Continuing Education

Relationship Violence Prevention Education in Schools: What's Working, What's Getting in the Way, and What Are Some Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes five K-12 school-based dating violence prevention curricula/programs that have gone through some form of evaluation and peer review. These programs were selected as a result of a broad and comprehensive review of the relationship violence literature that has been published in the past decade. Program objectives, components, outcomes, and evaluation procedures are compared and discussed. The programs that were reviewed were generally found to be not very effective at preventing relationship violence in the short term, and less effective in the long term, suggesting the need for more program depth, length, and a systematic, longitudinal process for collecting and analyzing data. Reasons for a lack of overall effectiveness in addition to suggestions for future programs and evaluations are discussed.

Relationship violence statistics are variable and range from under 10% to in excess of 60% depending on the demographics and/or size of the sample and whether students were middle/high school-aged or college students (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002; Foshee et al., 1996; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Kreiter et al., 1999; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997; O'Keefe & Treister, 1998; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Spencer & Bryant, 2000). According to the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 9.5% of high school students nationwide reported that at some point during the past year they were hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). When this data is examined on a state-by-state basis, the rates of relationship violence range from 6.9 to 18.1% (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). This survey also found that nationwide 7.7% of high school students had been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will in the past year.

Other studies have reported higher rates of relationship violence among teenagers. For example, one study of almost 2,000 eighth and ninth graders found that 25% reported that they had been victims of non-sexual relationship violence, whereas 8% reported they had been victims of sexual relationship violence (Foshee et al., 1996). O'Keefe and Treister (1998) reported that in a sample of more than 1,000 public school students in Los Angeles, 45.5% of female students and 43.2% of male students said that they had been the recipients of some form of physical aggression within a dating relationship. In addition, almost 10% of male students and 17% of female students reported that a dating partner had forced them to perform sexual acts when

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they were not willing. A study by Malik et al. (1997) that included over 700 high school students found that 39% of the students reported that they had perpetrated an act of relationship violence, whereas 38% reported that they had been victimized in a dating relationship.

At what age or grade level are students most at risk for being victims of relationship violence? A study by Burcky, Reuterman, and Kopsky (1988) asked a sample of high school girls their age when they first experienced an incident of violence within a dating relationship. Approximately 29% of the sample reported that they had been 12 to 13 years old when they had first experienced an incident of relationship violence, 40% were 14 to 15 years old, and 29% were 16 to 17 years old. These statistics clearly suggest that relationship violence is a serious public health problem for adolescents in the United States. In addition, due to the age ranges at which adolescents appear to be most at risk, prevention programs should be implemented by ninth grade (at the latest) and ideally should target middle school aged students.

The goals of this article are to present the results of a comprehensive review of school-based adolescent relationship violence prevention programs that have been evaluated and undergone some form of peer review, to discuss the effectiveness of these programs in reducing relationship violence, and to make some recommendations about how programs might better address and prevent relationship violence.

METHODS

This review began with a broad survey of the literature programs/curricula that focused on relationship violence and had been implemented and evaluated in a school setting. The review was comprehensive and focused on a broad search of the literature (e.g., psychology, sociology, public health, school health, education) for peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters from 1992 to 2002, which included the evaluation of a school-based relationship violence prevention program. The keywords that were utilized in this search included *relationship*, *dating*, *violence*, *victimization*, *adolescent*, *teen*, *program*, *curriculum*, and *evaluation*. Because of our interest in focusing on the school setting, the review did not focus on relationship violence programs that were based in community settings, even if those programs had been evaluated.

RESULTS

The programs that were reviewed included Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 1998); Southside Teens About Respect (STAR) (Schewe, 2002); Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together (BRIGHT) (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997); Teen Dating Violence Program (TDVP) (Macgowan, 1997); and the London Secondary Intervention Project on Violence in Intimate Relationships (LSIP) (Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992). What follows is a brief summary of the curricula/programs with a focus on the program length, depth, goals and objectives, and reported program outcomes (for more detailed information on each program please refer to Table 1). Then key issues and shortcomings that were identified in the programs are discussed, followed by recommendations for improving programs and curricula that address teen relationship violence.

