

Adolescent Dating Violence: A Review of Literature on Development,
Prevalence, Perceptions, Help-Seeking
and Prevention Programs

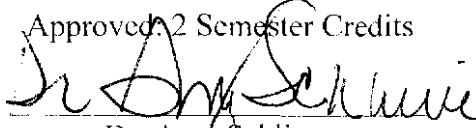
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ABSTRACT

There is an extensive amount of research available on issues related to adolescent dating violence. The purpose of this study was to explore current literature specifically related to development, prevalence, perceptions, help-seeking and prevention. By gaining an understanding of these factors, developmentally appropriate prevention and intervention programs can be designed to address inaccurate perceptions, improve help-seeking and change behaviors of victims and perpetrators of adolescent dating violence.

Research findings provide insight into the age of onset and the role of parent and peer relationships in the development of adolescent dating violence. Reasons for inconsistent estimates of the prevalence of dating violence among adolescents are discussed along with current knowledge regarding the impact of perceptions on help-seeking and behavior change. This research concludes with an examination of dating violence prevention and intervention

programs. Evaluations of current programs suggest that further research and more rigorous assessment is needed to determine how prevention and intervention programs can more consistently affect perceptions and behaviors.

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Chapter I: Introduction

While adolescent dating violence has undoubtedly existed for many years, the issue gained increased attention following a landmark study by Makepeace (1981) which reported rates of adolescent dating violence comparable to those of marital violence. Since that time, more research has shown that dating violence is a serious issue for adolescents. National estimates of dating violence among adolescents range from 10% to in excess of 30% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2006b; Halpern et al., 2001). Single-subject studies have reported even higher percentages (e.g. O'Keeffe & Treister, 1998; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; Jezl, Molidor, & Wright, 1996).

Adolescents experience physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual violence within dating relationships resulting in serious threats to their physical and mental health. Dating violence victimization is related to lower psychological well-being for both boys and girls (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003). Adolescent girls who experience dating violence are more likely to report feeling sad or hopeless, have considered or attempted suicide, be involved in a fight or carry a weapon, use a variety of substances including tobacco, cocaine, and inhalants, and engage in risky sexual behaviors (Howard & Wang, 2003b). Another study found that the experience of dating violence contributed to posttraumatic stress and dissociation for girls (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003). Adolescent boys who experience dating violence are more likely to be involved in a physical fight and fights that require medical attention. They are also more likely to report feelings of sadness or hopelessness, abuse substances (Howard & Wang, 2003a), and experience anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003).

Similar to studies of violence within adult relationships (Foshee, 1996), studies of victim and offender behavior by adolescents have shown mixed results. Some studies (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Foshee, 1996; Foshee et al., 1996) have indicated that boys are more likely to be perpetrators of abuse, particularly sexual abuse for which girls are more likely to be victims. Callahan, Tolman, and Saunders (2003) indicated that boys may also experience less dating violence than girls. However, it is important to recognize that boys do experience violence within relationships, with equally harmful effects (Howard & Wang, 2003a). Several studies have found that girls are more likely to be perpetrators of psychological and physical abuse (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; Foshee, 1996), while other studies have found equally violent behavior between genders. Malik, Sorenson, and Aneshensel (1997) and Foshee (1996) found that boys and girls are equally likely to be victims of nonsexual dating violence. It is likely that partners mutually perpetrate and sustain physical and emotional aggression within dating relationships (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). Dating violence tends to be reciprocal in nature. Perpetrators of violence are also likely to be victims and vice versa (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997).

It is clear that dating violence exists within adolescent relationships as a significant social problem (Johnson et al., 2005; Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Howard & Wang, 2003a, 2003b; Jezl, Molidor & Wright, 1996). However, research has shown that adolescents are unlikely to report the experience of abuse. Adolescents often do not recognize abuse, partly because of lack of experience with intimate relationships (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Kreiter et al., 1999; Levy, 1990). Even when adolescents do recognize the abuse, they are often reluctant to seek assistance from important adults such as teachers, school counselors, or parents (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000; Levy, 1990).

Lack of knowledge and failure to report abusive behaviors may perpetuate the cycle of violence. Research has frequently shown that without intervention, children and adolescents who experience violence within relationships will continue to have similar relationships as adults (e.g. Foshee et al., 2005; Gagne, Lavoie, & Hebert, 2004; Feiring & Furman, 2000). Thus, adolescence is an important developmental period for learning healthy relationship skills. During this time, adolescents experience social and psychological changes and begin to form attitudes and beliefs about interpersonal relationships and the abuse of power and control (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000).

Part of breaking the cycle of violence from adolescence to adulthood requires that prevention and intervention programs are developed with an understanding of how adolescents perceive and experience dating violence. An adolescent's definition of violent behavior will determine whether or not he or she is likely to recognize abusive behaviors within a relationship. If adolescents are unable to recognize abusive behavior, or don't perceive an abusive behavior as such, it is unlikely that they will report its occurrence or take the necessary steps to change their behavior. A better understanding of adolescents' perceptions of dating violence is necessary so that prevention programs can address inaccurate perceptions. Educating adolescents about abusive behaviors, whether physical, sexual, emotional or psychological, may increase the likelihood that adolescents will report abuse. Therefore, this study will examine how adolescents perceive and experience dating violence and how these factors are related to the development of healthy relationships skills, reporting of abuse, and prevention and intervention.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to explore literature on the development and prevalence of adolescent dating violence. Furthermore, this study will examine adolescent perceptions of dating violence and how prevention programs can address inaccuracies and attempt to improve help-seeking and behavior change by victims and perpetrators of adolescent dating violence.

