseline scores and to participants not receiving the intervention. Despite these generally positive results, a majority of studies examining dating violence prevention programs have focused on eliciting change in intermediate outcomes, such as attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about partner violence rather than measuring actual longitudinal changes in behavior.²⁴ This is an important limitation given our knowledge that changes in attitudes do not necessarily reflect changes in behavior.²⁵

Studies examining the Safe Dates program,²⁶⁻²⁹ Ending Violence curriculum,³⁰ and Fourth R³¹ program are among the few that have examined behavior change. The Safe Dates prevention program was evaluated in eighth and ninth grade students in 14 schools randomized to receive either a dating violence prevention curriculum or the control condition. This school-based program includes a theatrical production, community-based activities, and ten 45-minute sessions targeting mediating variables, such as dating violence norms, gender-role norms, and conflict management skills. The goal is to prevent the onset (primary prevention) or stop the continuation (secondary prevention) of dating aggression. In general, the program has been found to be effective in reducing physical, severe physical, and sexual dating violence victimization and perpetration. Notably, these effects were observed four years post-treatment. However, Safe Dates has primarily been tested on rural and mostly White and African American adolescents, so generalizability to other contexts may be limited.

Ending Violence, another school-based approach to dating violence prevention, also examined behavior change. This brief, three-session program was designed to decrease dating violence among youths by

changing their attitudes and providing education about domestic violence laws, especially regarding victim protection. Jaycox and colleagues³⁰ evaluated this program over three years among primarily Latino ninth graders in 11 high schools ($n = 2,540$). The students were randomized to receive either the intervention or the control condition, and were assessed at pretest, posttest, and six-month follow-up. Posttest results revealed that students in the treatment group knew more about the legal aspects of dating violence, reported an overall greater propensity to seek help for victimization (eg, legal counsel, police), and were less accepting of female-to-male violence relative to adolescents in the control group. However, no differences emerged between groups with respect to abusive dating experiences and violence perpetration or victimization.

One of the more promising programs, Fourth R, integrates the promotion of healthy relationship skills, and the prevention of dating violence into existing health and physical education courses.³¹ The program includes a school-level component in which teachers receive specialized training on healthy relationships and teen dating violence, and students form “safe school committees”. A cluster-randomized trial of Fourth R revealed that adolescents in the treatment group evidenced reduced physical dating violence 2.5 years post treatment, relative to adolescents in the control group. The effects of the intervention group were especially prominent for adolescent boys. Although additional research and fine-tuning is needed – especially with respect to adolescent girls – this relatively feasible and cost-effective approach of embedding teen dating violence prevention into existing curricula carries enormous potential for resource-strapped schools.

Are schools an appropriate outlet for teen dating violence prevention?

Although the need for evidence-based dating violence prevention programs is apparent, the question of whether schools are an appropriate setting to house these programs remains. For one, school-based programs are typically universally applied, in which all students in a particular school or class are given the prevention program, regardless of risk. Thus, time and resources are expended to all students despite the fact that a majority are not and will not be in a violent relationship. Secondly, school-based programs may exclude the most vulnerable and high-risk youth (ie, school dropouts and truant youth), thus limiting their value and generalizability. Indeed, the US department of education estimates that approximately 5% of high school aged adolescents are not enrolled in school.³²

Despite these limitations, administering prevention programs in schools, where children spend about one third of their lives, offers several unique advantages. First, school-based prevention programs can reach a large number of students for an extended period of time.³³ Second, because of the relatively confined space and access to teachers and parents, school-based prevention programs can elicit a change in culture – for example, from one where it is acceptable for girls to hit their boyfriends to one where no form of violence is acceptable. Moreover, by providing staff training and integrating violence prevention into school services and policy, such as the Fourth R program, cultural change can be sustainable.³³ Third, schools offer practical benefits (eg, transportation, space) and the necessary infrastructure to safely and cost-effectively administer prevention programs.³⁴ Indeed, schools are typically equipped with counselors, social workers, or nurses who, with training, can appropriately respond to adolescent victims or perpetrators of dating violence. In a recent national assessment, Khubchandani and colleagues³⁵ found that nearly all high school counselors who participated in their study believed that school counselors should take a major role in assisting victims of teen dating violence.