Program Objectives

There was some general agreement across the programs about the objectives that a curriculum on teen relationship violence should address (for more detailed descriptions of the individual program objectives, please refer to Table 1). The most common program objectives were to increase knowledge about relationship violence; change attitudes that justify or are supportive of relationship violence; increase the use of school or community based antiviolence programs; decrease verbal and physical aggression within dating relationships; increase help-seeking behavior; and improve conflict management skills. These objectives were generally built into the content of the curriculum as the focus of the different sessions, lessons, and/or presentations.

How Were Programs Evaluated for Effectiveness?

The programs varied in terms of the ways they were evaluated. The majority of the curricula/programs were evaluated using a treatment and nontreatment group format in which these two groups were compared on the same pre- and postprogram measures. The comprehensiveness of the evaluation also tended to vary by program. Some programs utilized lengthy surveys that included empirically tested scales, whereas others used a selection of items that addressed different aspects of relationship violence. More specifically, the Safe Dates program included items (approximately 166) and scales that evaluated psychological abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence in dating relationships. This survey also measured relationship violence norms, gender stereotyping, conflict management skills, and help-seeking behaviors. In contrast, the TDVP, which was evaluated by Macgowan (1997), was a 5 hour program that was evaluated using a 22-item survey on relationship violence. This empirical study of 440 sixth and eighth graders in Miami, FL, reported that the treatment group improved over the nontreatment group on 6 of the 22 individual items. When significant results were discussed, 2 of the items were related to knowledge about relationship violence and 4 of the items addressed attitudes about relationship violence. The contrast between the scope and quality of the evaluation of these relationship programs is fairly evident. For a more detailed description of the evaluation component of all of the programs, please refer to Table 1.

Were Programs Successful in Achieving Their Stated Objectives?

When objectives were examined and compared with the significant postprogram outcomes, students who participated in the program did not always demonstrate significant changes in attitudes and behavior related to relationship violence (for more

Table 1. Overview of the Programs Reviewed

Program Information	Program Overview/ Objectives	Research Study (or Studies)	Methods/Subjects of Evaluation	Reported Results/Outcomes
STAR (Southside Teens about Respect) Developed by Metropolitan Family Services of Chicago Evaluated by Schewe (2002)	4- to 10-session curriculum focused on increasing participants: * knowledge of the extent, causes, and solutions of dating violence * use and promotion of peer peace education * use of school-based and community antiviolence programs * attitudes that are not supportive of violence	Schewe (2002). Guidelines for developing rape prevention and risk reduction interventions: Lessons from evaluation research. In P. Schewe (Ed.), Preventing violence in relationships: Interventions across the lifespan. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association	Southside Chicago sample (94% African-American) Attrition rate of students over a 2-year period was 61% (Time 1, N=333; Time 2, N=118). Treatment (T) and nontreatment (NT) groups were compared for postprogram differences	Significant differences between treatment and nontreatment groups on the following: * Dating violence test (knowledge about dating violence) * Resources and help seeking questionnaire No significant differences between T and NT groups on the following: * Negative conflict behavior scale * Relationship skills questionnaire * Justification of violence scale * Violence supportive attitudes questionnaire
BRIGHT (Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together) Developed by Cascardi & Avery-Leaf Evaluated by Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, O'Leary, & Cano (1997)	5 session curriculum implemented in health classes that focused on: * increasing knowledge about dating violence * changing attitudes that justify dating violence * decreasing verbal/ physical aggression within dating relationship * increasing help-seeking	Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano (1997). Efficacy of a dating violence prevention program on attitudes justifying aggression. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 21, 11-17.	193 high school students Treatment (T)=102 Nontreatment (NT)=90 80% White 11% Hispanic 4% African-American	* More girls than boys reported having been aggressive in a dating relationship * Significant differences between T and NT groups on justification of interpersonal violence questionnaire * No significant differences between T and NT on justification of dating jealousy and violence
Safe Dates Developed by Vangie Foshee PhD Evaluated by Foshee Bauman, Arriaga, Helms, Koch, & Linder (2000)	10-session curriculum, theater production, and poster contest Focused on changing: * dating violence norms * gender role expectations * conflict-management skills * help-seeking behavior * attributions for violence	Foshee et al. (1998). An evaluation of Safe Dates, an adolescent violence prevention program. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88, 45-50. Foshee, Bauman, Arriaga, Helms, Koch, & Linder (2000). The safe dates project. *Prevention Researcher*, 7, 5-7.	Participants from Rural North Carolina * 1,886 eighth and ninth grade students * 77% White, 19% African-American Treatment (T) and nontreatment (NT) group design	T group improvements: ▪ less supportive of dating violence (DV) norms ▪ perceived fewer positive consequences from using DV ▪ used more constructive communication skills in response to anger ▪ less likely to engage in gender stereotyping ▪ more aware of victim/perpetrator services Behavioral reports: T versus NT ▪ 25% less psychological abuse perpetration ▪ 60% less sexual violence perpetration ▪ 60% less violence perpetrated against current dating partner