Definition of Terms

The terms included in this section are used frequently in the discussion of dating violence. The following definitions provided by the Washington State Office of the Attorney General (2007) will clarify the meanings of these terms.

Dating violence. Dating violence occurs in a dating relationship when one person uses emotional, physical, psychological or sexual abuse to gain power and to keep control over the other person.

Emotional abuse. Emotional abuse includes actions which cause loss of self-esteem, such as name-calling, swearing, or criticizing.

Physical abuse. Physical abuse includes actions which cause physical pain or injury, such as kicking, pushing, punching, and pinching.

Psychological abuse. Psychological abuse includes actions which create fear, such as isolation or threats.

Sexual abuse. Sexual abuse includes acts of a sexual nature, whether covert or overt, that are unwelcome or uncomfortable.

Assumptions and Limitations

The following information is a discussion of the assumptions and limitations that should be considered regarding this research. The literature reviewed in this work represents a small

sample of that which is available on the subject of dating violence. Because much of the research provides conflicting evidence, readers should be aware that conclusions drawn from this literature are limited. Further research needs to be done to provide a comprehensive picture of all aspects of adolescent dating violence.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

This chapter will include a discussion of the development of dating violence during adolescence including developmental connections for the importance of addressing dating violence during adolescence, the age of onset, and an examination of *Social Learning Theory*. This will be followed by a discussion of its prevalence and adolescents' perceptions of dating violence. Specifically, the chapter will explore how adolescents' definitions and misconceptions about dating violence hinder the reporting of abusive behaviors and behavior change. Factors that contribute to adolescents' hesitancy to report abusive behaviors will also be discussed. The chapter will conclude with a description of dating violence prevention programs and necessary components for programs that lead to successful prevention and intervention.

The Development of Unhealthy Relationships

Adolescence is an important developmental period for learning healthy relationship skills. During this time, romantic relationships begin to emerge as social networks begin to include more opposite-sex friends (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Connolly, Furman, & Conarski, 2000; Feiring & Furman, 2000). Through these relationships, adolescents begin to fulfill their needs for companionship, intimacy, support, autonomy and social status (Feiring & Furman, 2000; Furman & Wehner, 1997). As adolescents begin to undergo psychological changes and experience changes in their relationships, they begin to form attitudes and beliefs about interpersonal relationships and the abuse of power and control (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). Attitudes and beliefs that are learned in early relationships serve as building blocks for the development of further skills and patterns of behavior. Thus, dating during adolescence serves as practice for adult relationships. Along with the emergence of romantic relationships comes the threat of the development of violent behaviors within these relationships. When early education

and intervention does not occur, the patterns learned in these relationships, both good and bad, become habituated (Howard & Wang, 2003a; Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003).

Burcky, Reuteran, and Kopsky (1988) studied the onset of dating violence in a sample of high school girls. Participants were asked to report their age at their first experience of violence within a dating relationship. Twenty-nine percent of the sample reported that they had been 12 to 13 years old, 40% were 14 to 15 years old, and 29% were 16-17 years old. Similarly, Foshee (1996) reported that patterns of adult violence often begin in early adolescence, finding that the first episode typically occurred by age 15.

A variety of theories exist that attempt to explain the development of dating violence during adolescence. Social learning theory is one of the most commonly applied theories (e.g. Foshee, Bauman & Linder, 1999; Prospero, 2006). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) proposes that adolescents may learn behaviors through observation of important role models, such as parents, peers, or other significant adults. When role models who are perceived as having competence, power and high status are observed using behaviors that lead to positive outcomes, these behaviors are likely to be repeated by impressionable youth. For example, when a child observes a parent being abusive towards their partner, they may perceive that the parent's aggressive behavior provides them with power by instilling fear in the partner. Having witnessed this behavior and perceiving that it led to a positive outcome for the aggressor, the child might try the behavior within their own relationships with peers or romantic partners. Similarly, children who observe positive interactions modeled by significant adults will be more likely to attempt those behaviors within their own relationships.

Several studies have supported the notion that children who witness abuse within adult relationships will be more likely to repeat similar behaviors within their own relationships.

Arriaga and Foshee (2004) found that adolescents who witnessed violence between parents were 50% to 60% more likely to experience dating violence, either as a victim or a perpetrator. Being abused by a parent may also lead to use of violence as an adolescent (Gagne, Lavoie, & Hebert, 2005). However, not all children who observe abusive relationships will tolerate similar behaviors within their own relationships (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002).

Parents are not solely responsible for the development of adolescent relationship skills. Adolescents' relationships with their peers are also influential in the development of romantic relationships. The onset of dating and the extensiveness of the relationship that develops appear to be related to the nature of one's peer group and an individual's status within that group (Furman, 1999). For example, in the context of heterosexual romantic relationships, adolescents who socialize within a large, mixed-gender peer group are more likely to develop dating relationships than those in small peer groups with few friends of the opposite sex. It is thought that mixed-gender social groups provide an opportunity for adolescents to practice and develop competency in interacting with members of the opposite sex, ultimately leading to the transfer from opposite-sex friendships to romantic relationships.

