

# A Phenomenological Investigation of Adolescent Dating Relationships and Dating Violence Counseling Interventions



*The Professional Counselor*  
Volume 1, Issue 3 | Pages 222-233  
© 2011 NBCC, Inc. & Affiliates  
www.nbcc.org  
<http://tpcjournal.nbcc.org>  
doi:10.15241/dgh.1.3.222

Danica G. Hays, Rebecca E. Michel, Rebekah F. Cole,  
Kelly Emelianchik, Julia Forman, Sonya Lorelle,  
Rebecca McBride, April Sikes

Despite the prevalence of dating violence, incidences often go unreported due to a lack of awareness among students as to appropriate dating behaviors. This phenomenology investigated how adolescents conceptualize and experience dating relationships. We explored adolescent females' definitions of healthy and abusive relationships, experiences with unhealthy relationships, and responses to dating violence in order to develop effective strategies to intervene with this population. Implications for school counseling and mental health counseling practice, training, interventions and future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* dating violence, adolescent, female, school counseling, mental health counseling, interventions

Dating violence, which involves actual or threatened emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse within a dating relationship, has become an increasing concern among counselors working with adolescent populations (Craigen, Sikes, Healey, & Hays, 2009; Hays, Green, Orr, & Flowers, 2007). There are significant mental, physical and behavioral consequences of adolescent dating violence, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal ideation, poor self-concept, disordered eating, substance use/abuse, risky sexual behavior, and school disengagement (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Banyard & Cross, 2008; Howard, Beck, Kerr, & Shattuck, 2005; Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007; Masho & Ahmed, 2007; O'Keefe, 2005; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Due to the severity of negative health outcomes, it is imperative for counselors to understand the experiences of adolescents to facilitate early intervention with this at risk population (Hays et al., 2007). Few studies have given voice to the individuals themselves.

Dating serves as an important developmental milestone as individuals come to understand social and relational goals. For many, dating begins in adolescence, with an estimated 72% of 11- to 14-year-olds dating before age 14 (Teen Research Unlimited, 2008). Unfortunately, young adolescents may be unaware how to behave in a dating relationship, so they are vulnerable to inaccurate messages from their family of origin, peers and the media (Connolly, Friedlander, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, 2010). With respect to family influences, many individuals are socialized that violence is a normal and appropriate response to conflict in intimate family relationships (Hays et al., 2007). Adolescents living in urban communities or experiencing socioeconomic disadvantages may be exposed to increased levels of family and community violence (Banyard, Cross, & Modecki, 2006; Vézina & Hébert 2007). Compared with their peers, female and male adolescents with a history of family violence are at a greater risk of dating violence victimization and perpetration, respectively (Laporte, Jiang, Pepler, & Chamberland, 2011).

Peers and media also influence behaviors and attitudes. Research suggests between 50 to 80% of adolescents report knowing friends who were involved in dating violence (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001; Teen Research Unlimited, 2008). Adolescents with friends who experience dating violence are more likely to perpetrate violence against their dating partner (Foshee, McNaughton, Reyes, & Ennett, 2010). Further, media exposure may impact adolescent attitudes surrounding dating violence, specifically the belief that violence is a way to resolve relationship problems (Manganello, 2008; Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008). Adolescents who prefer aggressive media such as physical or verbal violence in television, movies, music and video games are likely to exhibit violent relationship

---

Danica G. Hays, NCC, is an Associate Professor and Department Chair at Old Dominion University. Rebecca E. Michel, NCC, is a doctoral candidate and Rebekah F. Cole, NCC, is an Adjunct Professor, both at Old Dominion University. Kelly Emelianchik, NCC is an Assistant Professor at Argosy University-Atlanta. Julia Forman, NCC, is an Instructor at Walden University. Sonya Lorelle, NCC, is an Adjunct Professor at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Rebecca McBride, NCC, is an Adjunct Professor at Old Dominion University. April Sikes, NCC, is an assistant Professor at Georgia State University. Correspondence can be addressed to Danica G. Hays Old Dominion University, 110 Education Building, Norfolk, VA, 23529, [dhays@odu.edu](mailto:dhays@odu.edu).

patterns (Connolly et al., 2010). When faced with fictional dating situations, the majority of young adolescents resorted to aggressive conflict resolution techniques, such as fighting (Prospero, 2006).

Adolescent perceptions of social dating norms (Sears & Byers, 2010) as well as mental health issues may also impact students' exposure to dating violence. There is a direct relationship between tolerant attitudes toward violence and becoming a physically violent dating partner (Josephson & Proulx, 2008). Female aggression against peers and depression have also significantly predicted dating violence perpetration (Foshee et al., 2010). Clearly, there are many environmental and personal factors that contribute to relationship violence.

Dating violence is often under reported because students lack awareness about appropriate dating behaviors (Hays et al., 2007; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Adolescents may be reluctant to disclose dating violence to adults for fear of a possible confidentiality breach, personal denial of the situation, labeling harmful behaviors as "love" and fear of repercussion from the violent partner (Close, 2005). Others may believe disclosure would impact their academic performance or lead to disciplinary issues (Moyer & Sullivan, 2008). Survey data indicate that dating violence prevalence rates range from 21 to 80%, depending on type of violence (Cyr, McDuff, & Wright, 2006; Harned, 2002; Holt & Espelage, 2005; Sears & Byers, 2010; Wolitzky-Taylor, Ruggiero, Danielson, Resnick, Hanson, & Smith, 2008).