Table 1. (Continued)

Program Information	Program Overview/ Objectives	Research Study (or Studies)	Methods/Subjects of Evaluation	Reported Results/Outcomes
Teen Dating Violence Program (TDVP) Developed by the Domestic Violence Intervention Services of Tulsa, OK Evaluated by Macgowan (1997)	Five 1-hour sessions that addressed: * recognizing and understanding dating violence * understanding the role of power in abusive relationships * building positive relationships * improving communication/ problem-solving skills	Macgowan (1997). An evaluation of a dating violence prevention program for middle school students. *Violence and Victims*, 12, 223-235.	440 sixth-eighth graders in Miami, FL Majority African-American and Hispanic 22-item survey evaluated.	Treatment group improved over nontreatment group on 6 of 22 items: * 2 items from knowledge about relationship violence * 4 items from attitudes about relationship violence Male students with high academic abilities made the greatest gains in knowledge.
London Secondary Interventions Project on Violence in Intimate Relationships (LSIP) Curriculum created by London Family Court Clinic, Ontario, Canada Evaluated by: Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip (1992)	Large group presentation and a classroom discussion component (2 half-day and 2 full-day interventions) Program addressed: * students' knowledge about abusive relationships * dating violence attitudes * behavioral intentions related to intervening in dating violence	Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip (1992). An evaluation of a secondary school primary prevention program on violence in intimate relationships, *Violence and Victims*, 7, 129-146.	Four high schools (737 high school students) Students completed the LFCC Questionnaire on Violence in Intimate Relationships (48 items)	Pre- and posttest design: * Statistically significant change in the desired direction occurred with 11 of 48 items overall related to knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions surrounding dating violence. * Changes in undesired direction were found on 8 of 48 items for boys (related to coercion to have sex–e.g., "It is ok for a male to hold a female down and force her to have sex if she gets him sexually excited").

details please refer to Table 1). The most commonly reported significant postprogram difference was that program participants increased their knowledge about relationship violence (STAR, BRIGHT, TDVP, Safe Dates, and LSIP). The programs all claim success in demonstrating that participants knew more about relationship violence. However, the more relevant and difficult question to answer is how knowledge about relationship violence translates into actual violent behavior and the likelihood that one will engage in such behavior. Only a few of the programs demonstrated additional changes in participants' attitudes and patterns of thought.

The BRIGHT program highlighted a decrease in the acceptance of violence as a way to resolve conflicts with a dating partner (Justification of Interpersonal Violence Scale), but no differences in the likelihood a program participant would justify jealous, coercive, or violent behavior against a dating partner (Justification of Dating

Jealously and Violence Scale). Safe Dates identified that program participants were less likely to support dating violence norms, perceived fewer positive consequences for engaging in relationship violence, were less likely to engage in gender stereotyping, and were more aware of victim/perpetrator services in their community.

The STAR program demonstrated an increase in knowledge about resources and help-seeking behavior, but no differences between the treatment and nontreatment groups in terms of negative conflict behaviors (Conflict Behavior Scale). It is interesting to note that although the LSIP demonstrated a statistically significant change on a number of desired items (related to knowledge and attitudes about dating violence), an almost equal number of items showed changes in the undesired direction (e.g., after taking part in the program, participants were more likely to respond that it was "OK for a male to hold a female down and force her to have sex if she gets him sexually excited.")