Peer relationships also play an important role in adolescents' attitudes concerning intimacy and aggression. Furman (1999) reported that peer and romantic relationships will share similar characteristics. For example, supportive friendships with peers were related to the development of supportive romantic relationships. In addition, adolescents who associate with victimized peers are more likely to experience psychological and physical violence themselves (Gagne, Lavoie, & Hebert, 2005; Arriaga & Foshee, 2004). Likewise, adolescents who associate with friends who are perpetrators are also more likely to perpetrate violence themselves (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004). It is clear from these findings that peer relationships can influence behaviors

that occur within a dating relationship, possibly having an even stronger impact than relationships with parents. Arriaga & Foshee (2004) compared the influence of witnessing violence between parents to the influence of associating with peers who use violence within dating relationships. Results indicated that peers are even more influential than parents in the development of standards for acceptable behavior within dating relationships.

While there are a number of factors that may contribute to the development of dating violence within adolescent relationships, parent and peer influences have been found to have a strong association. Adolescents enter dating relationships lacking experience to guide their decisions about what is and is not acceptable behavior within these relationships. Thus, standards and attitudes for appropriate behavior are likely to form based on observation of important individuals in their life.

Prevalence

One of the most commonly cited sources of data on the prevalence of dating violence among adolescents in the United States is the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (YRBS) (e.g. Meyer & Stein, 2004; Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Howard & Wang, 2003a, 2003b; Richard, 2002; Kreiter et al., 1999). This survey is one component of the *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System* (YRBSS) which was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to monitor health-risk behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among youth and adults in the United States (CDC, 2004). The results of the 2005 YRBS indicated that 9.3 percent of girls and 9.0 percent of boys had experienced physical violence by a dating partner during the 12 months prior to the survey. This estimate has remained fairly consistent since the YRBS began including a question to measure adolescent dating violence on the survey in 1999. Since this time, national estimates of dating

violence measured by this survey have consistently ranged between 8.8 percent and 9.5 percent (CDC, 2006b).

Some argue that these numbers are not a complete picture of the prevalence of dating violence because they overlook instances of emotional and verbal abuse (Richard, 2002). The YRBS specifically measured physical dating violence which was defined as being hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend (CDC, 2006b). However, dating violence in adolescence is not limited to physical abuse. Although the YRBS specifically measured physical violence, the CDC also acknowledges a more comprehensive definition of dating violence as “physical, sexual, or psychological violence within a dating relationship” (CDC, 2006a, p.532). Hickman, Jaycox and Aronoff (2004) described abuse as occurring on a continuum, including homicide, minor and severe physical assault, sexual assault, threats of harassment, robbery, property damage, kidnapping, stalking, economic deprivation, animal abuse and psychological coercion and intimidation. Therefore, when discussing the prevalence of dating violence among adolescents, it is important to note that estimates may vary depending on how dating violence is defined and measured for the purpose of the study.

One study based on data from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health* (Add Health) looked specifically at psychological and minor physical violence victimizations among seventh through twelfth grade adolescents in heterosexual romantic relationships. For the purpose of this study, psychological violence was defined as being called names or being treated disrespectfully in front of others, being sworn at or being threatened with violence. Physical violence was defined as having something thrown at you that could hurt you or being pushed or shoved. Most of the violent behaviors reported were psychological in nature, with approximately 1 in 5 adolescents reporting this kind of abuse. Similar to the results reported by the CDC’s

national sample, approximately ten percent of adolescents in Add Health's national study reported physical violence. The categories were then combined to determine a comprehensive total. Thirty-two percent of those surveyed reported experiencing some kind of dating violence during the 18 months prior to the interview. (Halpern et al., 2001).

Smaller scale studies have produced even more divergent results. One study of 114 male students and 118 female students from a suburban community in Chicago found that 96% of high school student participants had experienced at least one incident of psychological abuse in a dating relationship, while 59% had been a victim of physical violence and 15% had experienced sexual violence. Adolescent dating violence was defined as "any actual or threatened act that physically, sexually or psychologically abuses a member of an unmarried couple in which one or both partners is between thirteen and eighteen years old" (Jezi, Molidor, & Wright, 1996, p. 73). The estimates reported in this study are significantly more than those reported by the CDC and Add Health. Several reasons for the high percentages were proposed. Jezi, Molidor and Wright (1996) stated that the incidents of psychological victimization were likely inflated because subjects were asked to indicate whether or not they had ever experienced at least one of the psychologically abusive behaviors in a current or past dating relationship. Thus, frequency was not accounted for and the time frame was not limited as it had been in the national studies previously cited. In addition, the questionnaire item "forced to engage in sexual activity against my will" was described by the researchers as broad and open to interpretation. For example, one female participant stated that a boy kissed her when she did not really want him to. Under most operational definitions, this behavior would not be considered sexual abuse, but because the item required a yes/no response, it was counted as an affirmative response and included in the data.

These studies provide an example of how prevalence rates can be influenced by how researchers define and identify dating violence for the purpose of their study. Although prevalence statistics vary widely depending on researcher methodology, it is clear from this research that dating violence is a serious issue for adolescents.

Perceptions

One issue that contributes to the discrepancy in reports of dating violence among adolescents is that adolescents may have *misconceptions* about what constitutes violence (Richard, 2002). Dating violence, broadly defined, includes any attempt to control or dominate another person physically, sexually, or psychologically that results in harm (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). However, research has shown that adolescents have different perceptions about what constitutes abuse, and as a result, may have difficulty identifying abusive behavior as such (Levy, 1990). As cited in Kreiter et al. (1999), Symmons et al. found that 60% of high school students had been involved in at least one violent incident during a dating relationship, while only 12.7% perceived those incidents as abuse. Qualitative studies of the experience of dating violence among adolescents shed light on the reasons for these misconceptions.