A majority of research indicates that female and male adolescents are equally likely to experience dating violence (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Sears, Byers, & Price, 2007; Schnurr & Lohman, 2008). While both males and females experience dating violence, research suggests violence has a greater impact on females than on males (Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003). Sears and Byers (2010) found adolescent females report a stronger emotional reaction to dating violence than their male peers. Thus, it is important to assess female adolescent reactions to dating violence.

There is limited research that explores dating violence perceptions and experiences of young adolescents. Previous qualitative studies have either been retrospective or involved adolescents 14 and older. One retrospective study (Draucker, et al., 2010) sought to classify typical violent events within adolescent relationships by interviewing young adults about dating violence experienced between 13 and 18. Draucker and colleagues (2010) also found that jealousy and relationship threats often led to threatening and controlling events in the future. Communication problems, such as an inability to express feelings, often led to additional disagreements among dating partners. Livingston, Hequembourg, Testa, and VanZile-Tamsen (2007) found women who had been sexually victimized as adolescents reported the following areas of vulnerability may have contributed to their victimization: lack of guardianship, inexperience with dating, substance use, social and relationship concerns and powerlessness.

In addition to retrospective studies, other researchers have explored older adolescents' experiences with dating violence. Lavoie, Robitaille, and Heberts (2000) interviewed individuals between ages 14 and 19 about their dating relationships. Participants provided examples and reasons for teen intimate partner violence. The young adults explained that physical abuse was usually aimed at provoking fear in the victim. Psychological abuse often included gossip and was meant to be damaging to adolescents' reputations. While participants generally viewed perpetrators negatively, some viewed their own violent behavior as acceptable. For example, females believed using violence in self-defense was preferred over being hurt without reciprocation. Aside from self-defense, other reasons given for abuse included: jealousy, need for power, substance use, previous violent relationships, communication problems, and need for affiliation.

Other researchers explored perceptions of dating violence among females ages 15 to 17 living in Thailand (Thongpriwan & McElmurry, 2009). Major themes that emerged included (a) descriptions of adolescent relationships, (b) influences on relationships, (c) perceptions of dating violence, (d) cycle of dating-violence experiences, and (e) influences on adolescent perceptions of dating violence. The majority of participants were 17, and the authors indicated that younger students may have different views and experiences (Thongpriwan & McElmurry, 2009).

Information gathered from qualitative studies provides researchers with information about perceived risk factors and perceptions of violence, which can aid in the development of age and culturally appropriate interventions to reduce dating violence. Adolescence is an optimal time to intervene with education and skills to promote healthy dating relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999) and school and community counselors are well-positioned to help adolescents navigate these relationships (Davis & Benschhoff, 1999; Hays, Craigen, Knight, Healey, & Sikes, 2009). To develop effective

interventions, researchers must further understand the context of adolescent dating violence. In addition, counselors must be knowledgeable about dating violence indicators, peer influence, and adolescent opinions about healthy and abusive dating relationships in order to appropriately intervene in potentially harmful dating situations (Craig et al., 2009).

While many adolescents begin dating before age 14, no previous studies to date have explored how adolescents perceive and experience dating relationships. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to capture the essence of young adolescent female conceptualizations and experiences of intimate partner relationships and potentially identify counseling interventions. The following research questions were explored: (a) How do young adolescent females conceptualize healthy and abusive dating relationships? (b) What experiences do young adolescent females identify related to unhealthy relationships? and (c) What methods do young adolescent females identify as helpful in preventing and intervening in dating violence?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Seven adolescent females ages 11 to 14 who had witnessed intimate violence participated in the study. Participants were recruited from a community group, and the primary researcher (first author) had a rapport with the group facilitator. The primary researcher secured parental consent and child assent for each participant. The females lived in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States and had been acquainted with each other at least 1 year prior to the research study. Participants were from varying racial backgrounds: four identified as White/European American, two as Asian/Pacific Islanders, and one as Native American. Participant living arrangements were mixed: two lived with a mother and father, two with divorced mothers, one with a divorced father, one with a single-never-married mother, and one with a guardian after being removed from the home due to severe child neglect. Regarding current dating relationships, two participants reported dating and all identified as “liking boys.”

### **Measures and Procedures**

IRB approval, parental consent and child assent were obtained prior to data collection. Data were collected through four independent focus group interviews averaging 45–60 minutes. The researchers utilized semi-structured open-ended questions to focus the interviews. Sample interview questions across the focus group interviews included the following: What do you think makes a good dating relationship? What do you think makes a bad dating relationship? How do you define abuse? How would you respond to abuse in a relationship? Subsequent focus group interviews were used to elaborate or clarify on responses from previous focus groups. All participants attended all focus groups. Research team members transcribed each audio-recorded focus group interview data verbatim. Focus group interviewers developed memos for each session. Participants also completed a demographic sheet that consisted of questions regarding age, race/ethnicity, gender, grade level, sexual orientation, dating behaviors and family status.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers bracketed their assumptions prior to beginning the study to ensure credibility of the results (Hays & Singh, 2011). Researchers assumed participants would: (a) report minimal knowledge of dating violence prevalence and characteristics; (b) describe instances when female peers were victims of dating violence; and (c) state uncertainty for intervening in dating violence. Each research team member independently analyzed the sentence transcript data using horizontalization. The research team then consensus coded to describe textures (meaning and depths) related to their experiences (textural descriptions) (Hays & Singh, 2012). A final codebook outlining four primary themes and several subthemes was developed from the recursive coding process.

