Mindful
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How Peers Influence Teen Dating Violence

Introduction

Compared to childhood, adolescence is a period marked by significant changes in the nature and importance of interpersonal relationships. Relationships with friends become more autonomous and central to personal well-being and, for the first time, many youth become involved in romantic relationships. Although the initiation of romantic relationships is a positive and healthy experience for many youth,[1] it is a source of violence and abuse for others. Approximately 9 percent of high school students report being hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year.[2] Teen dating violence rates appear to be even higher among certain populations, such as youth who have a history of exposure to violence.

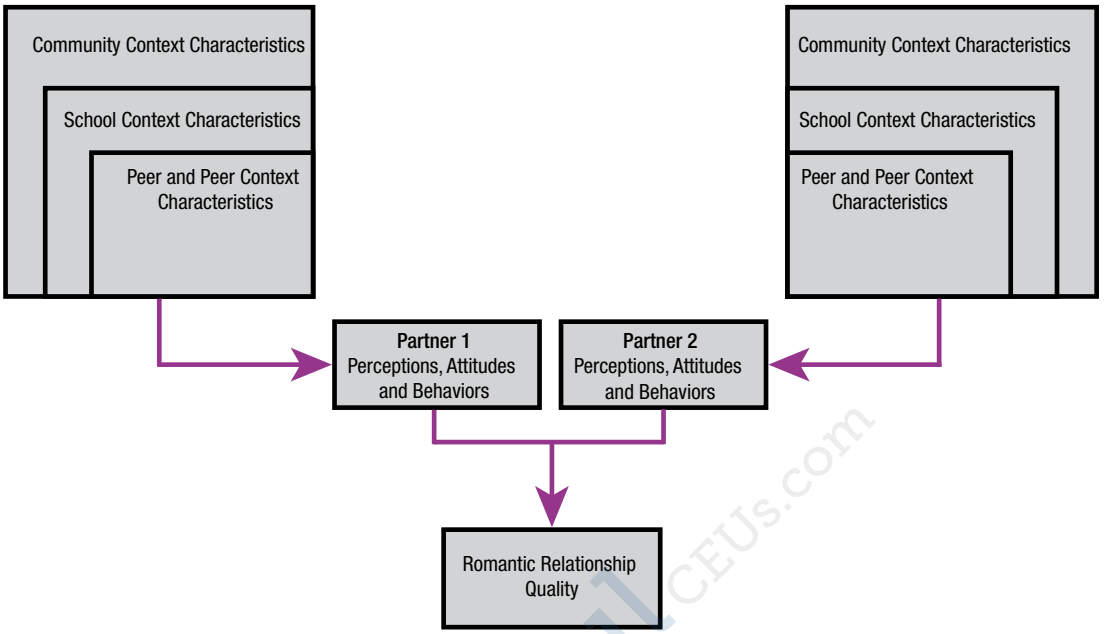
Recognizing the large number of youth who experience dating violence, policymakers at the federal and state levels have worked to raise awareness of dating violence, prevent violence from occurring, and offer more protection and services to victims. In response to this increased focus on teen dating violence, research has begun to flourish. Since 2008, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has provided close to $15 million in funding for basic, applied and policy-level research on dating violence. These projects have led to increased knowledge about risk and protective factors and psychosocial health behaviors associated with teen dating violence, and to the development and evaluation of dating violence prevention programs targeting diverse samples of youth. Research has also examined adolescents' knowledge of and barriers to using protection orders against violent partners.

This Research in Brief looks at the research from the perspective of one key emerging theme: *Peers and the contexts in which peers interact can contribute to their risk for and protection against dating violence.* Although we focus primarily on findings from NIJ-funded research, we also draw upon the broader literature on adolescent development and romantic relationships to show ways that teens shape each other's experiences across the spectrum of entering into and leaving violent romantic relationships.