Sears et al. (2006) studied adolescents' understanding and perceptions of physical and psychological abuse in dating relationships using focus groups. Results indicated that adolescents believe abuse is dependent on the context in which a behavior occurs. For example, name calling may not be considered abusive if it is perceived as *joking or demonstrating caring*. In addition, an abusive behavior is more likely to be perceived as such if it happens repeatedly or there is a threat of physical harm.

In another study that used focus groups to explore urban youths' experiences of dating violence, both male and female participants had difficulty identifying the boundaries between

play, harassment and abuse. Youth reported experiencing violence in a variety of contexts and roles, and many concluded that sometimes violence was acceptable. Participants commented that sometimes being hit or slapped could be interpreted as flirtatious, and that it did not constitute abuse until a bruise or mark was left. Female participants suggested that sometimes violence from an intimate partner could be interpreted as a sign of commitment and a reflection of love. In addition, staying with an abusive partner was also perceived by some as reflection of love (Johnson et al., 2005). Levy (1990) supported these findings, stating that lack of experience with intimate relationships may lead adolescents to confuse jealous and controlling behavior with love and devotion. Because adolescents are in the process of learning how to behave in intimate relationships, identifying behavior as play, harassment and abuse may be difficult (Johnson et al., 2005). However, having accurate perceptions of a situation does not necessarily translate into appropriate behavior from adolescents.

Prospero (2006) found that adolescents' perceptions do not necessarily match their behaviors. In his study, Prospero used a questionnaire to compare adolescents' perceptions of dating violence scenarios with the behaviors they expected of the characters in the scenarios. Results found that even when adolescents perceived the protagonist's dating partner as behaving appropriately (i.e. the situation did not warrant an aggressive response) they still expected the protagonist to respond with aggression toward their dating partner. This finding suggests that aggressive behaviors do not necessarily occur in direct response to a negative perception of the situation.

A second theme that emerged from the Sears et al., (2006) focus groups was that boys and girls define abuse differently. Both genders agreed context is an important indicator for determining whether or not a behavior is abusive. However, boys used negative intent as a

criterion for indicating abuse whereas girls focused more on the impact of the behavior. For example, boys identified a behavior as abusive if the harm caused was intentional rather than accidental or “intended as a joke” (Sears et al., 2006, p. 1197). Girls identified behavior as abusive if it “caused uneasiness, physical or emotional hurt, or fear” (Sears et al., 2006, p. 1197). The following dialogue provided by Sears et al. (2006) illustrates the difference in how boys and girls defined abuse:

Yeah, if you intend to hurt a person by doing it, it's violence, but if you are just you know you are playing around and it gets a little out of hand and it's an accident, I mean it is still not right, but it's just an accident. (Trent)

If it hurts you, then it is not a joke. (Tracy) (p. 1197)

The third theme that emerged from the Sears et al. (2006) study was that adolescents' perceived that both boys and girls use physical and psychological abuse. However, they perceived that boys use more physical abuse whereas girls are more likely to use psychological abuse. Participants attributed gender differences in the use of abusive behaviors to the different ways in which boys and girls cope with stress. For example, boys are socialized to think that it is inappropriate for them to talk about their feelings or problems. As a result, emotions build until they erupt into physical violence. On the other hand, girls were perceived as having more options for coping with intense feelings, and therefore did not need to resort to physical aggression.

In comparison, research on gender differences in dating violence by adolescents has often found that both partners are equally likely to perpetrate and sustain physical and emotional aggression (Wolfe et al., 2003; Wolfe & Feiring, 2000; Malik, Sorenson & Aneshensel, 1997). In fact, several studies have found that adolescent girls often report higher rates of perpetration of physical and emotional dating violence than boys (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Foshee et

al., 1996). Although the Sears et al. study did not discuss sexual violence, research has shown that boys and girls are equally likely to be victims of nonsexual abuse (Foshee et al., 1996). However, girls are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse, while boys are more likely to be perpetrators (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Foshee, 1996; Foshee et al., 1996).

The fourth theme that emerged from the Sears et al. (2006) study was that adolescents perceive a double standard for boys' versus girls' use of physical violence. A girl's physical aggression is more likely to be seen by peers as "joking around," partly because the abuse is less likely to cause physical harm to a boy. In comparison, youth perceived boys' use of physical aggression with girls to be highly scrutinized by peers and adults. In other words, girls are more likely to get away with behaving abusively towards a partner without the risk of being reprimanded by adults or peers.

According to Sears et al. (2006), adolescents recognize that psychological abuse reflects a struggle for control and they perceive that control is an important part of dating relationships. Girls feel the need to gain control as a result of societal norms that suggest that women need to be assertive rather than submissive to their male partner. Boys suggested that psychological abuse by males has increased because physical abuse is not acceptable as a way to gain power within a relationship. These ideas expressed by adolescents about power and control within a relationship support the notion that adolescents are only beginning to understand how to behave within relationships and that more education is needed to promote the development of healthy relationship skills.