Questions of program effectiveness that have been raised by this analysis include what comprehensive and meaningful change is, why some programs demonstrated significant change in participants' attitudes after the program, and how we should approach changes in the "undesired" direction when dealing with prevention programs. Perhaps some of this relates to the comprehensiveness of the intervention program.

Comprehensiveness of the Programs

The depth/length of the curriculum varied by program from 5 sessions (e.g., Avery-Leaf et al., 1997) to a 10-session program integrated into health classes (Foshee et al., 1998). Not surprisingly, the programs with the least amount of contact with students appeared to have the lowest impact in terms of student outcomes. Foshee's evaluation of Safe Dates (a 10-session, integrated curriculum), which included 1,886 eighth- and ninth-grade students in rural North Carolina, demonstrated that those students who had been exposed to the Safe Dates curriculum were less supportive of relationship violence norms, perceived fewer positive consequences for engaging in violent behavior within a dating relationship, used more constructive communication skills in response to anger, were less likely to engage in gender stereotyping, and were more aware of victim/perpetrator services (Foshee et al., 1998). In addition, this comprehensive program demonstrated that students who had completed the Safe Dates program reported 25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual violence perpetration, and 60% less violence perpetrated against a current dating partner (Foshee et al., 1998).

In comparison with Safe Dates, many of the other programs reviewed were much shorter in duration. For example, the BRIGHT program is a five-session (1 hour each) curriculum, integrated into health classes. A study by Avery-Leaf and colleagues (1997), which included 193 high school students, revealed that program participants were less accepting of relationship violence during an argument after completing the BRIGHT program. However, at the conclusion of the program there were no significant differences between the treatment and nontreatment groups on their justification of relationship aggression. Thus, when one compares the outcomes of a program of short duration (such as BRIGHT) with Safe Dates, Foshee's significant evaluation results are much more comprehensive. This would seem to suggest that the more deeply embedded the program is within the classroom curriculum over time, the more likely it is to produce significant changes in behavior.

How Long Is a Program Effective?

Only a few of the programs reviewed have conducted substantial longitudinal follow-up to see whether the effects of a relationship violence prevention/intervention program are sustained over time. For example, Schewe's (2002) evaluation of the STAR program demonstrated changes in behavior and attitudes over a 2-year period; however, the attrition rate in this sample (61%) must be taken into consideration when considering these results.

Foshee (2004) has some longitudinal data from the evaluation of her Safe Dates program that followed up on program participants 2, 3, and 4 years after they participated in the program. The study revealed lower levels of sexual violence, psychological abuse, and relationship abuse perpetration amongst participants up to 4 years after participating in the program, when compared with a control group. Program effectiveness over time is one of the most important indicators of meaningful change.

DISCUSSION

Improving Relationship Violence Prevention Programs: Programmatic Suggestions

The following suggestions are for improving the design and implementation of relationship violence prevention programs, based on the prior review.

Design clear program objectives that are quantifiable and/or measurable through quantitative and/or qualitative methods. Program goals and objectives need to map onto the curriculum/program and be measured by reliable methods that have been subject to rigorous scientific review. If the program goals and objectives are not met after the initial evaluation, changes may need to be made in the program/curriculum to better address program goals. This should be an ongoing process where the program is informing the evaluation and vice versa.

Limit or eliminate "add on" or "peripheral" programs that are not integrated into the official curricula of the school. The prevention literature has repeatedly demonstrated that these kinds of programs are not as effective in bringing about behavioral and attitudinal change as programs that are integrated into the existing curricula. Two of the programs that were discussed (Safe Dates and BRIGHT) were part of the health curriculum, although only for 5–10 sessions. The others were more typical of "add on" programs.

Integrate the relationship violence curricula into the classroom over a significant period of time. Many of the relationship vio-

lence prevention programs were not integrated into the classroom (e.g., a 1-hour assembly) or consisted of a short-term intervention (a few hours to a few days). The longest program that was reviewed was a 10-session curriculum (Safe Dates). It is difficult to imagine that this complex issue can be addressed in 10 one-hour sessions, and perhaps this was one of the reasons that the program objectives often did not consistently map onto the program outcomes when the evaluation was completed.