Peer Roles in Teen Dating Violence

Peer roles are best understood within a multisystemic framework (see the figure, page 2). That is, when teens begin dating, each partner enters into the relationship with his or her own set of perceptions, attitudes and behaviors shaped, in part, by the broader social "contexts," or environments, in which they live. Teens interact with peers in many different social contexts, for example, schools, social clubs, sports teams, neighborhood parks or community centers. Each social context can promote attitudes and behaviors that encourage or discourage dating violence. For example, teens' and their peers' perceptions of whether violence

Figure 1. Peer Roles in Teen Dating Violence: A Multisystemic Framework



This figure illustrates the theoretical framework guiding our review of research on peers, peer contexts and teen dating violence. It is not intended to depict all potential influences on the quality of the romantic relationships among teens; there are a number of individual- and family-level factors, for example, that are not depicted in this figure.

is acceptable within romantic relationships might depend on the level of violence they witness at school or in their neighborhood.

Thus, when considering how peers might shape dating experiences, it is important to consider not only the context of teens' close peer group but also the larger school and community contexts in which teens and their peers interact.

Teens' peers have the potential to considerably shape their dating experiences. Teens spend most of their days in school with peers and, in their free time, spend proportionally more time with peers than with parents or any other adults.[3] The desire to fit in and be liked by peers heightens in adolescence, and teens begin to rely on peers as a primary source of support and guidance.[4, 5] In addition, peer groups often set norms and offer social rewards for dating; for example, youth who date are often perceived as more socially accepted or popular than youth who do not date.[6, 7, 8] As such, peers are likely to have a significant impact on teens' decisions about whether to date, whom to date, and when to break up with romantic partners. Furthermore, the experiences that teens witness or perceive their peers to have within romantic relationships might shape teens' perceptions of what is normal or acceptable in their own romantic relationships.

It is critical to consider the very public nature of teens' romantic relationships. Teen couples often interact in the presence of peers at school or in other social settings where other teens and adults are present, such as a mall, a movie theatre, or at home. Because of this, interactions that occur in public, or that happen in private but are shared with peers, might quickly become public knowledge to the larger peer network. This is particularly true in today's digital world. Even when teens are not physically together, they are often still interacting by cell phone, text messages, social media sites, online video games and other electronic outlets that allow them to disseminate information quickly and widely. As a result, when relationships become violent or unhealthy in other ways, teens are at risk for experiencing embarrassment, being publicly ridiculed, or developing negative reputations among their peers. These concerns are very real to teens; they have to contend with their image among close friends and the larger peer network on a daily basis.

Of particular interest to service providers is that the presence of peers might instigate, elevate or reduce the likelihood of teen dating violence, depending on the situation. For example, if a girl hits a boy in front of his friends, the boy might feel pressure to "save face" and hit her in return.[9] On the other hand, if peers are present when a couple is arguing, the peers might help defuse the situation and prevent the argument from escalating to violence — or peers who witness or hear about violence occurring also might seek help from an adult.

Clearly, teens' orientation toward peers and the significant amount of time spent with them affords numerous opportunities for peers to impact teens' behaviors and decisions within romantic relationships. Findings emerging from NIJ-funded research on peer roles in teen dating violence can be viewed in terms of three overarching questions:

1. Do risky peer contexts increase the likelihood that teens will experience dating violence?

2. What roles do peers play in seeking help after teens experience violence?

3. Can group interventions or those focused on social contexts reduce the risk for teen dating violence?

Do Risky Peer Contexts Increase the Likelihood That Teens Will Experience Dating Violence?

Research consistently shows the tendency for dating violence to overlap with peer victimization, suggesting that youth who are victims or perpetrators of peer violence tend to be the same youth at risk for experiencing violence within romantic relationships. As such, researchers have begun to identify risky or antisocial characteristics of teens' broader peer social environments that increase the risk for dating violence.

Peer violence and dating violence tend to co-occur.