Help-Seeking

A study conducted by Ashley and Foshee (2005) found that adolescents typically do not seek help for dating violence. When they do, it is likely that help will be sought from informal

sources such as a friend, sibling or parent. It appears to be more likely that adolescents will seek help from peers. Wolfe et al. (2003) sought input from parents regarding the implementation of a prevention program and found that parents knew little about their son or daughter's romantic relationships, especially conflict and abuse. Henton et al., (1983) reported that most adolescents seek help from peers, but often, the advice that is received is not helpful. Likewise, peers, who are often seen as confidants, are protective of their friends and unwilling to endorse or report negative or abusive behaviors (Wolfe et al., 2003).

One promising finding is that help seeking may increase with age. Ashley & Foshee (2005) suggested that as cognitive functioning increases during development, adolescents become more mature and capable of assessing their situation and seeking out the necessary resources. However, research has primarily indicated that adolescents do not seek help for dating violence perpetration or victimization. Thus, it is important to gain an understanding of the reasons why they do not seek help. In doing so, these issues can be addressed through prevention and intervention programs.

As previously discussed, adolescents' perceptions are an important factor in the development and maintenance of dating violence. Perceptions also play an important role in help-seeking behaviors. Research has shown that help seeking is influenced by perceived susceptibility and severity of the problem (Weinstein, 1989). Pirog-Good & Stets (1989) studied the role of perceptions in reporting of abuse within relationships. Participants indicated that the perception of being abused was a strong determinant of help-seeking. However, the actual occurrence and seriousness of abuse was not. While these studies indicate that perceptions will influence help-seeking, adolescents often falsely perceive violent behavior as a sign of love and commitment (Sears et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2005; Levy, 1990). Thus, it is unlikely that

adolescents who are involved in abusive relationships will seek help because they do not perceive the behaviors that occur within that relationship as abusive. Based on these findings, it seems imperative that prevention programs address inaccurate perceptions, which may increase the likelihood that abuse will be reported.

Sears et al. (2006) found that embarrassment also prevents teens from disclosing dating violence. In fact, focus group participants suggested that the more severe the abusive situation, the less likely it is that teenagers will report the abuse to the appropriate adults. According to participants, increased education may play a role in adolescents' embarrassment. Participants suggested that youth who end up in an abusive relationship fear that they might be seen as "a real dummy" or "must deserve it," because they are educated enough to know better. Similarly, Foshee et al. (1996) suggested that adolescents might be less likely to seek help from formal sources because they fear that they will be blamed and information may not be kept confidential.

Foshee et al. (1996) also cited several studies (Hamilton & Coats, 1993; Kurz, 1987; Dobash & Dobash; 1979) that indicated that victims and perpetrators of dating violence often perceived that service providers were not helpful. While these studies pertained to adult women in abusive relationships, the results have important implications for adolescents who seek help. According to Weinstein (1989), help seeking is influenced by an individual's beliefs about the effectiveness of a resource. If an adolescent lacks confidence in a service's ability to be helpful, it is unlikely that the resource will be used.

Finally, Weinstein (1989) reported that the belief in a given action to provide help is influenced by awareness that resources exist. Thus, an important goal of prevention programs is to educate adolescents about the resources available to them. A variety of programs provide education about resources that are available to students. Some programs take this a step farther

by providing the opportunity to practice using the services. These programs will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Prevention Programs

As knowledge about the prevalence and severity of adolescent dating violence has increased, so has the availability of a variety of prevention programs. The majority of the programs available are school-based, while some community-based programs have also been developed. However, only a handful have undergone evaluation to determine their effectiveness, and often with mixed or inconclusive results regarding their immediate effectiveness. Most programs do not have research to support their long-term results. Another limitation of most studies of dating violence prevention programs is that they rely on adolescent self-report of dating violence. Due to the private and sensitive nature of such acts, reports of their occurrence are particularly susceptible to response biases.

The following information will provide a summary of a sample of dating violence prevention programs. Each of these programs has undergone evaluation to determine their effectiveness with adolescents. This section will conclude with a discussion of components that have been found to be essential to effective programs.

Safe Dates.

One program that has shown some of the most promising evaluation results is the *Safe Dates Project*. This program uses theoretically based activities for primary and secondary prevention of dating violence among adolescent boys and girls. The program is designed for general populations of adolescents rather than only those at high risk. It is structured to reach large numbers of adolescents, and includes a set of specific replicable school and community activities (Foshee et al., 1996).

Primary prevention occurs when the first occurrence of dating violence is prevented. Theoretically, primary prevention is done by changing norms (or standards for acceptable behavior) and improving prosocial skills. Weak conflict management skills are also associated with partner violence. Thus, the goal of school activities is to lead to primary prevention by changing norms associated with partner violence, decreasing gender stereotyping, and improving conflict-management skills (Foshee et al., 1996).

Secondary prevention occurs when victims leave violent dating relationships or perpetrators stop being violent. Foshee et al. (1996) based secondary prevention activities on precaution adoption theory which states that decisions to seek help are based on the belief that help is needed, and the belief that given action will provide help. Therefore, secondary prevention activities provided by the program seek to address cognitive factors associated with help-seeking.

School activities include a theater production performed by peers, a 10-session curriculum, and a poster contest. In addition, the program provides community activities including services such as a crisis-line, support groups and materials for parents. Foshee et al. (1996) proposed that when compared with students who were exposed to community activities only, students exposed to both school and community activities would be less likely to initiate dating violence, more likely to leave an abusive relationship, and more likely to stop perpetrating dating violence.