The benefits of implementing dating violence prevention in schools are enormous, and appear to outweigh the costs. However, the fact remains that schools have a limited number of resources and a finite number of hours to educate students. Since teachers, administrators, and other school officials are on the front lines of education and are often evaluated on the academic performance of their students, we wanted to gauge their thoughts on the need for and appropriateness of implementing a dating violence prevention program in their school. Thus, we administered an anonymous internet-based climate survey to 497 staff of a mid-sized, suburban high school in southeast Texas. Participants included direct instructional staff (teachers), student support staff (eg, academic/behavior coaches), and district support staff (eg, education service center). We limited our analyses to the 219 participants associated with the district's middle and high schools (see Table 1 for sample characteristics).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (n = 219)

	n	%
Sex		
Female	172	78.5%
Male	47	21.5%
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	17	8.0%
Caucasian	169	79.7%
Hispanic	14	6.6%
Other	12	5.7%
Campus type		
Middle/junior high school (5 th to 8 th grades)	114	53%
High school (9 th to 12 th grades)	103	47%
School position		
Direct instructional staff (eg, teacher)	153	69.9%
Student support staff (eg, academic/behavior coach, nurse)	59	26.9%
District support staff (eg, education service center)	7	3.2%

In addition to standard questions on school policy and discipline, the district included three questions on teen dating violence, including: “I think implementing a prevention program that targets things like bullying, substance abuse, and teen dating violence would be an appropriate use of school time”; “I believe teen dating violence occurs among our students”; and “In my school, teen dating violence is a major problem among our

students.” As shown in Table 2, a majority of district staff believed teen dating violence was a problem, with 19% reporting having observed an instance of teen dating violence. Most relevant to our argument, 82% believed the school to be an appropriate outlet for prevention programs versus only 4% who disagreed with that belief.

Table 2. Perceptions of teen dating violence from middle and high school staff n (%)

	Agree or strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree or strongly disagree
I think implementing a prevention program that targets things like bullying, substance abuse, teen dating violence would be an appropriate use of school time	176 (81.9)	28 (13)	9 (4.2)
I believe teen dating violence occurs among our students	Yes, have witnessed	Yes, but have not witnessed	No or don't know
	40 (19.3)	124 (59.9)	43 (20.8)
In my school, TDV is a major problem among our students	Very true or somewhat true	Very false or somewhat false	
	107 (53.2)	94 (46.8)	

Conclusion

Teen dating violence is a public health priority. It is widespread, prevalent, and negatively affects adolescents’ mental, physical, and social health. Thus, we are in critical need of programs aimed at preventing dating

violence and promoting healthy relationship skills. Not only will this improve the health and quality of life of children and adolescents, it has the potential to curb the prevalence of adult domestic violence. Because middle schools and high schools are already overtaxed with educating and managing students, we argue for the importance of integrating evidence-based dating violence prevention programs into standard curricula. This method is likely the most feasible and cost-effective as it capitalizes on schools' existing resources. Ideally, and as practiced by the Fourth R program, healthy relationship skills will become part of the education curriculum, and emphasized to the same degree as reading and writing. Alternatively, these skills can be included within existing school-based programs aimed at preventing other unhealthy behaviors (eg, general aggression, substance use, unsafe sex).

We firmly believe that the benefits of addressing dating violence (eg, improved health) will result in improved academic performance and reduced truancy. Indeed, many states have introduced or passed bills that mandate school districts to address teen dating violence.³⁶ For example, the Texas legislature amended the Texas education code in May 2007 to require each school district to adopt and implement a teen dating violence policy by directing districts to: 1) address safety planning, enforce protective orders, and explore school-based alternatives to protective orders; 2) provide training for teachers and administrators; 3) provide counseling for affected students; and 4) provide awareness education for students and parents. While a step in the right direction, schools must be provided with appropriate resources and funds to meet these demands. The costs of implementing a prevention program is justified given the scope of teen dating violence, potential improvements in adolescent health outcomes, decreased need for youth to utilize services in the future (eg, medical, behavioral, criminal justice), and the perceived need and appropriateness among educators for school-based prevention programs.

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