Dating Violence in Adolescent Relationships

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Adolescence

During the adolescent developmental stage, an individual begins to experience various physical, social, and emotional changes. At times, the effect of these various changes can cause an adolescent to become more vulnerable to risk taking behaviors and exposure to violence. Additionally, adolescents also begin to explore relationships outside of their family of origin including developing relationships with peers and pursuing dating relationships. According to Sutherland (2011), one in five adolescents reported having a boyfriend or girlfriend in the fifth grade and more than half of a group of sixth graders surveyed reported having a girlfriend or boyfriend within the last three months. These data reveal a significant number of adolescents become involved in dating relationships. With such a high number of adolescents in dating relationships, it is important to understand how these early dating experiences may influence shaping their views of intimate relationships and their behavior in future adult intimate relationships (Sutherland, 2011).

Dating Violence Defined

Dating violence is an epidemic that is growing exponentially among the adolescent age group. Dating violence is a pattern of coercive behaviors used by adolescents to control their partners.

These coercive behaviors include physical assault, sexual assault, abuse, ascendancy, degradation, intimidation, possessiveness, blaming, and the minimization of feelings (Scheiman & Zeoli, 2003). Moreover, these behaviors can also include emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Various behaviors demonstrating dating violence include name-calling, bullying, intentional humiliation, and isolation from family and friends. Specific physical assault behaviors can include pinching, hitting, shoving, choking, or kicking. Examples of sexual abuse behaviors can include nonconsensual sex or attempted penetration, unsolicited nonpenetrative sexual contact, and reproductive coercion or sabotage. Lastly, behaviors of dating violence can include noncontact behaviors such as verbal abuse or verbal harassment (Sutherland, 2011).

Prevalence of Adolescent Dating Violence

Within adolescent relationships, statistics describing dating violence vary across age groups and different types of dating violence. According to Taylor and Mumford (2014), 69% of adolescents ages 12-18 reported experiencing some form of intimate partner violence, while 63% reported perpetration. Both in terms of perpetration and victimization, psychological abuse evidenced the highest reported form. Another 18% of adolescents reported being victims of sexual or physical abuse, while 12% reported perpetration. Taylor and Mumford (2014) found no gender differences for victimization rates of any form of dating violence, but their findings indicated perpetration rates of physical dating violence to be different for males and females, with 9% for males and 15% for females, respectively. Additionally, their findings described adolescents aged 15 to 18 evidencing higher rates of both victimization and perpetration regardless of type of violence as compared to adolescents ages 12 to 14. In studying the psychological impact of dating violence in adolescent research, findings indicate 61% of adolescents experienced accusations of flirting, threats to end the relationship, jealous behavior, excessive tracking of victim, hostile tones, or insulting behavior (Taylor & Mumford, 2014). Conversely, 10% reported experiencing serious threats or physical violence. Finally, 20.5% of female adolescents ages 15-18 reported victimization of sexual abuse, while their male counterparts reported 18.2%. These statistics illustrate many adolescents indicate a high risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence in an adolescent dating relationship (Taylor & Mumford, 2014).

Causes of Adolescent Dating Violence

With a growing number of adolescents experiencing dating violence, it is imperative to understand the various causations of this type of violence. Significant reasons related to adolescent dating violence within dating relationships include childhood family violence experiences, social networking sites, and influences from media outlets.

Childhood Family Violence & Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence

A significant risk factor for adolescent dating violence is a history of family violence. Adolescents who experienced family violence during their childhood reflect these experiences in partner relationships in various ways. For both males and females, exposure to intimate partner violence between parents indicates as a predictor of dating violence in future relationships (Latzman, Vivolo-Kantor, Niolon, & Ghazarian, 2015). Additionally, being victims of violence within previous relationships coupled with experiencing aggression and violence from their parents increased the rates of dating violence (Laporte, Jiang, Pepler, & Chamberland, 2011). Another major risk factor for dating violence is if an adolescent experienced callous discipline from both parents. Lastly, for adolescents who grew up in troubled and dysfunctional homes,

they may have been provided limited opportunities to learn how to appropriately work through problems within an intimate relationship. By experiencing these various forms of family violence and family chaos, the results can lead to detrimental outcomes for adolescents within dating relationships (Laporte et al., 2011).

Social Networking Sites

The current state of technology within our society indicates tremendous potential to shape how adolescents interact with each other, particularly in dating relationships. Cell phones, texting, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and teenage focused apps such as SnapChat, Kik, and TikTok, allow adolescents several avenues to remain in constant contact with one another. These social networking modalities can potentially provide relationship partners the opportunity to stalk, control, and monitor the social media footprint of their partner. According to a popular social networking sight, 51% of girls reported feeling pressure from boys to send sexual messages or pictures while 18% of adolescent boys reported the same type of pressure from girls (Sutherland, 2011). In another study, Reed, Tolman, and Ward (2017) found that 53.8% of adolescents experienced digital monitoring/controlling behaviors by a partner. Moreover, 46.3% of adolescents experienced "digital direct aggression" behaviors such as being sent a threatening online message. Although, both genders experienced digital dating violence, girls experienced more psychological distress. Finally, Stonard, Bowen, Walker, and Price (2017) also reported monitoring/controlling behaviors among adolescents in relationships. Considering the powerful influence technology exerts among adolescents, it is imperative to understand how social media can impact the behaviors, ideas, and attitudes of adolescents toward relationships and, in doing so, help perpetuate the dating violence so many adolescents experience.