Activities were implemented over a period of five months using a sample of students in the eighth and ninth grades. Baseline data for the program evaluation was collected through self-administered questionnaires. Follow-up data was collected one month after completion of the program (Foshee et al., 1996). At follow-up, measures of primary prevention indicated that

participants in the treatment group reported 25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual violence perpetration, and 60% less violence perpetrated against the current dating partner. School activities appeared to have the largest effect on influencing dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, and awareness of services (Foshee et al., 1998).

When measuring secondary prevention, results showed that although victims and perpetrators in the treatment group became significantly more aware of services than those in the control condition, there were no between-group differences in help seeking. Help seeking increased substantially from base-line to follow-up in both groups. However, a minority of victims and perpetrators reported seeking help from anyone, and these adolescents sought help from friends and parents rather than from community service providers (Foshee et al., 1998).

Exposure to school activities did not increase the likelihood that victims would stop being victimized. However, this may have been due to the fact that many of the participants were dating people who were not in the sample, and therefore, not exposed to the intervention. The evaluation of the *Safe Dates* program indicated that the activities have potential for preventing adolescent dating violence. However, it is important to note that (with this study and others) it is possible that the adolescents who were exposed to the activities were more likely to give socially desirable answers at follow-up than those not exposed to them (Foshee et al., 1998).

Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together.

Another school-based program that has shown some success is the *Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together* (BRIGHT) program (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002). The BRIGHT program attempts to address both the social and psychological causes of dating violence. The program is a 5 session curriculum that attempts to increase knowledge about dating violence, change attitudes that justify dating violence, decrease physical and verbal

aggression and increase help-seeking. This program, like *Safe Dates*, recognizes that both males and females may be perpetrators and victims of dating violence.

BRIGHT has undergone a series of evaluations with a variety of results. During the initial evaluation, the program was implemented in health classes. Participants reported a decrease in the perception that dating violence was justified. A second, larger evaluation of the program, showed significant gains in knowledge, higher intentions to seek help if involved in a harmful relationship, and less acceptance of attitudes that support dating violence. A third evaluation of the program found that increased exposure to the program produced greater improvements in behavioral intentions, but had the unintended effect of reducing help-seeking intentions (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002).

Youth Relationships Project.

Youth Relationships Project (YRP) is an 18-session community-based program designed for at-risk youth. The curriculum includes educational awareness of abuse and power dynamics in close relationships, skill development, and social action. The program is interactive and includes a variety of learning strategies, including guest speakers, videos, behavioral rehearsal, visits to community agencies, and a social action project in the community (Wolfe et al., 2003).

The educational awareness sessions focus on helping teens recognize and identify abusive behaviors, with an emphasis on power dynamics in male-female relationships. Participants are asked to identify their own situation and privileges, such as access to resources, jobs, education, family income, race/ethnicity, and sex. Guest speakers present information on gender-based abuse and violence and group time is spent on defining the imbalance of power and control as it relates to healthy versus unhealthy relationships (Wolfe et al., 2003).

The skill development sessions help participants gain knowledge of options for healthy conflict resolution and how to avoid abusive situations. Participants have opportunities to practice communication skills such as listening, empathy, emotional expressiveness and assertive problem solving by applying them to scenarios such as consent and personal safety in sexual relations (Wolfe et al., 2003).

Social action activities are designed to improve participants' help-seeking skills and decrease their fears of using a variety of community service agencies. Youth are given a hypothetical problem related to dating violence and are instructed on how to approach various agencies (e.g. police, counseling, rape crisis centers) for help. Students then conduct pre-arranged interviews with the agencies and report their findings back to the group (Wolfe et al., 2003).

Wolfe et al. (2003) evaluated the YRP using fifteen coeducational intervention groups. Groups were led by a man and a woman cofacilitator who modeled positive relationship skills such as power sharing and assertiveness. The facilitators were qualified professionals such as social workers who were chosen to lead groups on the basis of their experience working with youth and domestic violence. Evaluation compared study participants to a control group. Over the 2 years of the study, the treatment group was less physically abusive toward their dating partners and reported less physical, emotional and threatening forms of victimization. Participants also showed a greater decline in emotional distress symptoms than the control group. However, participants did not show growth in healthy relationship skills.

Program Comparisons and Recommendations

The programs previously summarized represent one school-based program, one community based program, and one program that combines both methods. However, there are

several other programs that have undergone evaluation, and based on these evaluations: researchers have made recommendations for important factors that practitioners should consider before choosing a program to implement with adolescents.

Meyer & Stein (2004) compared and discussed five K-12 school-based dating violence prevention programs that have undergone some sort of evaluation or peer review. The programs included *Safe Dates*, *Southside Teens About Respect (STAR)*, *BRIGHT*, *Teen Dating Violence Program (TDVP)*, and the *London Secondary Intervention Project on Violence in Intimate Relationships (LSIP)*. Evaluation provided a brief summary of the programs and focused on program length, depth, goals and objectives, and reported program outcomes.

Overall, Meyer & Stein (2004) found that 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.
(p. 199)

Program evaluation methods varied, but the majority of the programs used a treatment and non-treatment group format and compared pre- and post-program measures. All program evaluations reported that participants had increased knowledge about relationship violence following the intervention. However, only a few of the programs (*BRIGHT* and *Safe Dates*) actually demonstrated changes in participants' attitudes and thought patterns (Meyer and Stein, 2004).

