

Relationship violence prevention education in schools:

What's working, what's getting in the way, and what might be some future directions

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Abstract.

This article begins with a summary of K-12 school-based dating violence prevention curricula/programs that have been evaluated in peer reviewed journals. In general, the summary revealed that most programs offered were short-term and lacked the depth and/or comprehensiveness that would be necessary to result in lasting impact and behavior change among the participants. The programs that were reviewed were generally found to be not very effective in the short term, and less effective in the long term. The authors (Meyer and Stein) have also spent some time in the past fifteen months (April 2000 - May 2001) traveling to domestic violence/sexual assault prevention agencies across the country to discuss dating violence prevention curricula and programs. The authors have found that community agency staff across the country report that their time and access to students in schools is very limited. For example, the majority of agency staff discussed their frustration with the limitations imposed by school staff on their presentations (classroom or assembly) or access to only those students who participated in after-school programming. The article will discuss these and other obstacles faced by agency and school staff, and offer strategies for agency staff to increase their access to students and to foster collaboration with school personnel.

Overview of the article:

Despite recognition as a public health issue, dating violence among adolescents is rarely addressed from the perspective of prevention (for an exception see e.g., Foshee, Bauman, Arriaga, Helms, Koch, & Linder, 1998). When we began our review of dating violence programs and curricula, we found that some were implemented by school staff during school hours either as an assembly or as part of health class. Other programs were presented by community agency staff in after school programs. Additional programs, developed and implemented through sexual assault or domestic violence agencies, were conducted in community settings. In addition to a lack of comprehensive programs, there appeared to be a tension between staff from schools and those from community agencies over the location of these prevention programs. Should these programs take place in school classrooms or outside of school in community agencies?

The goals of this review are to 1) highlight dating violence curricula/programs that have been evaluated; 2) discuss the key issues regarding the implementation and the evaluation of these specific programs; and 3) suggest some general strategies for improving the impact and effectiveness of dating violence prevention programs, particularly those implemented in the school setting.

Overview of the problem of dating violence.

Dating violence statistics are variable and range from under 10 percent to in excess of 60 percent depending on the demographics and/or size of the sample, and whether students were middle/high school aged or college students (e.g., Foshee, Linder, Bauman, Langwick, Arriaga, Heath, McMahon, Bangdiwala, 1996; Kreiter, Krowchuk, Woods, Sinal, Lawless, & DuRant, 1999; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Malik,

Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997; O'Keefe & Treister, 1998). According to the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (1999) almost 9 percent of high school students nationwide reported that at some point during the past year they were hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend. This survey also found that nation wide, 8.8 percent of high school students had been forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to in the past 12 months (Kann, Kinchen, Williams, Ross, Lowry, Grunbaum, & Kolbe, 2000).

Other studies have reported higher rates of dating violence among teenagers. For example, one study of almost 2,000 8th and 9th graders found that 25 percent reported that they had been victims of non-sexual dating violence (e.g., getting hit by a dating partner) while 8% reported they had been victims of sexual dating violence (e.g., being forced to have sexual intercourse) (Foshee, et al., 1996). O'Keefe (1998) found that in a sample of over 1,000 public school students in Los Angeles, 45.5 percent of female students and 43.2 percent of male students reported that they had been the recipient of some form of physical aggression from a dating partner (e.g., being pushed, shoved, or slapped). In addition, almost 10 percent of male students and 17 percent of female students reported that a dating partner had forced them to perform sexual acts when they were not willing. A study by Malik et al. (1997) which included over 700 high school students found that 39 percent of the students reported that they had perpetrated an act of dating violence while 38 percent reported that they had been victimized in a dating relationship.

At what age or grade level are students most at risk for being victims of dating violence? A study by Burcky, Reuteran, and Kopsky (1988) asked a sample of high school girls their age when they first experienced an incident of dating violence.

Approximately 29 percent of the sample reported that they had been 12 to 13 years old when they had first experienced an incident of dating violence, 40 percent were 14 to 15 years old, and 29 percent were 16 to 17 years old. These statistics clearly suggest that prevention programs should be implemented in 9th grade (at the latest), and ideally should target middle school aged students.

Summary of existing teen dating/relationship violence prevention programs.