The research team used several practices to establish trustworthiness throughout the study. The research team members maintained prolonged engagement with participants over the course of one year. During meetings, field notes were kept to capture data and self-reflective thoughts and feelings. Simultaneous data collection and analysis occurred in order to further explore themes in each subsequent interview. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and checked by another member for accuracy. During this time, memos were created to organize thoughts and connections emerging from each

interview. Researchers provided thick description by incorporating verbatim quotes throughout the data analysis and results, providing interpretive depth and detail.

## Results

The following four themes were identified: conceptualization of healthy dating relationships; conceptualization of unhealthy dating relationships; exposure to relationship violence; and dating violence interventions.

### Conceptualization of Healthy Dating Relationships

Participants identified several components of healthy relationships, including honesty, trustworthiness, openness, compassion toward animals, fun, holding opposite views and attractiveness. The first component, honesty, was best described by one participant: "If you don't know everything about that person ... you are not going to be happy because you wanted to find it out from them and not someone else." Trustworthiness was important to participants, as one stated, "you cannot really trust them if [they] are lying behind your back... I am going through that right now." A third identified component was openness: "he has to be able to be open to what is said... like when you're talking they're not judging." Compassion toward animals and nature was described by a participant: "I am a fan of people who like the earth and animals... people that abuse animals. I hate those kind." Several participants indicated they enjoyed having fun: "I like people who can make me laugh... can take a joke." Overall, they valued holding opposite views from their partner: "if you have a person that is different from you, then you can experience different things." Finally, participants agreed that they looked for attractiveness in relationships: "I want someone that's good to look at [laughs]."

Participants also identified several components of healthy relationships that related to interpersonal dynamics, including independence, security, and lack of abuse, sexual pressure and conflict. When describing healthy relationships, adolescents mentioned the importance of independence. For example, participants explained, "I need my personal time." "[Not] always around you, always calling you, always trying to get a hold of you." Security was also noted as a component of healthy relationships: "Don't we date for security? Isn't that kind of why you date? You date because you want to feel safe with someone." Participants believed physical abuse and sexual pressure should be absent from healthy relationships. A participant explained, "I have learned that the more you get beat in the head, the more brain cells you lose and you can't get brain cells back." Another participant noted, "If I didn't want to have sex then the other person wouldn't pressure me."

Participants supported varying views on the role of conflict in healthy relationships. Some participants believed less conflict was indicative of healthier dating relationships. One participant stated: "If you agree with someone there is less confrontation of any kind and it makes things a little bit easier." However, approximately half of participants viewed conflict as a normal and fun aspect of relationships: "disagreeing is kind of fun because you get to debate... no one agrees on everything, so you have arguments."

Overall, participants described characteristics of healthy dating relationships similarly to those of healthy peer and family relationships. One participant noted, "I want someone who would be nice and kind, like in any kind of relationship." Additionally, participants noted healthy dating relationships can be fragile. For example, one participant stated, "if you don't start it off with truthfulness, then if you are not honest the entire time then you may never actually see that person again if they find out who you really are." Another participant noted, "like in the movies they are in a marriage and then they get divorced." While many participants provided examples and descriptions of healthy relationships, initially 2 of the 7 participants could not clearly articulate their opinion: "I don't know the exact definition. I can see pictures in my head but I can't put it into words." As the groups progressed, participants provided additional descriptions and components of healthy relationships.

### Conceptualization of Unhealthy Dating Relationships

The second major theme refers to components of unhealthy romantic relationships, conceptualization of dating violence, and dating violence consequences. Participants believed certain components perpetuated unhealthy relationships, including addictions and abuse. Participants reported a connection between unhealthy relationships and addictions.



For instance, one participant suggested “you shouldn’t sell her wedding ring for drugs, and don’t get addicted to drugs or cigarettes or anything.” Another participant stated “one time he told her that if he had to choose he said he would choose drugs over his own children.” In addition to addiction, participants indicated abuse served to facilitate unhealthy relationships. One participant discussed how one of her friends was recently a victim of dating violence and as a result ended the relationship. She indicated, “Unhealthy would definitely be abuse, one of them cheating on the other, and unfortunately one of our girls actually had to experience that recently and she broke up with him.”

The young adolescents spent significant time conceptualizing dating violence, notably emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Emotional abuse was described as “when you’re being told that you’re worth nothing.” Another participant conceptualized physical dating violence as a male beating a female just because he can. She stated, “They can just like hurt you, they can beat you up just because...like dating, if the girl doesn’t agree with the guy if he wants to he can just, like, beat her up.” Participants also displayed knowledge of types, signs, and prevalence of dating violence. One participant suggested, “If you are going to be a victim of sexual abuse then look for signs like trying to get you to do things that you don’t want to do or touching you in a certain manner.” Another adolescent reported, “I think it is like 50 or 60% of people like experience or have couples around them that experience dating violence.”

The girls identified numerous perpetrator factors which perpetuated dating violence. Techniques to gain control over a victim included manipulation, peer pressure, and jealousy. Participants indicated perpetrators might make threats or use manipulation to force them to stay in a relationship. One participant suggested a perpetrator might say, “I will hurt you if you break up with me...and she says she will be forced to stay because she doesn’t want to get hurt.” Another girl stated, “he said nobody’s going to love you like I do,” displaying the incidence of manipulation and control. Participants also discussed how perpetrators might use peer pressure or isolation to stay in control. One participant said, “Sometimes they try to push you into doing things that [you don’t want to].” When asked by the facilitator why perpetrators may want to keep victims in isolation one participant suggested, “So they can get closer to you...and do more damage.” Further, participants discussed how perpetrators might try to use jealousy to control victims. One participant discussed how she experienced jealousy in a previous relationship. She shared, “He was trying to make me jealous by going out with [name] but it didn’t work.”

