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Should I Say Something?

Dating and Sexual Aggression Bystander Intervention Among High School Youth

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A growing body of research has documented the alarmingly high rates among high school youth of dating aggression, defined as physical, sexual, or psychological aggression that happens between current or former dating partners, and sexual aggression, defined as any unwanted sexual behavior, ranging from sexual contact to completed rape, that can occur between any individuals regardless of whether they are or have been in a relationship.[1] Dating and sexual aggression often co-occur (for example, someone who perpetrates physical dating aggression is also more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression toward an acquaintance), and, since they share many of the same etiological risk factors, are often examined together in research and targeted concurrently in prevention programming.[2] Research documents the deleterious consequences associated with dating and sexual aggression,[3] and these consequences underscore the critical importance of developing and implementing evidence-based dating and sexual aggression prevention efforts for adolescents.

One type of prevention effort that has been recognized as a critical component to dating and sexual aggression programming is bystander intervention education and training.[4] Such programs help participants develop behaviors that aid in the prevention of dating and sexual aggression and assist in victims' recovery from dating and sexual aggression experiences.[5] In order to address bystander intervention in programming efforts, it is important to understand the factors that facilitate or hinder bystander intervention. However, there is little research focusing on dating and sexual aggression bystander intervention among high school youth. The current study examined this gap in the literature by administering surveys and conducting focus groups with 218 high school youth from three high schools in New England (one rural, two urban).

KEY FINDINGS

An overwhelming majority (93.6 percent) of high school students reported having the opportunity to intervene during the past year in situations of dating aggression or sexual aggression; however, in over one-third of the episodes (37.4 percent) students reported not intervening. Non-intervention was related to several variables, and students themselves identified a number of reasons for non-intervention.

Girls were more likely to intervene in situations of dating and sexual aggression than boys.

Youth with histories of dating and sexual aggression were more likely to intervene than youth without these histories.

Focus group data revealed that barriers to bystander intervention included avoidance of drama or a desire to fuel drama, social status and personal repercussions, closeness with the victim and/or perpetrator, the victim being male and the perpetrator female, the failure of the dating or sexual aggression to meet a certain threshold, the dating and sexual aggression occurring online, anticipated negative reactions from the perpetrator or victim, and an inability to relate to the situation.

Bystander Intervention in Episodes of Sexual and Dating Aggression

Almost all (93.6 percent) students surveyed had the opportunity to intervene during the past year in situations of dating and sexual aggression. In fact, the average number of situations in which students had the opportunity to intervene was 5.63 (SD = 3.62). However, across these opportunities, students reported non-intervention in over a third (37.4 percent[6]) of cases. Students with the opportunity were most likely to intervene when

they heard someone say, "she deserved to be raped" (56.8 percent), when a friend's boyfriend or girlfriend was exhibiting jealous or controlling behavior (61.5 percent), when they believed their friend was in an abusive relationship (54.2 percent), and when they heard a friend insulting his or her partner (51.3 percent). Students were least likely to intervene in situations involving sexist jokes (35.2 percent) and catcalls (such as whistling at a girl; 31.2 percent), and when a friend was being taken upstairs at a party and appeared very intoxicated (29.2 percent). See Table 1.

Self-Identified Reasons for Youth Bystander Intervention and Non-Intervention

Thematic analyses from focus groups helped us to understand some of the reasons for non-intervention as well as the factors that facilitated or hindered helping. These non-intervention behaviors often related to an overarching theme of "drama," either a desire to avoid it, such as by ignoring or walking by the incident, or a desire to fuel it by encouraging

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS WHO WITNESSED SITUATIONS AND INTERVENED WHEN THEY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY

SITUATION AND RELATED INTERVENTION	PERCENT OF SAMPLE WHO WITNESSED THE SITUATION DESCRIBED IN THE STATEMENT	PERCENT WHO INTERVENED (TOOK THE ACTION DESCRIBED) AMONG THOSE WHO WITNESSED THE OPPORTUNITY
Expressed concern to a friend when I saw their boyfriend or girlfriend exhibiting very jealous behavior and trying to control my friend.	36.7%	61.5%
Heard a friend insulting their partner, and said something to them.	27.5%	51.3%
Indicated my displeasure when I heard sexist jokes.	26.1%	35.2%
Indicated my displeasure when I heard catcalls (for example, whistling at a girl).	20.2%	31.2%
Approached a friend I thought was in an abusive relationship and let them know that I'm here to help.	17.9%	54.2%
Talked with friends about what makes a relationship abusive and what warning signs might be.	17.9%	28.3%
Saw a man talking to a female friend. He was sitting very close to her and by the look on her face I could see she was uncomfortable. I asked her if she was okay or tried to start a conversation with her.	14.2%	47.7%
Talked with my friends about sexual assault and relationship abuse as an issue for our community.	11.9%	18.4%
Spoke up when I heard someone say, "She deserved to be raped."	11.5%	56.8%
Expressed disagreement with a friend who says having sex with someone who is passed out or very intoxicated is okay.	10.6%	44.2%
Thought through the pros and cons of different ways I could help when I saw an instance of sexual assault.	7.8%	24.6%
Stopped and checked in with my friend who looked very intoxicated when they were being taken upstairs at party.	6.4%	29.2%
Went with my friend to talk with someone (e.g., police, counselor, crisis center) about an unwanted sexual experience or physical violence in their relationship.	3.7%	14.0%
Total N = 218		

the incident directly or by sharing it through social media. As an example of avoiding drama, one student said, "*It's just annoying drama really is what it is. You don't even want to deal with it.*" Examples of fueling drama as a barrier to bystander intervention were: *"Some people love drama,"* and "*It's like a movie you know watching them, it's funny.*" When deciding not to help in situations of dating and sexual aggression, students' responses clustered into three strategies: ignore what was happening (e.g., *"just let it happen," "a lot of laughing and talking," "I'm just going to keep walking"* in response to witnessed verbal and physical dating aggression in school hallways); engage in behaviors to encourage it (for example,"*they'll like it or favorite it,*" "*post like popcorn*"—that is, post an emoticon of popcorn to suggest enjoyment of witnessed behaviors—in response to dating aggression happening through social media); or share it with other students through social media (e.g., "*start putting [photos or a summary of what is happening in a post] online*").

In addition to the desire to avoid or fuel drama, students identified other factors that hindered or promoted bystander intervention in situations of dating and sexual aggression. Students were less likely to intervene when they felt there could be social repercussions for their intervention (e.g., *"Nobody's going to say anything to [the popular kids]; nobody is going to approach them if they are [engaging in aggressive behavior toward their girlfriend or boyfriend]"*). Students were more likely to intervene when they were friends with the involved individuals, especially when their friend was the victim (e.g., *"Like if it is a close friend, I'll step in*"); students reported concerns about helping students they did not know (e.g., "*If I don't know them, I'm not going to tell them to, to stop. They're just going be like 'I don't even know you. Stop talking to me.*'").