This review began with a broad survey of any programs that addressed dating violence and then focused on dating violence programs/curricula that had been implemented and evaluated in a school setting. Thus, our review will not focus on dating violence programs that were community based, even if they had been evaluated. The programs which we ultimately reviewed included Safe Dates (Foshee, et al., 1998); Southside Teens About Respect (S.T.A.R.) (Schewe, in press); Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together (B.R.I.G.H.T.) (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997); Teen Dating Violence Program (T.D.V.P.) (Macgowan, 1997); Teaching Peace (McDonald & Jouriles, 1998) and the London Secondary Intervention Project on Violence in Intimate Relationships (L.S.I.P.) (Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992). Briefly, the curricula/programs will be summarized with a focus on the program length, depth, goals and objectives, and their reported outcomes. Then, key issues and shortcomings that were identified in the programs will be discussed, followed by recommendations for improving programs and curricula that address teen dating violence.

What objectives did the programs/curricula address?

There was some general agreement across these programs about the objectives that a curriculum on teen dating violence should address. Most commonly the objectives were to increase knowledge about dating violence, change attitudes that justify or are supportive of dating violence, increase the use of school or community based anti-violence programs, decrease verbal and physical aggression within a dating relationship, increase help seeking behavior, and improve conflict management skills (S.T.A.R., B.R.I.G.H.T., T.D.V.P., Teaching Peace, Safe Dates & L.S.I.P.). However, it was interesting to compare the stated objectives of the programs with the reported significant outcomes. Not surprisingly, students who participated in these programs did not always demonstrate changes in attitudes and behavior surrounding dating violence as a result of their participation. The most commonly reported significant post-program difference was that program participants increased their knowledge about dating violence (S.T.A.R., B.R.I.G.H.T., T.D.V.P., Teaching Peace, Safe Dates & L.S.I.P.). An important question these results raise is whether a change in knowledge about dating violence translates into a change in actual behavior?

Evaluation of dating violence prevention programs.

The programs also varied in terms of the ways they were evaluated. The majority of the curricula/programs were evaluated using a treatment and non-treatment group where the two groups were compared on the pre and post-program measures. The comprehensiveness of the evaluation also tended to vary by program. Many programs utilized lengthy surveys that included empirically tested scales, while others used a selection of items that addressed different aspects of dating violence. More specifically,

the Safe Dates program included items/scales (approximately 166) that evaluated psychological abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence in dating relationships. This survey also measured dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, conflict management skills, and help seeking behaviors. In comparison, the Teen Dating Violence Program, which was evaluated by Mark Macgowan (1997), was a five-hour program that was evaluated using a 22-item survey on dating or relationship violence. This empirical study was based on the finding that 440 6th and 8th graders in Miami, FL in the treatment group improved over the non-treatment group on 6 of the 22 individual items. Two of the items were related to knowledge about relationship violence and four of the items addressed attitudes about relationship violence.

The findings from the Macgowan (1997) study highlight a very important point about the evaluation of prevention programs, more specifically, dating violence prevention programs. There needs to be some consistency across programs and evaluators in terms of how “significant change” or “meaningful change” is defined. Is it a “significant change” if a student moves from “strongly agreeing” that *hitting a dating partner is a good way to show them how you feel* to “agreeing” on a Likert-type scale after participating in the program? Or do students need to be tested on multiple scales, using multiple methods? Some of the programs used only the analysis of survey items to evaluate whether students experienced behavioral changes even if the programs only consisted of a few sessions with students. For example, students may be asked whether they hit their dating partner before and after participating in the curricula/program. If students’ responses show that they are less likely to report that they would hit their dating partner after participation in the curricula/program, then a change in their behavior is

assumed. But, does answering on a survey that one is less likely to hit his/her dating partner after participating in a teen dating violence prevention program translate into an actual change behavior? Perhaps by also using more qualitative methods, evaluators and researchers could look at the process by which attitudes and behavior changes take place, rather than solely depending on quantifying a behavioral change through a survey instrument.

Comprehensiveness of the programs.