Two studies using community-based samples directly examined the links between dating violence and peer violence, including the associations between bullying among peers and dating violence.[10, 11] One study of 1,162 teens attending high school in Illinois revealed concurrent links between youth who bully and youth who perpetrate teen dating violence, suggesting an overlap in teens who victimize peers and those who victimize dating partners.[10] Specifically, female teens who bullied others were also likely to perpetrate sexual harassment and sexual, verbal and physical dating violence. Similarly, male teens who bullied others were also likely to perpetrate sexual harassment, physical dating violence and verbal dating violence.

A survey of 5,647 teens across three northeastern states focused more specifically on the co-occurrence of cyberbullying and teen dating violence.[11] Results revealed significant overlaps in who perpetrated cyberbullying and cyberdating violence — 26 percent of teens who *perpetrated* cyberbullying also perpetrated cyberdating violence, compared with only 7 percent of teens who did not perpetrate cyberbullying. Overlap also existed in victimization experiences. Teens who *experienced* cyberbullying by peers were more than three times as likely to experience cyberdating violence, compared with those who did not experience cyberbullying (38 percent versus 13 percent, respectively).

Furthermore, a national study of 1,525 Latino teens revealed links between victimization by dating partners and a wide range of other forms of victimization.[12] About 71 percent of dating violence victims experienced peer/sibling violence, sexual victimization, stalking, conventional crime or another form of victimization in the prior year. Dating violence and peer/sibling violence were the two most common forms of victimization to co-occur. About 57 percent of teen victims of dating violence were also victims of peer/sibling violence.

The consistency with which peer violence and teen dating violence have been found to co-occur illustrates that teens who struggle with establishing healthy peer relationships also have difficulties in romantic relationships. Although we know little about the details of how this occurs, these findings are in line with theories that suggest that outcomes in one relationship tend to be shaped by experiences, beliefs and attitudes learned in other relationships.[13, 14]

Youth in risky, antisocial environments are at significant risk for teen dating violence.

Practitioners often must provide services to teens who have multiple risk factors for dating violence and thus would benefit by knowing which risk factors are *most important* to address in situations where time and resources might be limited. One study simultaneously examined multiple risk factors, including social context, within a sample of low-income teens who were receiving community-based services allocated to at-risk populations. Among the 223 youth in that study, there were 11 known risk factors for dating violence, divided into four categories: risky social environment, risky sexual history, risky family background and poor ability to self-regulate. Risky social environment represented a combination of teens' ratings of peer delinquency, exposure to peer dating abuse, negative neighborhood quality and attitudes toward relationship abuse.[15]

When the four categories of risk factors were examined simultaneously, risky social environment was the strongest correlate of physical and emotional dating violence victimization and perpetration within a romantic relationship. Teens from risky family backgrounds were also more likely to experience and perpetrate emotional and physical dating violence. However, this finding was partly explained by the fact that the more high-risk the teens' family backgrounds were, the more likely they were to become involved in risky social contexts, such as having delinquent peers or witnessing dating violence among their peers.[15]

Studies consistently show that teens who engage in delinquent behaviors are at risk for experiencing and perpetrating dating violence.[10, 11, 12, 15] Indeed, teens' own participation in delinquent behaviors is a likely indicator that they are embedded within a risky social environment. The vast majority of adolescent delinquency is committed in groups of peers, and teens' and their peers' levels of delinquency tend to be similarly aligned.[16, 17, 18] Moreover, teens who engage in delinquency are also likely to choose delinquent romantic partners, creating risky romantic relationship contexts that are, in turn, associated with higher levels of dating violence and other health-risk behaviors.[15, 19, 20]

Findings from NIJ-funded studies contribute to a growing body of literature suggesting that a diverse set of peer attributes are linked to whether teens experience or perpetrate dating violence, including close peers' and the broader peer group's behaviors, attitudes and guidance; teens' social standing among the broader peer group; and the quality of relationships with close peers.[21, 22, 23] Moreover, peer risk factors tend to be more strongly associated with dating violence perpetration and victimization in adolescence than with family risk factors.[15, 24, 25]

What Roles Do Peers Play in Help-Seeking After Teens Experience Violence?

