

**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ACADEMIC CENTER OF EXCELLENCE ON YOUTH
VIOLENCE PREVENTION, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE**

**Fact Sheet
DATING VIOLENCE**

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Introduction

Violent behavior that occurs in the context of a dating relationship is not a rare event among adolescents in the United States. In fact, teens are at greater risk of dating violence than any other age group, with estimates that 1 in 10 high school students¹⁻² and 1 in 4 college students³ will be involved in a physically violent relationship. Despite these alarming statistics, many teens do not view dating violence as destructive or unhealthy, and some actually believe it can improve a relationship.⁴ This perception is worrisome as it may prevent adolescents involved in dating violence from seeking help. Dating violence is not limited to a specific demographic; teenagers from all walks of life are vulnerable, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status or sexual orientation.^{1, 5-6} Dating violence can take many forms, including psychological, physical and sexual abuse. In its least severe form, it includes jealousy, possessiveness, verbal put-downs and coercive behavior. In its more extreme forms, dating violence can involve punching, slapping, shoving, pulling hair, threats involving a weapon and rape. While there is limited research on effective strategies for prevention, several programs have shown promise for reducing dating violence in national and local evaluations. Typically, these programs are multidimensional and focus on education and development of effective relationship and conflict resolution skills.

Scope of the Problem

Youth dating violence is a common occurrence. Estimates of incidence range from 10% to 79%.^{2,7} Studies that include emotional and verbal abuse in their definition of dating violence report the highest incidence rates. Studies that limit their definitions to overt physical or sexual violence report lower rates.

Both male and female adolescents can be victims of dating violence. Although sexual aggression is largely perpetrated in relationships by boys against girls,⁶ 12% of girls and 12% of boys report experiencing physical dating violence.¹ While there is gender parity in rates of physical dating violence, the nature of the violence experienced is different. Boys and men initiate violence far more frequently within relationships,⁸ and girls are more likely to report using violence in self-defense.⁹ When motivated by anger or a desire for control, girls often find their violence ineffective as compared to boys,¹⁰ with

one study finding that the most common response by boys to female violence is laughter.⁹ Conversely, violence is more likely to result in fear and injury for girls.⁶

Often the precursor for an escalation into violence, psychological abuse – verbal abuse and tactics intended to control a partner’s behavior – is both disturbingly prevalent and damaging. Studies have found psychological abuse among 35% of boys and 47% of girls.¹¹ Especially for girls, this abuse can lead to negative health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and substance use.¹²⁻¹³

Risk Factors

Adolescent dating violence is a complex phenomenon resulting from a combination of individual, familial, and societal factors.

Individual and Peer Influences

Low self-esteem, prior antisocial and aggressive behavior, and prior exposure to violence in the home have all been associated with an increased likelihood for dating-related victimization and violence perpetration among adolescents.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Alcohol and substance use is another risk factor for dating violence.¹⁵ Negative gender identities also increase risk for dating violence. Adolescents who ascribe to stereotyped perceptions of males as dominant and aggressive and females as submissive and victims are more likely to be involved in violent dating relationships.¹⁴ Finally, peer group norms can be a powerful influence. Young people whose friends are in violent dating relationships are themselves more likely to be involved as perpetrators or victims of dating violence.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

Family and Community Factors

Family plays a critical role in influencing adolescent dating behaviors. Parents model behaviors, values and attitudes regarding the management of conflict in intimate relationships. Children, especially males, who are exposed to family violence are more likely to use aggression in their relationships with peers and romantic partners later in life.^{2, 16} Exposure to community violence has also been linked with increased risk for involvement in dating violence.¹⁸

Societal Factors

Adolescents receive many messages from the media about how males and females should behave and how intimate relationships should be conducted. Much of the content in movies, videos, song lyrics, comics and television shows is violent and contains stereotyped and negative images, not only of gender roles but also of different racial and ethnic groups. On television alone, 61% of programming contains violence.¹⁹ Many studies have found a link between depictions of violence and stereotyped gender roles in the media with increased rates of interpersonal aggression.²⁰

Promising Strategies

Interventions that define violence as an unacceptable part of dating relationships and provide education and training in effective relationship and conflict management strategies show promise for reducing dating violence among adolescents.²¹ Several promising interventions are described below.

The Youth Relationships Project targets at-risk teens in the community. In an evaluation study, 158 14-16 year olds with histories of child maltreatment were divided into a treatment group and control group. The treatment group was involved in eighteen two-hour sessions on healthy and abusive relationships, relationship communication skills, and social action activities. As compared to the control group, the treatment group reported fewer incidents of physical and psychological dating violence and less related emotional distress at 16-months post intervention.²²

Safe Dates targets 12-18 year old students in school. In addition to strengthening teacher and parent awareness, the program involves students in a ten-session curriculum, a play, and a poster contest. An evaluation of 460 teens found that those experiencing Safe Dates in 8th grade were less likely than those not experiencing it to be victims and perpetrators of dating violence four years later. The study also found a 56% to 92% reduction in sexual and physical dating violence victimization after four years.²³

Break the Cycle's Ending Violence program educates high school students about dating violence in three sessions largely focusing on legal issues. In an evaluation of the program's effect on Latino youth, there were positive changes in attitudes discouraging dating violence, though violent behaviors 6 months after the program were unaffected.²⁴

Choose Respect is a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention initiative that aims to prevent dating violence by reaching out to children ages 11-14, a group that has generally yet to form their first romantic relationships. Through an interactive website (www.chooserespect.org), an eye-catching media campaign (i.e. posters, television commercials, radio public service announcements), and school outreach campaigns launched in 2006 within 10 U.S. cities, Choose Respect is estimated to have reached 26 million people through print coverage, 5.8 million people with a national radio media tour, and 325,000 people at Choose Respect events.²⁵ Preliminary results from the 2007-2008 implementation of Choose Respect in Austin, Texas middle schools show a positive change in attitudes and behavioral intentions pertaining to dating violence.²⁶

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Internet Resources

Choose Respect (sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
<http://www.chooserespect.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fact sheet:
<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/TeenDatingViolence2009-a.pdf>

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline
<http://www.loveisrespect.org/>

Are You Abusive?
<http://www.loveisrespect.org/is-this-abuse/are-you-abusive/>

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center
<http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/dateviolence.asp>

Prevention Recommendations for Teens, Parents, School Personnel, etc.
<http://www.abanet.org/unmet/teendating/preventionrecommendations.pdf>

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