The depth/length of the curriculum varied by program from five sessions (e.g., Avery-Leaf, et al., 1997) to a 10 session program integrated into health classes (Foshee, et al., 1998). Not surprisingly, the programs which were shortest in terms of length and time spent with students discussing these issues were the ones that appeared to have the least amount of impact, based on the student outcomes. Vangie Foshee's evaluation of Safe Dates (a 10 session, integrated curriculum) included 1886 8th and 9th grade students in rural North Carolina where a treatment/non-treatment group evaluation design was utilized. When the treatment and non-treatment groups were compared after completion of the program, the students who had been exposed to the Safe Dates curriculum were less supportive of dating violence norms, perceived fewer positive consequences for engaging in violent behavior within a dating relationship, used more constructive communication skills in response to anger, were less likely to engage in gender stereotyping, and were more aware of victim/perpetrator services (Foshee, et al., 1998). In addition, students who had completed the Safe Dates program reported 25 percent less psychological abuse perpetration, 60 percent less sexual violence perpetration, and 60 percent less violence perpetrated against a current dating partner (Foshee, et al., 1998).

In comparison to a program such as Safe Dates, many of the programs, which we reviewed, were much shorter in duration. For example, the B.R.I.G.H.T. program is a five session (one hour each) curriculum, which is integrated into health classes. A study by Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano (1997) included 193 high school students and also used a treatment and non-treatment group evaluation design. The study revealed that program participants were less accepting of dating violence during an argument after completing the BRIGHT program. There were no significant differences between the treatment and non-treatment group on their justification of dating aggression at the conclusion of the program. Clearly, Foshee's significant evaluation results are much more comprehensive, which is most likely due in part to the length and depth of the Safe Dates curriculum. Thus, the more deeply embedded the program is within the classroom teacher's curriculum over time, the more likely it is to produce significant changes in behavior.

How long is a program effective?

Only a few of the programs, which we reviewed, have conducted substantial longitudinal follow up to see whether the effects of a dating violence prevention/intervention program are sustained over time. For example, Schewe's evaluation of the S.T.A.R. program has demonstrated changes in behavior and attitudes over a two-year period; however, the attrition rate in this sample (61%) must be taken into consideration when considering these results.

Vangie Foshee (2001) has some preliminary longitudinal data from the evaluation of her Safe Dates program that followed up on program participants 2, 3, and 4 years after they participated in the program. In general, the studies revealed that the effects of

the program on behaviors (sexual violence, psychological abuse, and dating violence perpetration) tend to fade over time (2,3, and 4 years post-program). However, other variables, such as dating violence norms and awareness of services in the community remain relatively stable over time. Program effectiveness over time is one of the most important indicators of meaningful change.

Program developers as evaluators.

It was interesting to notice some of the dating violence programs that we reviewed were in fact evaluated by the same individual(s) who created the programs (e.g., Safe Dates and B.R.I.G.H.T.). Although the individuals who created the programs are probably most knowledgeable about what aspects of the program should be evaluated; there are many reasons why an outside evaluator might be more appropriate. Included among these reasons is that an outside evaluator is assumed to be neutral and unbiased in the success of the program. Thus, it can be assumed that both significant and non-significant results will be uncovered and reported with an eye towards understanding why a program wasn't successful in changing certain attitudes or behaviors. Upholding this standard is not meant to accuse those who evaluate their own programs of concealing their non-significant results, but rather we pose this standard as one which would remove all suggestions of author bias.

Broader issues in the field of dating violence prevention.

Now that we have discussed the evaluated curricula in the area of teen dating and relationship violence, we feel that we need to turn to the problem of gaining access to the teenagers. We have found that when we have presented our summary of teen dating violence programs to staff from sexual assault/domestic violence agencies who were

attempting to get their dating violence prevention programs into K-12 schools, that more complex issues would surface¹ than just questions of which curriculum they should utilize. More specifically, agency staff typically revealed to us the difficulty they had gaining access to students, and being provided with the time necessary to implement their programs. The resistance that community agency staff encountered from K-12 school staff often revolved around the tension surrounding the importance of inserting this kind of material/subject area into the school day. Perhaps the reluctance that the agency staff encountered is related to the imposition of high stakes tests that most states impose upon students, which then consume and paralyze the faculty and staff. Most community agency staff reported that in general, school staff allowed them to have only one hour for a presentation (classroom or assembly) or restricted their access to those students who participated in after-school programming. Ultimately, this issue of limited access may be another reason why the programs/curricula, which we reviewed, lacked a comprehensive approach to the prevention of dating violence.