Teen dating violence has been associated with negative psychosocial health outcomes, including delinquency, hostility and depression.[11, 12] Once teens experience violence in one relationship, they are at significant risk for experiencing violence in another relationship.[15] Thus, it is important that teens who experience dating violence seek help soon after, so they can receive services to protect against the potential psychosocial impacts of violence and reduce the likelihood of future violence.

Peers also can have a significant impact on how teens respond to dating violence. Studies have identified two ways in which peers play a role in the aftermath of dating violence: (1) Peers often serve as first responders to dating violence, and (2) peers can hinder or encourage legal help-seeking in the form of a protection order.

Peers as first responders to dating violence.

It is difficult to determine how many teens seek help after violence occurs because researchers often ask different questions about help-seeking and dating abuse. For example, some researchers examine the percentage of teens who sought help after experiencing certain forms of serious physical or sexual abuse, whereas others examine help-seeking among teens who experienced any form of dating violence. Regardless, one clear message has emerged: *Many teens do not seek help from anyone after violence has occurred, and those who do seek help most frequently turn to a friend.*[11, 12, 26, 27, 28]

In a study of 2,173 teens who reported being the victim of cyber, physical, psychological or sexual dating abuse, only 8.6 percent reported seeking help from at least one person; more females (11 percent) sought help than males (5.7 percent).[11] Very few teens — only 4.1 percent of females and 2 percent of males — sought help after they experienced dating abuse for the first time. Among the teens who did seek help, more than three-quarters (77.2 percent) turned to a friend for help and 48.5 percent turned to parents. Less than 10 percent sought help from other service providers, such as a teacher or police officer. For those who did seek help, both males (69.2 percent) and females (82 percent) were most likely to seek help from friends.

Somewhat higher rates were reported in another study that asked only about help-seeking after experiencing physical, sexual or stalking dating violence in the past year.[12] Of the roughly 90 Latino teens who had experienced such violence, about 63 percent sought help afterward (60 percent of males and 69 percent of females). Compared with psychological or cyber forms of abuse, it is possible that teens are more likely to recognize physical, sexual and stalking dating violence as abuse and thus seek help. Nonetheless, few teens (15.6 percent) sought help from formal sources such as school, social services or legal professionals. Instead, male and female teens were most likely to turn to friends for help (43.6 percent and 41.4 percent, respectively).[12]

These findings add to the growing evidence that peers tend to be the most frequent first responders to teen dating violence among male and female teens, teens of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, and teens who experience different forms of dating violence.[26, 27]

Peers play a role in teens' help-seeking.

A recent exploratory study examined teens' use of protection orders, also called civil orders of protection or restraining orders.[29] In July 2008, New York state law was modified to give teens access to protection orders without parental consent and without having a child in common with their partner. The study examined all petitions filed by dating violence victims age 18 and younger throughout 2009 and 2010 — a 2-year period shortly after the law took effect. The study found that the orders were not being used widely; victims filed only 1,200 petitions during the 2-year period. To better understand potential barriers to obtaining protection orders, the researchers conducted focus groups and interviewed teens who were potentially at risk for dating violence or had begun the process of filing for a protection order.

These conversations revealed that many youth were hesitant to obtain protection orders because they were afraid of escalating violence, were reluctant to end the relationship, or felt overwhelmed with other responsibilities. Another common barrier to seeking a protection order was how family and friends would feel about it. For example, teens were concerned about being viewed as a "snitch" or as responsible for the violence. Some teens felt ashamed to admit their victimization to others, as shown in the following examples:[29]

> *"I feel like you'd get talked about at school. 'Cause, like, I feel like we live in a small town, so everyone would know and figure out, and they'd talk about you."*

> *"Your friends whatever, like, might look at you a different way … they see it as you went to the police and you couldn't handle it — that's really not for guys."*