Media

In addition to an adolescent's history of childhood family violence and the influence of social networking sites, the media outlets also play a significant role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents in partner relationships. Various forms of media specifically target the adolescent age group such as television, movies, and music. For adolescent girls who fantasize about romantic relationships, many look to these media outlets to learn how to love, how to be loved, how to date, and what romantic relationships should look like. Unfortunately, some of the messages about adolescent relationships presented in media outlets endorse a message of love and violence mixed together (Collins & Carmody, 2011). With so many adolescent girls believing violent behaviors is a standard in romantic relationships, they can potentially accept violence as their partner's love language. With this twisted message being received and accepted by young girls, it is essential to understand the social message adolescents continue to receive from media outlets about dating relationships (Bonomi et al., 2014). For example, movies such as the *Twilight* series and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series present a love story between adolescents and young adults. Though the main characters fall happily in love together at the end of the movie, the course of the relationship is filled with various forms of violence that the female partner in the relationship accepts in order to appease her partner. For adolescents still developing a sense of self as well as learning how to function in a relationship, the messages received from these movies can severely and negatively impact how they view and behave in dating relationships during their adolescent and adulthood years (Bonomi et al., 2014; Collins & Carmody, 2011).

Outcomes of Adolescent Intimate Partner Violence

For adolescents engaging in dating relationships where violence is present, they experience a higher risk for several negative outcomes. These negative outcomes can include developing poor risk management skills and life-long health consequences (Howard, Debnam, & Wang, 2013). For both males and females, dating violence showed an association with increased depression, suicidal behavior, and substance abuse (Martz, Jameson, & Page, 2016). Additional negative outcomes also included eating disorders, poor academic performance, and injuries requiring medical attention (Wincentak, Connolly, & Card, 2017).

Another harmful outcome of adolescent dating violence is an increase of participation in sexual risky behaviors. This increase of sexual risky behaviors includes participating in intercourse at a very young age, not using a condom or some form of protection during intercourse, and experiencing a high number of sexual partners. Moreover, an increase of sexually risky behaviors could also potentially lead to unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Alleyne-Green, Grinnell-Davis, Clark, Quinn, & Cryer-Coupet, 2016; Howard et al., 2013; Martz et al., 2016). Dating violence in adolescent dating relationships can also lead to negative emotional states and create a foundation of maladaptive relationship patterns of abuse in future adult intimate relationships (Howard et al., 2013).

Interventions and Preventions

Several programs help to curtail the number of adolescents involved in dating violent relationships. To increase awareness of adolescent dating violence, the 2010 Congress acknowledged February as Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. The government continues to show support for this issue by using the 17th anniversary of the passage of the Violence Against Women's Act to initiate the "1 is 2 many" campaign. This initiative specifically focuses on organizing youth to help create and identify ways to prevent violence in adolescent dating relationships (Howard et al., 2013).

In addition to the federal government participation, many state governments now require school districts to provide an educational curriculum for violence prevention. As of 2018, 22 states implemented legislation requiring education on adolescent dating violence and another three states incorporated dating violence curriculum into related education programs without having explicit laws passed regarding it (Cascardi, King, Rector, & DelPozzo, 2018). With the majority of adolescents spending a preponderance of their time in the school setting, it is imperative for school personnel to understand the signs, implications, and resources for adolescent dating violence. This includes educating the school personnel on the physical, emotional, social, and academic impact of dating violence and how to recognize these signs. Moreover, it is critical to inform school personnel on how to address imminent danger or concrete threats of danger. Additionally, school administration should consider implementing adolescent dating relationship curriculum such as Safe Dates (Sutherland, 2011) within the health education courses in middle school and in high school. In order to strengthen the efficacy of this curriculum, school districts invite community and advocacy groups along with university research experts that focus on dating violence among adolescents to participate in the design and execution of the curriculum. Partnering with local organizations and universities assists in validating the purpose and rigor of the curriculum within the school district (Howard et al., 2013).

Another major intervention created to help increase the awareness of violence in adolescent relationship is the Choose Respect Campaign. Created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), this program focuses on adolescents aged 11 to 14 years old and uses various modalities of media to encourage messages of positive relationships. Despite the usefulness and their importance in decreasing the amount of violence within adolescent dating relationships, the very populations they seek to help, frequently overlook the programs (Howard et al., 2013). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) also released an online training known as *Dating Matters*, which is designed to identify risk factors and prevent dating violence among teens (Centers for Disease Control Prevention, 2015; Tharp, 2012).

Implications for Counselors

For counselors who work with adolescents involved in violent dating relationships, it is important they screen for a family violence history and assess for current violence in the adolescent's life. It is also critical counselors remain knowledgeable of what to look for when an adolescent is involved in a relationship filled with violence and abuse. Possible signs include somatic complaints, distress when the relationship is discussed, a loss of interest in activities, and making excuses for their partner's behavior (Sutherland, 2011). Lastly, it is essential for counselors to familiarize themselves with community resources such as shelters and employment agencies to help victims of dating violence receive the additional resources, as they need to safely remove themselves from the violent relationship. As adolescents continue to experience dating violence within their relationships, it is imperative for counselors to understand how past family violent histories, the various media outlets, and the numerous intervention programs can help shape the dating and relationship views of adolescents.

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