Another source of information: A 1997-1998 survey of sexual assault and domestic violence agencies and their relationships with school districts: Questions of access, target audiences, and content of the presentations

In 1996 - 1997, over 500 sexual assault and domestic violence agencies responded to a survey conducted by Stein (two year project funded by the U.S Department of Education, under a grant from the Women's Educational Equity Act, and the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act, with matching funds from a private family foundation). For financial considerations, the four-page survey could only be mailed to each state's

¹ April, 2000 in PA (Stein); Oct., 2000 in OH (Stein); Nov., 2000 in KY (Stein); Jan., 2001, in MA (Stein & Meyer); Feb., 2001, in NY (Stein); Feb., 2001, in OH (Stein & Meyer); May, 2001, in FL (Stein).

coalition for sexual assault and domestic violence (n=160), with the request that each coalition then distribute it to their member agencies. In some states, there was extensive cooperation and response (for example: Florida, Connecticut, Minnesota, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Washington, Nebraska), while in other states, there was virtual silence (New Jersey, Arkansas, Maryland, Puerto Rico and Tennessee, to name a few). By no means was the sample scientific, yet according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this survey was the first attempt to gather nation-wide information on the relationships between sexual assault and domestic violence agencies and their local school districts. Although the 500 responses were indeed anecdotal and non-scientific, they nonetheless represented snapshots of the work that was going on in the field and point towards future research directions. No doubt these responses have played a big role in Stein's research for the past several years.

Questions on the survey instrument covered a wide range of topics. Included among those questions were: conditions under which access to schools were gained; age of the students; typical venue of the presentations; size of the student group at each presentation; number of times the same students received presentations; subject matter most often discussed; relationship with teachers; curricular materials used; questions asked by the students; restrictions placed on the topics discussed in classroom presentations; and limitations of the curricular materials used and suggested improvements for curricular materials.

Summary and Recommendation

Drawing both from the responses provided by agency staff to Stein's survey in 1997-1998, and our subsequent work and experience with prevention educators, we feel that agency staff need to find additional approaches other than curricular interventions to gain access to students during the school day. After several years of working with agency staff, we feel that framing the topic of teen dating violence as a matter of violence prevention and as an integral part of creating a safe school might go a long way to increasing the receptivity of this topic among school personnel. We conclude with some suggestions for getting in the schoolhouse door, rather than solely relying on running through the hallways, conducting one session after another. We hope these suggestions might produce more fruitful relationships both with students and staff and lead to deeper discussions regarding issues of relationship violence.

1. Since high stakes tests are driving education today, learn as much as you can about these tests, their objectives and the academic standards and goals that surround them. Any outsider coming into a school should connect their presentations to those standards/tests, so the teachers won't feel that they will be "deviating" too much from the tests and taking time away from preparing their students for those tests. Teachers are reluctant to give up time to those subjects that they consider to be "tangential" to the test, or that are delivered by outsiders. Check out the web site of the particular state's education department, and get the information on the tests and the curriculum standards. Before we visit any state, we go to their web site and research the health standards, social studies standards, and anything else that might connect to interpersonal violence and school safety.

2. Figure out a way to tie the presentations into the topics of **SCHOOL SAFETY AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT**. As a topic, Sexual Harassment seems to be one that schools feel warrant their attention especially since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the Davis case in May 1999 which established that schools are liable for peer-to-peer sexual harassment. This case provides an entry that didn't exist before. But please be aware that this was not a criminal case, and students cannot be put on trial for sexual harassment; that in fact, under Federal Law Title IX, it is schools who are liable and who get sued for sexual harassment. We have found that this is a common misunderstanding among sexual assault and domestic violence agency staff, and school personnel often are equally confused and often make this accusation – that students can be accused of sexual harassment.
3. If your state administers the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, get the data (it is usually given to 9-12th graders, though about 8-10 states also give it to 8th graders). Some states, like Massachusetts, include questions about dating violence (both physical and sexual violence, and the questions are asked in such a way NOT to assume heterosexual relationships). Moreover, as of the 1999 national version of the YRBS administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, dating violence questions have been added. This information can be very convincing data to have to provide to school administrators who might feel that they don't have problems in their state or district. If a particular state's data is not available, consult the data from the national sample administered and analyzed by the CDC (sample size is usually about 11,000 students).