Because high stakes tests are driving education today, it is clear that schools will be reluctant to introduce relationship violence prevention programs that are outside of the traditional subject areas (e.g., math, science, English). However, integrating themes of relationship violence prevention into these subject areas could help so that teachers do not feel that they will be "deviating" too much from the tests and taking time away from preparing their students for those tests.

There is a need for an ongoing review of the literature that discusses "best practices." There is a need for an ongoing review of relationship violence programs/curricula to highlight why some programs are successful, why some are not, and what we can learn from programmatic successes and failures. In addition, no one has looked at the specific goals/objectives and the implementation procedure for other prevention curriculum (in terms of violence, smoking cessation, or other public health concerns) and compared successful programs in these realms to the relationship violence prevention curriculum. A comparison might help us learn how other programs bring about meaningful change over time and what methods or program components could inform relationship violence prevention programs.

Improving Relationship Violence Prevention Programs: The Evaluation

Two critical issues that need to be examined and some consensus reached, are what "significant" changes in relationship violence attitudes and behaviors are, and what changes imply program success/effectiveness. The findings from the Macgowan (1997) study highlight a very important point about the evaluation of relationship violence prevention programs. There needs to be some consistency across programs and evaluators about the definition of the terms "significant change" or "meaningful change." Is it a significant change if a student moves from "strongly agreeing" that hitting a dating partner is a good way to show them how you feel to "agreeing" on a Likert-type scale after participating in the program? Or should students be tested on multiple scales, using multiple methods? Some of the programs used only the analysis of survey items to evaluate whether students changed their behaviors, even if the programs consisted of only a few sessions with students.

Another suggestion for improving relationship violence prevention program evaluations includes collecting information from teachers or program staff/administrators. Information from these individuals who played key roles in the implementation of the program may help to shed some light on how attitudinal/behavioral changes in program participants may have come about, and more specifically what aspects of the program seemed effective and which seemed ineffective (see e.g., Stein, 2001). In addition, programs need to move beyond the standard pre- and posttests with the students, which typically test only cognitive change and barely get to the level of behavioral and attitudinal change. The majority of the programs/curricula examined in this review were evaluated using a survey-based instrument. The comprehensiveness of these surveys ranged from 22 items to more than 150 items. A gap in the evaluation of these programs appeared to be any kind of qualitative analysis, which may be able to shed light on the meaning of these results. It is also very important that programs attempt to build in longitudinal analysis so that behavioral change can be documented over time.

There also needs to be a more rigorous examination of why some researchers (e.g., Jaffe et al., 1992) have found that a number of participants (particularly male students) change in "undesired" directions after completing a dating violence prevention curriculum/program (e.g., being more likely to agree that it is OK for a male to hold down a female and force her to have sex if she gets him sexually excited). Certainly the goal of a relationship violence prevention program is not to have participants' attitudes or behaviors change in the undesired direction; thus, programs need to be particularly sensitive to and aware of this possibility.

Ideally, program evaluation should be continuous and comprehensive with an eye toward informing program changes on an ongoing basis. The evaluation process should continuously inform the program implementation for the program to be most effective. And once a program has been determined to be effective (through high-quality evaluation), it is important that these results be published and distributed so that other schools and districts can try to replicate an effective program.

CONCLUSION

This review of relationship violence prevention programs revealed the importance of clear program goals and objectives, high-quality evaluation, and the need for programs to be fully integrated into the school curricula. Strategies for how these goals might be achieved have been discussed, including developing relationship violence curricula that fit into more traditional disciplines (e.g., English, social studies), focusing on gaining access to students through health classes, and utilizing a high-quality evaluation process. It is important to note that this review did not come close to covering the myriad of relationship violence prevention programs that exist. In fact, some of the programs that emerged in this review in the format of curricula or final reports appeared to be very promising, yet we did not include them because they had not gone through a peer-review process (see e.g., Joyce, 2003). We encourage these agencies/organizations to publish their results so that others may replicate these programs. Relationship violence prevention is a serious public health issue, and we are calling

on professionals to evaluate their programs and disseminate their results so that all students are exposed to high-quality programs that have been successfully integrated into classroom curricula.

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