Teens also were concerned that protection orders place victims at risk for retaliation by the abusive partners' peer network and might lead to social isolation resulting from losing mutual friends after the breakup. For example, one teen's decision to end the relationship and seek a protective order led to the dissolution of nearly her entire peer network: "It's like I don't have anybody."[29] Another teen stated,*"[His] friends target you. When I was with him he got some other girls, and they were all, like, gang members … and now there's, like, a whole group of girls after me and, like, I don't feel safe at all."*[29]

On the other hand, teens' social networks can also be a source of motivation to seek legal protection. Teens reported that moral support from their friends and family is what helped them make it through the process of obtaining a protection order. Teens who had obtained a protection order recommended making peer support

networks available for those who are considering taking legal action against an abusive partner.[29]

Although research on protection orders in abusive teen relationships is nascent, preliminary work illustrates that teens' decisions to bring legal action against an abusive partner are shaped by more than the abusiveness of the relationship and guidance from caring adults. Teens also weigh the potential benefits of the protection order against the potential negative consequences such legal action might have on their image and social well-being among peers.

Can Group Interventions or Those Focused on Social Contexts Reduce the Risk For Teen Dating Violence?

Researchers, practitioners and policymakers are invested in identifying and implementing interventions that decrease the likelihood of dating violence among teen partners. Growing evidence supports the finding that teens tend to weigh the perceptions of peers when making decisions about romantic relationships. Such knowledge raises the question of whether interventions conducted on a group level — that is, among groups of peers within a school or other social setting — would be effective at reducing the risk for teen dating violence. Practically speaking, interventions in schools and other community-based peer settings are worthwhile because they offer opportunities to reach large numbers of teens in the environments where they spend a significant amount of their time.

Most of the effective teen dating violence interventions identified to date have been school-based programs.[30] The majority of these programs take a universal preventive approach — where all students in a school receive the intervention — and have been developed for implementation among high school students.[31] Yet, many youth have already started dating and have experienced dating violence before high school.[32] As such, the new generation of teen dating violence prevention programs is beginning to focus on middle school youth, which will increase the likelihood of reaching teens before they begin dating or when they first start to date.[33] *Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships* and *Dating Matters*™ are two examples of comprehensive, multicomponent teen dating violence prevention initiatives implemented with middle school-aged youth and their families across the United States.[32, 34]

Between 2005 and 2011, NIJ funded the development and evaluation of Shifting Boundaries, one of the first teen dating violence intervention programs designed for middle school students.[35] Shifting Boundaries was developed and tested in an early study in Cleveland, Ohio,[36] and then modified and re-evaluated in 117 sixth- and seventh-grade classes (30 public middle schools) in New York City.[37] Schools and classrooms were randomly assigned to (1) a classroom intervention with both a personal interaction and a law and justice curriculum, including discussions on relational boundaries, laws and legal penalties; or (2) a school building intervention that consisted of building-based restraining orders, a display of posters about the reporting of dating violence and harassment, and monitoring of violence "hot spots"; (3) a combined classroom and building intervention; or (4) a control group. Compared with teens in the control group, teens who received the school building intervention seemed to benefit in many ways, regardless of whether they had the classroom intervention. Specifically, 6 months after the intervention, teens who received the school building intervention showed significant reductions in sexual and other victimization by dating partners compared with teens in the control group.[35, 37] At that time, teens were presented with example cases of dating violence and asked if they would intervene. Teens who received only the school building intervention were significantly more likely than teens in the control group to report that they would intervene if they witnessed dating violence.

Community-based interventions can also reduce dating violence risk among high-risk youth. Youth who have been exposed to known risk factors might need specialized intervention that aligns with their pattern of risk. Moreover, high-risk youth might be less likely to participate fully in school-based interventions, compared with lower-risk teens. For example, they might miss more days of school or be less engaged in learning opportunities. One study developed and evaluated two community-based group interventions to prevent dating violence victimization of teen girls involved in

the child welfare system.[38] Specifically, it compared the incidence of dating violence among female teens who did not receive an intervention with female teens who completed either (1) a social learning/feminist group intervention focused on gendered attitudes, beliefs about relationships, and relational skills, or (2) a risk detection/executive-functioning group intervention focused on noticing contextual danger cues, regulating emotions and knowing how to respond in difficult situations. Teens who received one of the group treatment interventions were two to five times less likely to report being sexually or physically victimized by romantic partners over the course of the study, compared with teens who did not participate in one of the group interventions.