4. Collect syllabi and/or lesson plans for the classes in which the subject of teen dating violence/gender violence might be discussed, and then integrate those presentations into the content of the course, be it health, social studies, psychology, family/consumer science or English classes.
5. Just say NO to those one-shot presentations, especially if those sessions consist of a large assembly of many students. These venues are a set-up for failure, unless the agency staff person also happens to be a rock star or basketball player who can capture the students' attention. Ask the administrator and/or teacher to allot at least four to five classroom sessions, spread out over a period of weeks, and have an outline ready, with evaluation mechanisms in place, and meet with the administrators/teachers in advance of conducting those classroom sessions. **Remind the school staff that they would never teach algebra in five sessions, or reduce foreign language instruction to only a few sessions.** So, why should discussions about building and maintaining safe and healthy relationships be reduced to two sessions? However, if you are forced to have only one session, ask that it be with the faculty and staff, first, and then with the students.
6. Improve the evaluations of programs you are able to implement in schools. Add a teacher component to the evaluations, and get beyond the standard pre- and post-tests with the students, which typically only test cognitive change and barely get to the level of behavioral and attitudinal change. The majority of the programs/curricula which we examined were evaluated using a survey-based instrument. The comprehensiveness of these surveys ranged from 22 items to over 150 items. However, a gap in the evaluation of these programs appeared to be any kind of

qualitative analysis, which may be able to shed light on the meaning of these results.

It is also very important that programs attempt to build in longitudinal analysis so that behavioral change/impacts can be documented over time. If a program can demonstrate that students' behavior changes and that this trend stays constant over time, then this would be evidence of a high quality programs which should be replicated. In addition, include the teachers in the evaluation efforts, and obtain their opinions and feedback in writing. Treat them as your allies and collaborators. Use some open-ended questions with both students and teachers or consider conducting focus groups to gain new information to complement any survey items you might utilize.

7. Join the school's various safety committees, which are required if the school district receives state or federal safe and drug-free school funds. These committees are made up of representatives from parent groups, community agencies, law enforcement and students, and would be a vehicle to participate and influence direction for student and school violence prevention education.
8. As an example of an intervention other than a curriculum, develop SCHOOL-BASED RESTRAINING ORDERS in conjunction with school personnel. Whether or not your state provides eligibility for non-cohabitating minors to take out civil restraining orders for teen dating violence, any school can create a school-based version of a restraining order. This is a somewhat more formal version of the dictive that teachers often say to their students: "Now, you two stay away from each other."
9. Competition with other agencies that also try to gain access to the schools may confuse school personnel. In particular, when both the domestic violence agency and

the sexual assault agency are both trying to gain access to schools to talk about issues of “teen dating violence,” school personnel may become confused, and wonder why they should go with one agency over another. It could end up badly – not just between the two agencies, but also for entry into the schools on these issues. Attempt to develop some agreements between the various agencies that are trying to get into the schools to implement relationship violence prevention programs.

10. Negotiate with school personnel about the age of the target audience for the dating violence prevention programs. Research (Burcky, Reuteran, & Kopsky, 1988) suggests that prevention programs should be implemented in 9th grade (at the latest), and ideally these programs should target middle school aged students. Forty percent of high school girls in this study reported that they had experienced their first incident of dating violence when they were 14 and 15 years old.
11. Consider your allies carefully. Check out who’s offering what and why; we are particularly leery of alliances with those who profess the law and order mantra (“one strike and you are out” or “zero tolerance”); those who want to increase surveillance and regulation in the lives of young people, as they criminalize them, at younger and younger ages.
12. Agency staff need to be careful about what they promise and we urge them not to bite off more than they can chew. Schools will want to work the agency staff to the bone, including conducting and analyzing surveys for them; they’ll have the agency staff running through the halls, conducting one session after another for different classes. Most likely, the schools won’t pay agency staff for their time and products.

Our advice to agency staff is not to do everything the schools ask, even if it means doing less for them.

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