The programs varied in length and depth from a large group presentation combined with classroom discussion (LSIP) to a 10-session curriculum that was integrated into health classes (*Safe Dates*). Meyer and Stein (2004) reported that programs that had the least contact with

students also had the lowest impact on student outcomes. From these findings, it was suggested that programs that are more integrated into the regular classroom curriculum over time are more likely to lead to significant behavior change. In addition, Meyer and Stein suggested that programs that are not integrated into the official school curricula should be limited or eliminated because research has repeatedly shown that they are not as effective in promoting attitudinal and behavioral change as programs that work within the existing curricula.

Based on their comparison of various prevention programs, Meyer and Stein (2004) suggested that dating violence prevention programs could be improved by being designed with clear goals and objectives that are quantifiable or measurable. In order to attain high-quality evaluations, prevention programs could be improved by better defining what constitutes a significant change in relationship violence attitudes and behaviors, and what changes indicate program effectiveness. This definition needs to be more consistent across programs and evaluations. Finally, longitudinal data needs to be collected to measure outcomes over time. Aside from the *Safe Dates* evaluation, which showed the most improvement in levels of dating violence over time, few of the programs provided longitudinal data.

Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) also reviewed several evaluations of dating violence prevention programs. The programs evaluated included *Skills for Violence Free Relationships*, STAR, LSIP, *Safe Dates*, and BRIGHT. Based on their evaluation, Avery-Leaf and Cascardi made several recommendations for the implementation of successful prevention programs. They suggested that the primary consideration should be the program recipients and aspects of program delivery. Programs should be selected based on careful consideration of the needs of the target audience. Some programs are more appropriate for general student populations whereas others should be targeted towards at-risk populations. Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) advocated

for the use of interventions that target the whole adolescent population. These programs are more likely to prevent dating violence by reaching students who are not yet involved in dating relationships, potential perpetrators who have not been identified as at risk, and high-risk individuals who might otherwise be unlikely or unwilling to participate in treatment. In addition, universal implementation may reduce the potential stigma of being associated with a dating violence group.

Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) also found that programs based on feminist theory, which focuses on males as perpetrators and females as victims, either failed to demonstrate change in attitudes toward the use of violence or showed increased acceptance of violence for some of the male students. However, programs that showed both males and females as perpetrators and victims were more successful. Thus it seems important that prevention programs be gender-neutral. The next step in developing gender-neutral programs may be to look to a wider range of theoretical perspectives to explain the development of dating violence. Whitaker et al. (2005) analyzed 11 different studies of dating violence prevention programs and found that most of them were based on a combination of social-learning theory and feminist theory. While these theories are commonly used to understand the development of dating violence, they may not apply to all circumstances or encompass all the integral factors.

Whitaker et al. (2005) also sought to assess the effectiveness of a collection of dating violence prevention programs. Their goal was to find evidence supporting the use of particular prevention strategies by comparing components of programs that were found to be effective to those of programs that were less effective. However, researchers concluded that strong conclusions supporting the effectiveness of various program components were premature due to a lack of data and the overall poor quality of program evaluations. In general, Whitaker et al.

found that program evaluations lacked behavioral measures and longitudinal data, and had poor retention rates and implementation fidelity.

One of the primary concerns noted by Whitaker et al. (2005) was that program interventions and evaluations did little to address changes in behavior. While the majority of the programs demonstrated improvement in adolescents' knowledge and attitudes regarding dating violence, few were found to positively impact behavior. According to Whitaker et al, it is still unclear whether or not changes in knowledge and attitude will lead to changes in behavior.

Of the programs evaluated by Whitaker et al. (2005), *Safe Dates* and the YRP were the only ones found to impact behavior. In addition, these programs had undergone rigorous evaluation. However, Whitaker et al. suggested that more research needs to be done to determine which components of these programs are effective in promoting behavior change. This is essential due to evidence suggesting that practitioners requesting the programs are not using them in their entirety. Whitaker et al. recommended that implementation of the programs should include all components until more research can be done to analyze the effectiveness of specific program components. Doing so will increase the likelihood that interventions will demonstrate the positive impact observed during evaluation.

Another disadvantage of many of the available programs is that their effectiveness has been evaluated through implementation with a limited population (Whitaker et al., 2005). For example, *Safe Dates* collected data from a sufficiently large sample. However, the sample was primarily representative of a rural setting and white population. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the program will demonstrate similar outcomes with more diverse populations. Whitaker et al. (2005) suggested that more research be done on cultural differences in the development of partner violence so that prevention strategies are more culturally sensitive.

Meyer & Stein (2004) and Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) advocated for the use of programs that are designed to reach general populations. They suggested that schools are ideal because they provide access to large populations and reduce stigma of participating in such programs. While Whitaker et al. (2005) acknowledged the advantages of school-based interventions, they also argued for the development of more specialized programs that might be delivered through families, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations or the media. These methods may reach an at-risk population not accessible by schools and offer different ways to engage students. Furthermore, alternative prevention programs might be necessary given the increasing pressure schools face to demonstrate students' academic success. Increased accountability for academic outcomes may decrease the amount of time schools are willing to devote to outside prevention efforts.

Chapter III: Discussion

The information provided in this section will serve as a summary of research findings derived from the review of literature on adolescent dating violence. Implications of these findings will be discussed as they relate to prevention and intervention efforts. Limitations and recommendations for future research will also be discussed. The literature reviewed in this work represents a small sample of that which is available on adolescent dating violence. Conclusions and recommendations provided here are based solely on the information attained from this sample.