Additional research is needed to determine exactly why the Shifting Boundaries building-wide intervention and the community-based social learning/feminist and risk detection/executive-functioning group interventions reduced the likelihood of dating violence among teens. The interventions are similar in that they use structured peer contexts — school-based and group interventions — to deliver programming. In addition, they focus on improving teens' knowledge, attitudes and norms regarding dating violence, and they aim to teach teens how to recognize and respond to violence that occurs between youth. The findings regarding Shifting Boundaries are consistent with other research that shows positive school environments — including positive norms, values and expectations — are associated with lower levels of student aggression and bullying behaviors.[39]

Implications and Key Future Research Questions

Findings across numerous studies document many links between teens' experiences with peers and the likelihood that they will be victims of dating violence, seek help if violence occurs, and access services and legal protections. Given the importance of peers during adolescence, it is critical to identify important areas for future research. Practitioners and policymakers need the best possible evidence regarding peers and peer contexts to identify teens who are at risk for dating violence. Only through strategically smart research and evaluation can we learn how to prevent and intervene in violent teen romantic relationships and how to promote positive outcomes in romantic relationships. Here are some key future research questions:

Can we focus on risky peer networks to identify teens at risk for dating violence?

Teens who experience or perpetrate dating violence tend to also be in broader peer networks that involve multiple other forms of risky health behaviors, such as bullying, delinquency and substance use.[11, 12, 15] Thus, one way to identify youth who are at risk for dating violence is to screen for dating violence risk factors among broader peer networks that involve teens known to be involved in other forms of risky behavior. For example, screening among teens enrolled in treatment programs through the juvenile justice system might reveal large numbers of teens who have experienced dating violence. Similarly, if a high school is known to have a high rate of bullying victimization, the students might also be at high risk for dating violence.

Given the overlap of different forms of violence perpetration and victimization, screenings among high-risk peer networks could focus on risk behaviors overall rather than risk for one specific behavior. If we can identify the peer networks most at risk by virtue of the promotion of norms, attitudes and behaviors that are associated with violence, then we can target the most intensive prevention and intervention efforts at the highest risk groups of teens and potentially offer group-level wraparound services to reduce a broad range of risky behaviors. Of course, this is dependent on the existence of effective, accessible and well-implemented prevention and intervention programming for high-risk groups. It also is important to consider how best to define the boundaries of peer networks in targeting screening efforts. For example, peer networks located in specific settings such as treatment programs or detention facilities may be easier to define than those located in broader contexts such as schools, where there are multiple peer networks.

What is the best way to use peers and peer contexts as an avenue for preventing dating violence?

Given the importance of peer relationships in adolescence and the mounting evidence that peers can shape the

quality of each other's dating experiences, peers and peer contexts seem to be an appropriate target for prevention and intervention programming. In fact, a number of dating violence interventions have been widely implemented across the United States to encourage teens — who are often bystanders or the first to learn when dating violence occurs — to intervene. Other interventions are aimed at modifying peer norms about violence, particularly gender-based norms. Based on early examinations of peer- and norm-based interventions, four major questions have emerged that merit future attention by researchers and practitioners:

1. When will teens intervene in a violent relationship?

2. Why should gender be considered when designing and evaluating intervention programs?

3. What role do the norms, behaviors and reputations of the teens in the group play in understanding the effectiveness of the intervention?

4. How should technology be used to help prevent dating violence and other types of interpersonal violence?

When will teens intervene in a violent relationship?