The young females brainstormed various consequences of dating violence. Specifically, they described what could happen to them physically, emotionally and behaviorally as a dating violence victim. One participant discussed physical consequences victims may face. She stated, “[one] could, um, get diseases, AIDS, you could get hurt.” Another participant explained, “you could, you could, die” demonstrating the perceived severity of victim consequences. Another participant reported the danger of abuse, “those that are exposed to emotional abuse, they could possibly have, like if they are being told they’re too fat, they could possibly become anorexic.”

When referring to the types of emotions victims may experience, one participant stated, “mixed emotions that you have like sometimes you’ll be sad, and sometimes you’ll be mad, sometimes you’re actually hurt.” Participants indicated victims may turn to substance use to relieve their pain. One participant stated: “they drink because they have a lot of stress. Sometimes people smoke and do drugs because they have too much stress on them and they do it to relieve the stress.” Participants also recognized the consequence of victim self-blame. One participant stated, “I think I know why they would blame themselves because they let themselves be attacked and they could have gone and tried to get help any chance they got.” Another participant stated, “They could have prevented it.” These statements suggest participants perceive dating violence to be the victim’s fault. Participant conceptualizations of perpetrator factors included jealousy, threats and manipulation, isolation, peer pressure, and exposure to violence within the family of origin. Victim consequences associated with dating violence were identified as physical consequence (e.g., disease, AIDS), emotional consequences (e.g., depression, suicide), body image issues, substance use, self-blame, and fear of others.

### **Exposure to Relationship Violence**

Exposure to relationship violence refers to the experiences one has with violence, including witnessing physical, sexual, or emotional violence within the family of origin, media, within the community, and in one’s peer groups. Participants reported violent acts between parents, siblings, and/or relatives. One participant indicated,

Something that happened recently between my brother and my dad, um, my dad actually threatened to hurt my brother, and, and, so my brother kind of took a hammer

just in case, just in case, cause he wouldn't hit my dad unless he really needed to and then he left for 2 days but we knew where he was so, or I knew where he was.

Many participants noted exposure to violence in the media, including the witnessing of violence via the television, magazines, the internet, and pop culture. One participant provided an example within pop culture, "what about [two pop stars], she was mad about what he did but....I think it's her fault." Another example of media exposure to violence came from television, "the thing where someone is growing up in an abusive house dating someone from a less hostile home, like it's um, kind of sounds like [two characters] from Secret Life [television show]."

In addition to pop culture and media exposure to violence, participants reported exposure within the larger community. This includes violence that takes place within neighborhoods and the larger community. For example, one participant shared:

I've actually witnessed, like on the corner [near my house] ... [The] guy in the relationship keeps grabbing her and taking her back into the car... and I got close enough to be able to see and hear... she looked at me and said help me... I felt good that I helped with the situation but I felt really bad for her.

Participants also noted exposure to violence within their own peer groups, which includes the witnessing or sharing of violence that takes place among friends and peers. Participants made a number of statements, including:

And I'm not going to say names but one of our current girls actually experienced being with one of our girls' brother. Or almost. But, I don't know...I guess he had her pinned up against the wall or something.

In addition to peer exposure to dating violence, participants reported direct personal experience with physical, emotional, and sexual relationship violence. Participants discussed violence in dating, familial, and casual relationships. Personal experience within dating relationships includes violence perpetrated or experienced during a dating relationship. One participant shared, "One of my ex-boyfriends one time pulled a knife on me because I wouldn't do some sexual things with him... he said nobody's going to love you like I do." Personal experience of violence in family of origin occurs within families where the adolescent is directly involved in the violent act. For example, one participant reported, "In my family there is a lot of yelling. It was hard because if I did one thing, he would yell at me and I was on restriction like every single day for just doing the littlest thing." Other areas of personal experience of violence include friends and peer groups. One participant explained, "I am very fun.... I'm pretty kind but I do hit my friends. It is a joke. I don't hurt them."

## Dating Violence Responses

The research team identified three primary themes regarding how participants recommended responding to dating violence: prevention strategies, factors influencing responses, and dating violence interventions. Participants proposed several methods to prevent dating violence. They suggested to "check your partner's background" by doing "criminal background" checks or asking friends about their ex-partner's behavior. It was assumed an individual's past relationship history is indicative of future behavior. One girl suggested avoiding, "a guy who has had many ex-girlfriends." They also discussed trusting their instincts about people and stated, "I know he's just not the right guy. I know that something's wrong with him, something's going to happen."

The participants discussed influences on responding to dating violence. Participants made statements suggesting they view reporting as dangerous. One female explained, "I know people who wouldn't want to tell because if you go back to that person...they can hurt you even more." Another girl stated, "What if you're like scared to see somebody about it? Like you're just like scared you're going to get into trouble about it or the person who did what was wrong will come back." Participants noted gender differences in reporting choices. For example, one participant explained, "[Girls] give in to telling people because they actually want to be safe. But boys ... they probably think they're tough." Participants also imagined scenarios where someone may choose to not report the violence due to what their friends might think. "People might actually try to cover it up because they don't want them to see that they are in a bad relationship." Another participant suggested someone's own ambivalence about the relationship could cause them to hide the violence, and stated, "They don't want their friends to know because they might like their partner at certain times."