Research on the prevalence of adolescent dating violence has shown inconclusive results (CDC, 2006b; Halpern et al. 2001; Jezl, Molitor, & Wright, 1996). Estimates vary widely based on study methodology and definitions of abuse. Despite inconsistency in prevalence estimates, it is clear that adolescent dating violence is a significant issue that must be addressed. Involvement in abusive relationships is related to increased threats to physical and psychological well-being for both boys and girls (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Howard & Wang, 2003a; 2003b). Furthermore, adolescents who experience abuse within dating relationships are likely to carry learned patterns of behavior into adult relationships (Foshee et al., 2005; Gagne, Lavoie, & Hebert, 2004; Feiring & Furman, 2000).

Adolescence is an important developmental period during which dating violence should be addressed. During this time, intimate relationships begin to emerge and adolescents have the opportunity to practice relationship skills (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Connolly, Furman, & Conarski, 2000; Feiring & Furman, 2000). Research has indicated that adolescents may have their first experience with dating violence as early as age 12 (Burcky, Reuterman, & Kopsky, 1988). The literature reviewed in this study identified factors related to the development

of unhealthy relationship skills at this age. First, adolescents are unfamiliar with the dynamics of intimate relationships and may lack knowledge of healthy behaviors that are needed within these relationships (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Kreiter et al., 1999; Levy, 1990). Thus, when they enter intimate relationships, they are uncertain of what is and is not appropriate. As a result, adolescents may develop unhealthy skills in early relationships, which become habituated as the relationship progresses. Second, because adolescents lack experience with intimate relationships, they may base their behavior on that of important others in their life, such as parents or peers (Gagné, Lavoie, & Hébert, 2005; Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Furman, 1999). When parents model abusive behaviors, children may use similar behaviors within their own relationships because they have observed these behaviors to be functional. Similarly, adolescents may learn healthy and unhealthy relationship skills from influential peers within their social network.

The development and prevalence of dating violence during adolescence requires that prevention and intervention programs begin early. Doing so is likely to have the most impact on forming attitudes and beliefs about appropriate behavior within dating relationships. Middle school aged students are often targeted for prevention efforts, with some researchers suggesting that prevention begin as early as grade 4, 5, or 6 (Avery-Leaf, S., & Cascardi, M., 2002).

While early prevention and intervention is needed, more research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of various prevention programs and their components. Generally, evaluations of current prevention programs have shown poor implementation integrity and a lack of evidence of long-term effectiveness. For these reasons, recommendations based on these evaluations are made with caution.

Overall, research seems to suggest that school-based interventions are essential for reaching the general population (Wolfe et al., 2003; Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002; Meyer &

Stein; 2001). Classroom-based programs provide the advantage of working interventions into the curriculum and reaching students that might not otherwise receive services, thus working in more of a preventative nature. In addition, the universal availability of these programs may decrease the likelihood that students will be targeted or labeled as having a problem.

Less research on community programs is available. These programs may provide different advantages by reaching more at-risk populations who are unlikely to respond to school-based interventions. Furthermore, community-based programs may be designed to address the more specific intervention needs of an at-risk population (Wolfe et al., 2003). Students who are already involved in abusive relationships may not receive appropriate support from school-based programs that are designed for prevention. As suggested by Whitaker et al. (2005), there is also an increased need for the development of intervention programs that are culturally sensitive. Community based programs that serve smaller groups may be better able to tailor their approach to address unique characteristics of different cultures.

Both school-based and community-based programs offer their own unique advantages. Therefore, it might be wise to combine prevention efforts for the most effective programs. *Safe Dates* (Foshee et al., 1996) utilized aspects of both methods and appeared to show the most promising outcomes. Schools and communities might benefit more adolescents by working together to offer a comprehensive school-based program like that provided by *Safe Dates* in cooperation with another successful community-based program like the YRP (Wolfe et al., 2003). In doing so, dating violence prevention services can be provided universally in schools while more concentrated intervention services are made available to at-risk populations in the community.

Changing attitudes and beliefs was one of the most common goals identified by prevention programs (Whitaker et al., 2005; Meyer & Stein, 2001). Research has shown that adolescents have unique perceptions about dating violence (Sears et al., 2006; Johnson et al. 2005) and that these perceptions influence whether or not they identify abusive behaviors as such, and the likelihood that they will report perpetration or victimization (Pirog-Godd & Stets, 1989; Weinstein, 1989). Therefore, changing perceptions to reflect more accurate knowledge about dating violence is an important step in the prevention process. Many programs currently focus their efforts on education in this area. However, research is unclear about whether changes in attitudes will bring about corresponding changes in behavior (Prospero, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2005). In other words, the belief that it is wrong to emotionally abuse your partner does not necessarily translate into the absence of those behaviors within a relationship. Therefore, more research is needed to determine interventions that affect behavior change. Prevention programs may benefit from integrating more opportunities to practice skill building so that adolescents can learn healthy behaviors that are consistent with healthy attitudes and beliefs about dating relationships. The YRP (Wolfe et al., 2003) provides a good example of how programs might integrate skill building opportunities. This program not only educated participants about the availability of community services and when it is appropriate to seek help; they also provided opportunities for participants to practice using the services, making it more likely they would feel comfortable doing so when necessary.

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