Youth also reported that they were more likely to intervene in situations in which a boy was abusing a girl and less likely when a girl was abusing a boy, which was often viewed as funny or deserving (e.g., *If my guy friend came up to me and was like, 'my girlfriend slapped me,' I'd be like, 'well what did you do retard?' If a girl came up to me and was like 'my boyfriend just slapped me' or 'my boyfriend just pushed me into a wall,' I'd be like, 'alright where is he, let me talk to him for a second.*"). Related to this was the finding that girls were more likely than boys to report bystander intervention behavior on the surveys. Students were also far more likely to report that they would intervene if the aggression happened in person as opposed to over social media ("*It's actually a lot harder to [intervene] on Facebook. Because…it spreads not only from [the victim] being attacked, but to [now] you being attacked"; "[You] can't really stop the fight [on Facebook] because [it is not like you're going to] drive to their house and turn the computer off. There's nothing you can really do.*"). Students were also more likely to intervene if the aggression met a certain threshold, such as physical dating aggression that caused injury and/or notable emotional distress to the victim. Students also reported not intervening due to concerns about reactions from the perpetrator (e.g., *[They might not intervene because they would] be scared that [the perpetrator would] do that to them too…if they can do that to [the victim], [the perpetrator could do that to me too.*") or from the victim (e.g., *"If you notice something is wrong, you bring it up to your friend who is in a bad relationship, [but your friend doesn't] really acknowledge it [and your friend doesn't] want your help, [so] how are you supposed to help them?"*), as well as an inability to relate to the situation (e.g., "*Sometimes you just can't relate to what they're arguing about, so whatever you say probably won't even matter.*"). This finding was echoed in the quantitative findings, such that youth who had been victims of dating and sexual aggression were more likely to intervene in situations of dating and sexual aggression than youth without these experiences.

To summarize, barriers to bystander intervention in situations of dating and sexual aggression included:

- Avoiding drama versus fueling drama
- Social status and personal repercussions
- Closeness with the victim and/or perpetrator
- Victim being male and the perpetrator female
- Dating or sexual aggression not meeting a certain threshold
- Dating or sexual aggression occurring online
- Anticipated negative reactions from the perpetrator or victim
- Inability to relate to the situation

Gender Distinctions in Bystander Intervention

Female students most often reported that they would talk to their friends, especially when a friend was the victim, but also discussed ways in which they would talk to a friend who was the aggressor. Male students often reported that they would resort to physical aggression (e.g., *"smack him across the face"* and *"beat his ass"*) when intervening in situations of physical dating aggression. However, some male students provided more positive and promising modes of intervention, which were at times subtle (such as offering to dance with a girl who was being bothered by another boy, starting a conversation to interrupt the sexually aggressive behavior) and other times more direct (e.g., calling out the aggressor on his or her behavior). Both male and female students provided examples of the words they would use when intervening in situations of dating and sexual aggression. For example, in response to witnessed verbal dating aggression, students said they would say, *"It's not cool, knock it off. Nobody thinks you are cool for doing it,"* and "*Yo dude, calm down.*" In response to witnessed sexual pressure, male students indicated they would say things such as, *"Chill…give her a few months,"* and "*Dude, you're hitting on girls you have no chance with. What are you doing?*" Examples of prosocial bystander responses to witnessed physical dating aggression included: *"Hey don't push my friend like that,"* and *"What do you think you are doing?"* Finally, in response to witnessed stalking and controlling behaviors, students gave examples of verbal intervention such as, *"You just got to leave her alone. Find someone else,"* and *"You need to stop talking to this girl. You are going to get yourself in trouble. She doesn't like you. You need to stop before she tells the officer. You are going to get suspended. You need to stop doing that."*

Program and Policy Implications

Based on the data presented above, we suggest that bystander prevention programming with youth address and include the following:

- Material and experiential activities that help teens without social agency (e.g., unpopular kids) intervene in ways that feel safe to them (such as anonymously reporting the behavior), and the provision of empathy-building activities in bystander intervention programming.
- Psychoeducation to help teens understand the importance of bystander intervention even when the dating or sexual aggression may not meet the threshold of the victim being visibly hurt (physically or emotionally).
- Programming that helps kids understand the role of drama in dating and sexual aggression situations; experiential activities that help youth recognize the connections between "drama" and normalization of dating and sexual aggression could also be useful.
- Challenging of the conventional uses of social media and making of suggestions for using it in a more prosocial manner (e.g., posts that challenge normalization of dating and sexual aggression).
- Inclusion of scenarios and role plays, especially in situations in which students feel low intervention efficacy (e.g., through social media), to build skills and confidence.
- Integration of media literacy programming to help youth become better at identifying unhealthy relationships and to provide a platform for students to speak up about dating and sexual aggression so that they develop the skillset and language needed to be prosocial bystanders.
- Integration of youth's language and examples of positive prosocial bystander intervention into programming content.
- Integration of hotspots (i.e., school hallways, the school cafeteria, the school yard, buses, social media, and parties, both school dances and parties outside of school) into group discussions, scenarios, and other experiential exercises to increase saliency and relevancy of program material.