While participants noted the challenge others may face when reporting relationship violence, the participants suggested

they would actually tell an adult or friend about violence they experience. Several participants identified a particular adult such as a parent, aunt, uncle, teacher or police as someone they would report to. One participant indicated, "I live with someone who talks to me about it all the time. My mom...she is always talking about it." One participant would tell a friend in order to be able to talk through the problem and stated, "She's a good listener and that's sometimes really all you need."

The girls had a sense if they were not treated well the best option was to end the relationship. One adolescent stated, "If he is going to tease you, he is not right for you because your partner is supposed to be nice and loving." Several girls suggested there would be warning signs they could respond to. One remarked, "If you sense it coming you can say I want to end it." Participants also noted that staying may be an option, but suggested different reasons for choosing that alternative. Some participants saw hope in resolving the conflict and suggested to "talk it out" and "ask why he is mad or sad." Another participant stated she would "try to make them happier." Other participants suggested they would stay because they would see no other options, "So you don't know what you're going to do and they think you're crazy, so you don't know what you're going to do, so you might just stay a little bit longer."

The most prevalent response to intervening in dating violence included using violence themselves. They reported imagined behaviors in a violent relationship. Participants made statements including, "I always say you abuse me, I abuse you back," and "If someone tries to, I'm just going to have to cut them." They also discussed incidents in which they or their friends have used violence in the past to resolve conflict. One girl stated, "My friend...says she kicks guys in the ankles." Two other participants recollected, "[I] remember almost having to kick this guy's butt one time."

## **Discussion**

Findings related to participant conceptualizations of healthy and unhealthy relationships, experienced relationship violence, and potential responses to dating violence. Components of a healthy relationship included openness, trustworthiness, honesty, lack of pressure to become intimate, and humor. Participants cited attractiveness, lack of physical abuse, independence, and kindness to the environment and to animals as being important. Interestingly, participants also identified conflict as a normal component of a healthy relationship. However, participants did specify healthy relationships would have less conflict than unhealthy relationships.

Participants distinguished between healthy and unhealthy dating relationships. Adolescents believed addiction and abuse perpetuated unhealthy relationships, which is similar to previous research findings (Foshee et al., 2010; Livingston et al., 2007). As with other qualitative research, adolescents exhibited awareness of verbal abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Lavoie et al., 2000; Thongpriwan & McElmurry, 2009). Furthermore, participants displayed knowledge regarding the consequences of various forms of abuse, which have been well documented in the literature (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Banyard & Cross, 2008). Participants noted physical, mental and behavioral consequences, such as the contraction of AIDS or death, depression, anger, body image issues potentially leading to anorexia, substance abuse and addiction, and self-blame in regards to not being able to prevent or stop an attack.

The young adolescents clearly noted the dynamics of power and control in unhealthy relationships. Participants discussed how a perpetrator could manipulate victims to stay in unhealthy relationships. Others cited that a perpetrator could threaten violence if the victim attempted to disengage. Also noted was how a perpetrator may isolate the victim, therefore reducing the chances of the victim leaving the relationship. Participant conceptualizations of unhealthy relationships mainly focused upon male to female violence and were consistent with forms of abuse and consequences cited in previous literature (Craig et al., 2009; Cyr et al., 2006; Hays et al., 2007; Holt & Espelage, 2005; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008).

Exposure to relationship violence was also a salient theme throughout the focus group interviews. Participants discussed the following personal exposures to violence: displays of violence in the media, witnessing violence in their communities, peer groups and family of origin, and personal experience with violence. Such exposure has been previously noted in the literature (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Banyard et al., 2006; Laporte et al., 2011; Manganello, 2008). All participants in the study report exposure to violence in some situation. It is critical to note many of the participants,

although aware of the consequences of violent behavior, had themselves resorted to violence. This was especially evident with the perpetration of violence against the opposite sex, which supports findings by Lavoie and colleagues (2000). Female adolescents cited examples of hitting their peers and digging their fingernails into another's skin to gain attention or to solve a conflict. This type of violent behavior by adolescent girls is alarming, as female aggression against peers has significantly predicted dating violence perpetration (Foshee et al., 2010).

In addition to violence, participants suggested a number of strategies to intervene with dating violence, including prevention strategies, factors influencing reporting, and dating violence interventions. Prevention strategies included knowing your partner's background, being aware of one's own safety, and trusting one's instincts. Consistent with previous research, participants indicated fear and reluctance to report dating violence due to either the potential for incarceration or further harm from the perpetrator (Close, 2005). The participants' conceptualized personal interventions ranged from hitting or abusing the perpetrator back, leaving the relationship, telling someone, or hiding the violence.

## Counseling Implications

This study fills a gap in the research on young adolescent conceptualizations of dating relationships. Adolescents exposed to dating violence are more likely to experience future relationship violence (Close, 2005). Thus, adolescence is an optimal time for school and community counselors to intervene to promote healthy dating relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Davis & Benshoff, 1999; Hays et al., 2009). Many adolescents are striving to form their identities within relationships. Without intervention, females experiencing dating violence might conceptualize themselves victims and seek future relationships to support this role (Klem, Owens, Ross, Edwards, & Cobia, 2009). However, supportive therapeutic interventions could assist adolescent females to learn healthy ways of relating to others (Klem et al., 2009). Counselors are in a position to recognize and respond to adolescent dating violence (Hays et al., 2009). Carlson (2003) asserted counselors working with youth must not only recognize violent actions, but also seek to understand the underlying issues causing such behavior. As counselors gain access to adolescent conceptualizations of dating violence, they can more appropriately and effectively intervene in harmful situations.