Despite the fact that significant research resources have been dedicated to understanding peer bystander interventions, very little is known about the conditions under which adolescent peers will actually intervene in violent relationships. One study revealed that most high school teens offered nurturing responses when their friends confided in them about being victims of dating violence.[40] However, the more severe the dating violence, the more likely teens were to "respond" with avoidance, possibly illustrating an unwillingness or uncertainty about how to offer help in serious cases of violence.[41]

There are many reasons why teens might be hesitant to intervene in their friends' relationships. For example, they might not know how to intervene, they might not recognize when intervention is warranted, they might not want to betray the confidentiality of the friend who confided in them, or they might fear retaliation from the abuser or from the friend of the abuser.

Often, researchers study teens' *intentions* to intervene if they witness violence; for instance, they may give teens an example of a dating violence situation and ask whether they would intervene. Research shows that programs can increase teens' intentions to intervene if they are bystanders to dating violence or bullying.[35, 41] However, intentions do not always predict behavior, and more research is needed to determine what types of bystander programs increase teens' likelihood of actually intervening. A recent evaluation of the Coaching Boys into Men dating violence prevention program suggests that when high school athletic coaches encouraged bystander intervention in cross-gender violence, male athletes reported higher levels of intervening in abusive or harassing behaviors — such as making rude comments about a girl's body or physically hurting a girl — by their peers.[42] Similarly, evidence suggests that bystander programs can encourage teens to intervene in situations of sexual assault or harassment on college campuses.[43, 44]

Nonetheless, it is important to consider how perceptions of romantic relationships as private and "the couple's business" might prevent teens from seeking help or intervening in violence that occurs within romantic (as opposed to casual) relationships, particularly if teens learn about but do not witness the violence.[45] Moreover, there are many different ways teens could intervene in violent relationships; they could, for example, directly confront the abuser, tell a trusted adult, encourage their friend to tell a trusted adult, or provide a direct referral to services. More research is needed to determine the safest and most effective ways youth can intervene, the ways they feel most comfortable intervening, and the best way for service providers to offer teens different methods for intervening.

How should gender be considered when designing and evaluating intervention programs?

We know, based on preliminary work on peer- and norm-based interventions, that gender should be considered when designing and evaluating intervention programs. Some interventions — such as Men Can Stop Rape and Coaching Boys into Men[42, 47] — are gender-specific,

designed for male teens, and others are designed to help female teens recognize danger signs.[38] However, a limitation of many of these programs is that they tend to focus on preventing *male* teens' abusive behaviors and victimization among *female* teens. It is well-documented that both male and female teens perpetrate dating violence. Moreover, although some evidence suggests that female teens might experience more severe types of abuse compared with male teens, dating violence has been associated with negative social and health outcomes for both male and female teens.[24, 47] Thus, the development and evaluation of peer- and norm-based programs that target female-perpetrated dating violence is warranted. For example, these programs might target peer norms about the acceptability of female violence toward males — that, for example, "it's okay for girls to hit boys" or "if a boy gets slapped, he deserved it."[48]

Some programs have shown more positive effects with teens of a particular gender. For example, "Fourth R: Skills for Youth Relationships" includes individual- and school-level components designed to prevent dating violence and promote healthy relationships. Among ninth-graders, the program showed significant effects on reducing perpetration of physical dating violence among males but not among females.[49] Research on other programs that aim to modify attitudes about dating violence has revealed mixed findings, with some producing stronger effects among female teens and others producing stronger effects among male teens.[50] On the one hand, differences in the efficacy of programs for male versus female teens might imply a need for more gender-specific programming — for example, programs that target norms and perspectives known to promote dating violence for each gender. Alternatively, the focus on gender-based norms, sexuality and masculinity in many existing intervention programs might be preventing the development of programming that is equally effective at reducing male- and female-perpetrated violence. Gender-neutral programming focused on components of healthy relationships (for both boys and girls) might produce positive effects for both genders. It is also possible that programs need both gender-neutral and gender-specific components. Future research examining the role of gender in teens' responsiveness to intervention is warranted.

What role do the norms, behaviors and reputations of teens in the group play in understanding the effectiveness of the intervention?