Finally, we suggest that district and state policies require the inclusion of evidence-based dating and sexual aggression bystander education in high school health curricula. Whereas most high school health and related curricula include lessons on healthy relationships and dating and sexual aggression, it is less common to see bystander intervention education included in these courses. Given the mounting evidence that bystander education is a critical component of dating and sexual aggression prevention, we urge policy makers and educators to enhance the presence of this type of education in high school health curricula and related course curricula.

Data

The data used in this brief are from a sample of 218 high school youth from three high schools in New England (one rural, two urban). Data collection procedures with students included obtaining parental consent/student assent, survey completion, focus group participation, and debriefing and referral information. The principals were asked to select the classrooms of students that would provide a representative sample of the student body.

After the consenting and assenting procedures, students completed surveys in gender-specific groups. To be mindful of gender variant identities, students were told that they could participate in whichever group they felt most comfortable. Surveys took approximately 15 minutes to complete. At two schools, the focus groups occurred immediately after completion of the survey; in the third school, which had a different class schedule, the focus groups occurred two days after the initial survey. Following the study procedures, students received local referral and debriefing information, and an advocate from a local crisis center accompanied the research team during all data collection procedures.

A slight majority (54.6 percent; *n*=119) of youth identified as male, 44.5 percent (*n*=97) identified as female, and 0.9 percent (*n*=2) identified as "other." The average participant age was 15.56 (*SD*=1.32, range=13-18). Nearly half (46.8 percent; *n*=102) of the sample was in ninth grade, 8.7 percent (*n*=19) were in tenth grade, 24.3 percent (*n*=53) were in eleventh grade, and 20.2 percent (*n*=44) were in twelfth grade. The majority of participants were Caucasian (83.0 percent).

Endnotes

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Teen Dating Aggression" (2014), retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/aggressionprevention/intimatepartneraggression/teen_dating_aggression.html; Hamby et al., "Title" (City: Org, 2011).

2. V. Foshee et al., "Longitudinal Predictors of Serious Physical and Sexual Dating Aggression Victimization During Adolescence," *Preventive Medicine* 39 (2004): 1007–16, doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2004.04.014; S. Hamby and J. Grych, "*The Web of Aggression: Exploring Connections Among Different Forms of Interpersonal Aggression and Abuse* (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 2013).

3. M. C. Black et al., "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Aggression Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report" (Atlanta: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011); A.L. Coker et al., "Physical and Mental Health Effects of Intimate Partner Aggression for Men and Women," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine 23* (year): 260–68, doi: 10.1016/S0749-37970200514-7.

4. CDC, "Teen Dating Aggression"; V. L. Banyard, "Go Big or Go Home: Reaching for a More Integrated View of Aggression Prevention," *Psychology of Aggression* 3 (2013): 115–20, doi: 10.1037/a0032289.

5. Banyard, "Go Big or Go Home."

6. Bystander items were examined separately and scored in order to create an overall ratio of bystander action (i.e., total number of situations in which one intervened/total number of situations in which one had the opportunity to intervene). It is important to note that this number (37.4 percent) should be interpreted with caution since we do not know if a participant had more than one opportunity to intervene in a given situation or if he or she intervened more than once in a given situation. In other words, we know only that students had the opportunity to intervene, not the exact number of times they had the opportunity to intervene in each situation. Furthermore, we do not know the exact number of times individuals actually intervened when given the opportunity, just whether or not they intervened.

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