In order to screen, intervene and measure dating violence interventions, counselors must partner with school and community leaders. Standardized dating violence screening could be administered at school, in the community or with a health care provider (Close, 2005). Counselors could modify their language to encourage student disclosure of violence by asking if students have experienced specific events (e.g., disparaging events, violating events, controlling events), rather than broadly asking about abuse (Draucker et al., 2010). Counselors can monitor middle school student behaviors for warning signs of possible dating violence, including physical or emotional complaints without explanation of the problem, depression, and academic decline (Close, 2005). Students experiencing dating violence often have difficulty concentrating and learning in school, as dating violence is most prevalent among adolescents earning low grades (Eaton, Davis, Barrios, Brener, & Noonan, 2007; Howard, Wang & Yan, 2007). When behavioral and emotional changes are witnessed, individuals can be assessed to determine if they are experiencing relationship violence and counselors can intervene accordingly (Draucker et al., 2010).

There is no widely accepted intervention strategy to combat young adolescent dating violence in the schools. However, school counselors can rely on empirically tested prevention and intervention programs to target populations based on dating violence risk. School counselors could develop a three-tier model of support which includes (a) universal prevention programming offered to all students, (b) peer education and classroom guidance for individuals at moderate risk, and (c) support groups, individual response services and referrals for adolescents at the highest risk for dating violence (O'Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006). Since adolescent dating violence is a problem with significant mental and physical health consequences, many prevention programs have been developed to target this vulnerable population (Draucker et al., 2010). Most dating violence prevention programs universally target middle or high school students in a brief, school-based venue (Whitaker et al., 2006). Empirically tested programs strive to increase participant knowledge about dating violence, levels of abuse, warning signs, and community resources using didactic and process-based learning (O'Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006). Such programs alert participants to the deleterious impact dating violence has on both perpetrators and survivors, such as increased mental health issues, substance use and school disengagement (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Banyard & Cross, 2008; Howard et al., 2007; O'Keefe, 2005). Several programs also incorporate communication and conflict management strategies. Student perceptions of dating violence can be discussed



through such school-wide initiatives. Adolescents place a high value on peer and dating relationships; thus, they may be more motivated to develop skills to improve their relationships (Davis & Benshoff, 1999). While many prevention programs demonstrate increases in participant knowledge about dating violence, most do not measure or report significant behavioral change or target at-risk populations (O'Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006). Thus, at-risk students would benefit from additional school counseling interventions.

At the next level of support, counselors could offer peer-support programs and classroom guidance lessons to teach students healthy strategies to interact with peers and partners without resorting to relationship violence (Weisz & Black, 2010). Peer education programs might include didactic presentations, skits, art, creative writing, and public service announcements. Benefits to this modality include peer role-modeling and personal knowledge of effective ways to target peers. However, coordinating peer education programs may be time consuming and require close monitoring in order to be effective (Weisz & Black, 2010).

Classroom guidance interventions for middle school students should be age-appropriate and culturally sensitive, utilizing multiple learning modalities including role-plays, art projects, and interactive games (Close, 2005). The young females in this study affirmed that media outlets impact adolescent attitudes around violence, and research has shown a relationship between tolerant attitudes and perpetrating violence (Connolly et al., 2010; Josephson & Proulx, 2008; Manganello, 2008). Thus, counselors could initiate a dialogue to assess adolescent attitudes about violence by listening to clips from movies, television shows and popular music. Students could brainstorm dating violence prevention and intervention strategies through participation in interactive games. The young females in this study suggested knowing your partner's background, being aware of one's own safety, and trusting one's instincts. The school counselor could discuss the pros and cons of each strategy in order to correct less effective strategies offered, such as resorting to violence or hiding the abuse.

As the interviews suggested, adolescents lack effective communication skills and are likely to resort to aggressive or avoidant strategies to handle conflict (Draucker et al., 2010; Prospero, 2006). These young females could benefit from communication and conflict resolution skill training. Additionally, many young adolescents have friends experiencing dating violence and report relying on peers for support rather than disclosing dating violence to adults (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Close, 2005). Thus, young adolescents must be prepared with how to appropriately respond when a friend is in trouble. Adolescents may not know how to support their friends, as individuals in this study discussed self-blame as an acceptable response to dating violence. Females often report a stronger emotional reaction to dating violence than males, so it would be important to assess their reactions to possible abuse (Sears & Byers, 2010). Counselors could encourage students to participate in interactive skits with fictional dating scenarios to explore healthy conflict resolution, strategies to intervene when friends are experiencing abuse, benefits of adult disclosure and reactions to abuse.

At the most intensive level of support, school counselors would target individuals at serious risk for relationship violence. These might include individuals experiencing multiple forms of aggression, demonstrating aggression toward their peers, experiencing depression, using substances, or those with a family history of violence (Foshee et al., 2010; Laporte et al., 2011; Sears & Byers, 2010). Group and individual interventions targeted at females can address depression, self-esteem, substance use, aggression against peers, and anxiety, since these concerns are both risk factors and consequences of dating violence (Foshee et al., 2010). Counselors may offer support groups to adolescents experiencing dating violence. Rosen and Bezold (1996) implemented a school-based didactic support group to help young women (a) identify type and levels of abuse, (b) believe they are entitled to relationships without abuse, (c) discuss the personal consequences of dating violence, (d) enhance interpersonal skills, and (e) conceptualize themselves as able to make effective choices.