In designing peer-based interventions, it is important to consider how the norms, behaviors and reputations of the teens that compose the group might impact the effectiveness of the intervention. Some evidence suggests that teens' *perceptions* of the attitudes and behaviors of others in their peer group are more strongly related to teens' aggressive behaviors than peers' *true* attitudes and behaviors.[51] In addition, when teens are aggregated into groups, deviancy training occurs such that, over time, the more deviant teens in the group appear to influence those who are less deviant, particularly at-risk teens. As a result, some peer-based interventions have resulted in increases in violent and delinquent behaviors.[52] Little is known about the contexts in which deviancy training might occur within peer-based teen dating violence prevention and intervention programs. Such research is especially relevant because growing evidence suggests that teens who are involved in delinquent behaviors are at high risk for experiencing and perpetrating dating violence.[11, 12, 15] Future research is needed to identify whether interventions can effectively target the highest risk peer groups, without enhancing the risk for dating violence, through the aggregation of peers who might perpetuate unhealthy dating attitudes and behaviors.

How should technology be used to help prevent dating violence and other types of interpersonal violence?

There is significant potential for using technology and electronic peer networks to prevent dating violence and promote positive interpersonal relationships. We already know a great deal about the ways that teens use technology to bully one another and perpetrate dating violence.[11] However, we know little about how we can use technology to prevent dating violence or other types of interpersonal violence. For example, the messages teens post to online social networking sites that reach wide audiences (such as Facebook and Twitter) can convey their perceptions of what is normal or acceptable in romantic relationships. As such, efforts to shape the quality of messages that youth post or share among their friends could reach a significant number of youth.

Similarly, peers could be trained to recognize and respond appropriately when adolescents post help-seeking or threatening types of messages.

How can we promote positive peer relationships as a precursor to positive romantic relationships?

It is important to keep in mind that preventing violent relationships is simply one component of the broader goal of promoting healthy, prosocial relationships. Although romantic relationships are marked by some unique characteristics — such as intense emotions, gender norms, and sexual behaviors — teens already have a great deal of experience in close interpersonal relationships before they begin dating. There is growing consensus among researchers that early interpersonal relationships with family and friends set the stage for the quality of later relationships with romantic partners.[14]

In fact, among teens who have experienced poor relationships with parents, positive relationships with peers have been shown to buffer teens against a range of risky behaviors, including risky sexual behaviors and poor romantic relationship qualities.[53, 54] Programs that help develop healthy peer relationships should begin early in adolescence, when youth are first learning to establish more autonomous and meaningful peer relationships. Youth can learn and practice with peers many of the positive qualities that are important in healthy romantic relationships, including respect, equality, supportiveness, warmth and autonomy. For example, initiatives such as *Start Strong* and *Dating Matters*™ are broadly focused on building healthy relationships starting early in adolescence, and they aim to reduce risk and promote positive relationships in the long term. Continued research is needed to determine the longitudinal effects of these initiatives on the quality of peer and romantic relationships, particularly as teens make the transition from adolescence into adulthood.

Conclusion

Romantic relationships can seem very personal in nature because they involve the behaviors, thoughts and actions of two people who commit to one another romantically. Events that occur within relationships tend to be perceived as "the couple's business."[45] Yet, there is growing evidence that romantic relationship experiences are shaped both by experiences as a couple and by the unique experiences each partner brings to the relationship. Teens place significant value on their relationships with peers while also beginning to translate the skills they have learned in close peer relationships into new relationships with romantic partners. As such, programs and policies aimed at preventing teen dating violence or promoting healthy teen relationships more broadly are likely to be most effective if they take into consideration the potential ways in which peers and peer contexts shape teens' experiences within close relationships.

For More Information

The findings discussed in this report are available online in the National Institute of Justice Office of Research and Evaluation's *Crime, Violence & Victimization Research Division's Compendium of Research on Violence Against Women 1993–2013,* at https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/223572/223572.pdf.

Visit NIJ.gov, keywords "Teen Dating Violence."

Endnotes

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