



background

Dating Violence during adolescence

Reasons For Conflict

Why some are at greater risk of being harmed

Adolescents often report anger and self-defense as reasons a relationship with an intimate partner turns violent. But research suggests dating violence is influenced by a more complex set of factors.

Some adolescents are more likely to experience dating violence, and the reasons may be linked to the nature of their intimate relationships, family experiences, and personality characteristics.

Another factor that influences relationships among teenagers is adolescence itself, an often turbulent period of major changes.

Researchers define adolescence as beginning as early as age 10, when pubescence begins, and ending when a person completes formal education, is autonomous from parents, and begins fulfilling adult role expectations. For many, such a period can stretch into their 20's.

Several general characteristics of adolescence have been observed:

- Boys physical development usually surpasses that of girls by mid-adolescence, when they are 15 to 17 years old. By then, most boys have surpassed girls in both stature and strength.
- Gender roles become more salient and rigid during adolescence. In general, boys tend to be more independent, aggressive and confident; girls, more passive, dependent, affectionate, and sensitive.

- Interactions with peers change. After approximately age 12, friendships among girls continue to be characterized by close knit and intimate relationships, while boys' relationships tend to be highly competitive and focused on dominance.

Reasons for dating vary by stage of adolescence. Early and middle adolescents are likely to list recreation and status as reasons for dating, while late adolescents were more likely to list companionship, sexual activity, and mate selection.

Reasons for Conflict

Adolescents, regardless of age, tend to interpret violence in a dating relationships as anger, confusion, or love. The reasons they give for conflict include jealousy, self-defense, intimidation, communication problems, and use of alcohol and drugs.

Related reports

*Dangerous Relationships
Dating violence accounts for at least 250,000 emergency room visits a year. Although young women are most likely to be the ones injured, they, too, inflict harm. See Report 29.*

In a study of adolescents aged 10-17 years old, the aggressor in a violent relationship most often interpreted his or her behavior as arising from confusion (60%), anger (54%), or love (31%).¹ Victims of abuse interpreted the violent behavior as a sign of anger (71%), confusion (40%), or love (27%).

Intimidation and self-defense are also frequently perceived reasons for dating violence, with adolescent males being more likely to inflict violence to intimidate and adolescent women more likely to resort to violence in self-defense.

Relationship Characteristics

Studies of late adolescents, aged 18-mid-20s, show they are more likely to experience dating violence the longer their dating relationships, the more frequently they date, the greater the number of partners they have, and the more serious their relationships become.

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Little is known about relationship characteristics and dating characteristics during early and middle adolescence.

And what is known is contradictory, perhaps because few of their relationships during last longer than six months.

Family Factors

Research into intimate partner violence among adults generally supports the theory that violent behavior is a learned response based on experiencing and witnessing physical violence within the family.

Exposure to violence as a child increases the likelihood of being involved in a violent relationship as an adolescent. Among late adolescents, males have been found to be much more likely than females to inflict or receive violence in a dating relationship if they had been exposed to child abuse. However, the evidence is far less clear among early and middle adolescents.

Personality Factors

The roles of personality factors and psychopathology in dating violence are important, but understudied topics. However thin, the research suggests that poor self-esteem, depression, and drug and alcohol use are influential factors in violent intimate relationships.

One of the more comprehensive studies to examine personality factors found that when poor self-esteem and symptoms of depression are found among girls, they are more likely to inflict violence in an intimate relationship. For boys, a history of antisocial behavior, such as delinquency, makes it more likely they will turn to violence in a relationship.

Drug and alcohol use is consistently found to be related to adolescent dating violence. In one study, 33% of the

adolescents reported that both partners were drinking during their most violent incident, and 25% reported using other drugs.²

Harm To Relationship

Surprisingly, significant numbers of adolescents appear to believe that dating violence does not harm – and may even improve – a relationship, despite the price that can be paid in injuries and feelings of anger, hurt, and regret.

The perception that dating violence is a benign or even a positive factor in a relationship is reflected in studies across all stages of adolescence.

One study of early and middle adolescents who experienced dating violence reported that 23% felt their relationship improved, 35% felt it was unchanged by violence, 12% said the relationship worsened, and 23% said the violence led to the end of the relationship.³

Older adolescents seem even more tolerant of violence in an intimate relationship. Among late adolescents,

37% reported that their relationships improved, and 41% said relationships did not change as a result of violence.⁴

Intervention

Effective treatment plans take into consideration a range of issues, including violence within a child's family; history of delinquency; personal characteristics, such as low self-esteem; and mental health issues, such as depression.

Research suggests that adolescents may need to be taught communication and other skills to help them deal with the issues arising from intimate relationships.

Very troubling are findings that suggest adolescents often don't view dating violence as destructive or unhealthy and, in fact, may believe it actually improves a relationship.

It may be some adolescents will choose to tolerate violence in a relationship. But at the very least, they need to be taught to recognize when a relationship is becoming unsafe and how to leave it safely.

references

This report was based on the following publication:

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