Individual responsive services may include motivational interviewing, social skills development, anger management and relationship therapy (O'Leary et al., 2006). Counselors could educate students about dating violence risk factors, including peer aggression and family violence. Female adolescents view peer violence as an acceptable self-defense technique (Lavoie et al., 2000). Counselors could teach adolescents about the cycle of violence and healthier techniques to resolve relationship conflict. Counselors working with those witnessing relationship violence might identify areas of strength, enhance self-esteem, and explore problem-solving strategies (Fontes, 2000). Counselors should assess students for known consequences of dating violence, including depression, anxiety, poor self-concept, suicidal ideation, PTSD, disordered eating, and substance use (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Banyard & Cross, 2008; Mashow & Ahmed,

2007).

One approach counselors might utilize is existential counseling. Using this framework, adolescents could explore meaning, family of origin issues, resistance to change and other existential issues in order to ultimately create new meaning outside of the violent relationship (Klem et al., 2009). However, there are limitations to this approach, notably that adolescents must be cognitively able to discuss existential concerns and must also be committed to accept responsibility for personal choices (Klem et al., 2009). Regardless of the approach, when counselors are welcoming and willing to discuss relationship issues, they can have a lasting impact on students' current and future relationships (Davis & Benschhoff, 1999).

## Limitations and Future Directions

While this research provides important information about young adolescent female perceptions of dating violence, the results must be taken into context within the limitations. An expansion of this study to explore adolescent conceptualizations of healthy relationships is warranted. This study focused on views of adolescent females and did not include the voice of males. Future studies could explore the dating perceptions and experiences of young adolescent males. Also, the sample only included seven individuals representing three ethnic groups from the same geographic region. Future research could include a more diverse sample. Study findings may not readily apply to other adolescent females, and thus additional research with various sample types and sizes is needed. Clinicians and researchers are encouraged to examine how young adolescent males and females of various demographics—as victims and perpetrators—describe and experience healthy and abusive relationships in order to effectively intervene and reduce adolescent victimization in our schools and communities.

---

## References

- Ackard, D.M., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2002). Date violence and date rape among adolescents: Associations with disordered eating behaviors and psychological health. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 26*, 455–473.
- Ashley, O. S., & Foshee, V. A. (2005). Adolescent help-seeking for dating violence: prevalence, sociodemographic correlates, and sources of help. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 36*, 25–31.
- Banyard, V. L., & Cross, C. (2008). Consequences of teen dating violence: Understanding intervening variables in ecological context. *Violence Against Women, 14*, 998–1013.
- Banyard, V. L., Cross, C., & Modecki, K. (2006). Interpersonal violence in adolescence: Ecological correlates of self-reported perpetration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 21*, 1314–1332.
- Carlson, L. A. (2003). Existential theory: Helping school counselors attend to youth at risk for violence. *Professional School Counseling, 6*, 310–315.
- Cleveland, H. H., Herrera, V. M., & Stuewig, J. (2003). Abusive males and abused females in adolescent relationships: Risk factor similarity and dissimilarity and the role of relationship seriousness. *Journal of Family Violence, 18*, 325–339.
- Close, S. M. (2005). Dating violence prevention in middle school and high school youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 18*, 2–9.
- Collins, W. A., & Sroufe, L. A. (1999). Capacity for intimate relationships: A developmental construction. In W. Furman, B. Brown, & B. Bradford (Eds.), *The development of romantic relationships in adolescence. Cambridge studies in social and emotional development* (pp. 125–147). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Connolly J., Friedlander, L., Pepler, D., Craig, W., & Laporte, L. (2010). The ecology of adolescent dating aggression: Attitudes, relationships, media use and socio-demographic risk factors. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 19*, 469–491.
- Craigen, L. M., Sikes, A., Healey, A., & Hays, D. G. (2009). School counselors' role in dating violence intervention. *Journal of School Counseling, 7*(18). Retrieved from <http://www.jsc.montana.edu/articles/v7n18.pdf>
- Cyr, M., McDuff, P., & Wright, J. (2006). Prevalence and predictors of dating violence among adolescent female victims of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 21*, 1000–1017.
- Davis, K. M., & Benschhoff, J. M. (1999). A proactive approach to couples counseling with adolescents. *Professional School*

- Counseling*, 2, 391–394.
- Draucker, C. B., Martsof, D., Stephenson, P., Risko, J., Heckman, R., Sheehan, D., Perkins, S., Washington, K., Cook, C., & Ferguson, C. (2010). Aggressive events in adolescent dating violence. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 31, 599–610.
- Eaton, D., Davis, K., Barrios, L., Brener, N., & Noonan, R. (2007). Associations of dating violence victimization with lifetime participation, co-occurrence, and early initiation of risk behaviors among U.S. high school students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22, 585–602.
- Fontes, L. A. (2000). Children exposed to marital violence: How school counselors can help. *Professional School Counseling*, 3(4), 231–237.
- Foshee, V.A., McNaughton Reyes, H. L., & Ennett, S. T. (2010). Examination of sex and race differences in longitudinal predictors of the initiation of adolescent dating violence perpetration. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 19, 492–516.
- Halpern, C. T., Oslak, S. G., Young, M. L., Martin, S. L., & Kupper, L. L. (2001). Partner violence among adolescents in opposite-sex romantic relationships: Findings from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91, 1679–1685.
- Harned, M. S. (2002). A multivariate analysis of risk markers for dating violence victimization. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 17, 1179–1197.
- Hays, D. G., Craigen, L. M., Knight, J. Healey, A. & Sikes, A. (2009). Duty to warn and protect against self-destructive behaviors and interpersonal violence. *Journal of School Counseling*, 7(11).
- Hays, D. G., Green, E., Orr, J. J., & Flowers, L. (2007). Advocacy counseling for female survivors of partner abuse: Implications for counselor education. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 46(3), 184–198.
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York, NY : Guilford Publications.
- Holt, M. K., & Espelage, D. L. (2005). Social support as a moderator between dating violence victimization and depression/anxiety among African American and Caucasian adolescents. *School Psychology Review*, 34(3), 309–328.
- Howard, D. E., Beck, K., Kerr, M., & Shattuck, T. (2005). Psychosocial correlates of dating violence victimization among Latino youth. *Adolescence*, 40, 320–331.
- Howard, D. E., Wang, M., & Yan, F. (2007). Psychosocial factors associated with reports of physical dating violence among U.S. adolescent females. *Adolescence*, 42, 311–324.
- Josephson, W. L., & Proulx, J. B. (2008). Violence in young adolescents' relationships: A path model. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 23(2), 189–208.
- Klem, J., Owens, A., Ross, A., Edwards, L., & Cobia, D. C. (2009). Dating violence: Counseling adolescent females from an existential perspective. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, 48, 48–64.
- Laporte, L., Jiang, D., Pepler, D. J., & Chamberland, C. (2011). The relationship between adolescents' experience of family violence and dating violence. *Youth & Society*, 43, 3–27. doi:10.1177/0044118X09336631
- Lavoie, F., Robitaille, L., & Hebert, M. (2000). Teen dating relationships and aggression: An exploratory study. *Violence Against Women*, 6, 6–36. doi:10.1177/10778010022181688
- Lewis, S., & Fremouw, W. (2001). Dating Violence: A critical review of the literature. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 21, 105–127.
- Livingston, J. A., Hequembourg, A., Testa, M., & VanZile-Tamsen, C. (2007). Unique aspects of adolescent sexual victimization experiences. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31, 331–343.
- Masho, S. W., & Ahmed, G. A. (2007). Age at sexual assault and post-traumatic stress disorder among women: Prevalence, correlates, and implications for prevention. *Journal of Women's Health*, 16, 262–271.
- Manganello, J. A. (2008). Teens, dating violence, and media use: A review of the literature and conceptual model for future research. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 9, 3–18.
- Moyer, M., & Sullivan, J. (2008). Student-risk taking behaviors: When do school counselors break confidentiality? *Professional School Counseling*, 11(4), 236–245.
- O'Keefe, M. (2005). Teen dating violence: A review of risk factors and prevention efforts. *Applied Research Forum*, April, 1–13.
- O'Leary, K. D., Woodin, E. M., & Fritz, P. A. T. (2006). Can we prevent the hitting? Recommendations for preventing

- intimate partner violence between young adults. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 13, 121–178.
- Prospero, M. (2006). The role of perceptions in dating violence among young adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 21(4), 470–484. doi:10.1177/0886260505285725
- Rivadeneira, R., & Lebo, M. J. (2008). The association between television-viewing behaviors and adolescent dating role attitudes and behaviors. *Journal of Adolescence*, 31(3), 291–305.
- Rosen, K. H., & Bezold, A. (1996). Dating violence prevention: A didactic support group for young women. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 74(5), 521–25.
- Schnurr, M., & Lohman, B. (2008). How much does school matter? An examination of adolescent dating violence perpetration. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 37, 266–283.
- Sears, H. A., & Byers, E. S. (2010). Adolescent girls' and boys' experiences of psychologically, physically and sexually aggressive behaviors in their dating relationships: Co-occurrence and emotional reaction. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 19, 517–539. doi:10.1080/10926771.2010.495035
- Sears, H. A., Byers, E. S., & Price, E. L. (2007). The co-occurrence of adolescents boys' and girls' use of psychologically, physically, and sexually abusive behaviours in their dating relationships. *Journal of Adolescence*, 30, 487–504.
- Silverman, J. G., Raj, A., Mucci, L. A., & Hathaway, J. E. (2001). Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 286, 572–579.
- Teen Research Unlimited. (2008) *Study on teen dating abuse*. Retrieved from: [www.loveisnotabuse.com=statistics.htm](http://www.loveisnotabuse.com=statistics.htm)
- Thongpriwan, V., & McElmurry, B. J. (2009). Thai female adolescent perceptions of dating violence. *Health Care for Women International*, 30, 871–891. doi:10.1080/07399330903066392
- Vézina, J., & Hébert, M. (2007). Risk factors for victimization in romantic relationships of young women: A review of empirical studies and implications for prevention. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 8, 33–66.
- Weisz, A. N., & Black, B. M. (2010). Peer education and leadership in dating violence prevention: Strengths and challenges. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 19(6), 641–660.
- Whitaker, D. J., Morrison, S., Lindquist, C., Hawkins, S. R., O'Neil, J. A., Nesius, A. M., Mathew, A., & Reese, L. (2006). A critical review of interventions for the primary prevention of perpetration of partner violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 11, 151–166.
- Wolitzky-Taylor, K. B., Ruggiero, K. J., Danielson, C. K., Resnick, H. S., Hanson, R. F., Smith, D. W., et al. (2008). Prevalence and correlates of dating violence in a national sample of adolescents. *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47(7), 755–762.