Teen Dating Violence

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Abstract

As adolescent behavior changes over time, the risk factors investigated by researchers must also adapt to these changes. One such adolescent behavior that is gaining attention is teen dating violence (TDV). The effects of TDV on adolescents have been linked to risk factors associated with academics, mental health, and social development. Due to the alarming rates of adolescent experience with TDV, legislative mandates have charged school districts with implementing policies to address TDV. In order for school districts to meet the needs of students relating to prevention, awareness, and counseling regarding TDV school leaders will need to be equipped with the following: (a) clear definition of TDV, (b) methods in which technology trends may be used to promote TDV, (c) prevention programs that are available for TDV prevention and awareness, and (d) the role of schools in TDV prevention and awareness. Technology enables adolescents to have constant contact with one another, regardless of their location and abusers have found a new form of control by using technology as a: (a) form of stalking, (b) means to communicate negative comments, (c) method of public embarrassment, and (d) an avenue to solicit sexually explicit photos.

*Keywords*: teen dating violence, technology, school districts

Teen Dating Violence

Adolescent risky behaviors have been a major focus of studies and is evident in the use of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) since 1991 (CDC, 2013). As adolescent behavior changes over time, the risk factors investigated by researchers must also adapt to these changes. One such adolescent behavior that is gaining attention is teen dating violence (TDV). Although terms such as domestic abuse or spousal abuse have been investigated, this phenomenon has not typically included adolescents. In the past decade, TDV has been deemed a critical public health issue (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2011) with reports of 1 in every 4 teens reporting being victims of some form of dating abuse (CDC, 2011). Even though prior research exists relating to TDV, researchers are faced with the need to keep up with current trending to adequately address the risk factors that influence TDV. With advances in social media and the accessibility of access to the Internet, harassment and abuse via the digital world is creating new forums for perpetrators to gain control of dating violence victims (Zweig & Dank, 2013).

Furthermore, the effects of TDV on adolescents have been linked to risk factors associated with academics, mental health, and social development (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Lowe, Jones, & Banks, 2007; Mayes, 2008; Protivnak & Roberts, 2011). In addition to advances in technology, secondary students are also involved in intimate dating relationships that mirror those of adults, which include sexual issues, unplanned pregnancies, as well as relational violence. Due to the alarming rates of adolescent experience with TDV, legislative mandates have charged school districts with implementing policies to address TDV (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013). In order for school districts to meet the needs of students relating to prevention, awareness, and counseling regarding TDV school leaders will need to be equipped with the following: (a) clear definition of TDV, (b) methods in which technology trends may be used to promote TDV, (c) prevention programs that are available for TDV prevention and awareness, and (d) the role of schools in TDV prevention and awareness.

**Definition of TDV**

Though this issue has received attention from government agencies, advocacy groups, and the medical community, no consistent definition has been established. When investigating the occurrence and characteristics of abuse that occurs between two adolescents engaging in a dating relationship, the term may appear in the literature in multiple forms, such as but not limited to: intimate personal violence, interpersonal violence, adolescent dating violence, relational aggression, or adolescent dating abuse (CDC, 2009; U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2011). For the use in this particular study, the term TDV will be used to identify abuse in a teen dating relationship. In addition to the inconsistency of what term should be used to identify this phenomenon, there are also various factors included in the definition of TDV. However, each definition includes forms of abuse that fall within the following categories: physical, emotional, sexual, or verbal abuse between two individuals engaging in an interpersonal relationship (CDC, 2009; Craigen, Sikes, Healey, & Hayes, 2009, Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Gallopin & Leigh, 2009; Busch-Armendeariz, Kalergis, Little, Woo, Garza & Ross, 2008; Kervin & Obinna, 2010; Largio, 2007; Lowe et al., 2007; Mayes, 2008; Obama, 2011; U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2011, Weisz & Black, 2009).

**Role of Technology in Teen Dating Violence**

In 2007, senior research specialists Lenhart and Madden (Pew Research Center, 2007) surveyed 12-17 year olds about their Internet use. Of those surveyed, 93% accessed the Internet, 61% accessed the Internet daily, and 34% used the Internet often throughout the day. In addition to the number of youth that access the Internet, another in 2009 Lenhart (Pew Research Center, 2007) survey revealed 71% of 12-17 year old adolescents owned cell phones and 76% used their cellular phones in methods other than placing phone calls. Although Internet and cellular phone use does not increase the probability of adolescent being involved in dating abuse, the use of technology affects the nature in which adolescent dating violence occurs (Drauker & Martsolf, 2010; Zweig & Dank, 2013). Technology enables adolescents to have constant contact with one another, regardless of their location. Zweig and Dank (2013) stated that abusers have found a new form of control by using technology as a: (a) form of stalking, (b) means to communicate negative comments, (c) method of public embarrassment, and (d) an avenue to solicit sexually explicit photos.

Although some may view these activities as harmless entertainment, the statistics on dating violence unveil the potential dangers of social networking and its influence on the adolescent dating experience. In 2013, Zweig and Dank conducted the largest survey on digital harassment and surveyed 5,647 middle and high school students. Participants in the survey identified 16 methods of digital harassment that occurred through the use of a cellular phone, e-mail message, or social networking site. In addition to digital harassment, nearly 84% of digital harassment victims also experienced psychological abuse, 50% were physically abused by their partner, and 30% were forced to engage in a sexual act. According to Zweig and Dank (2013), victims of digital abuse are 2 to 5 times more likely to be victims of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse.

These factors have influenced the tragic occurrences of teen dating violence (TDV) causing some state legislatures to approve bills requiring school districts to take preventative action (Krisberg, 2011; Largio 2007). As of April 2013, 20 U.S. states had approved legislative laws requiring school districts to implement some form of TDV prevention or awareness initiatives on school campuses (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013). In Texas, House Bill 121 requires school boards to develop and implement trainings for school professionals, provide counseling resources to TDV victims, as well as campaigns targeting students and parents regarding the awareness of TDV (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2008; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013).

**Teen Dating Violence Prevention Programs**

Although school districts have options on the type of prevention programs they incorporate, Srikala and Kumar (2010) recommend choosing programs, which incorporate critical thinking activities that are solution focused. The Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas at Austin, evaluated nine prevention programs that could be used in schools to promote prevention and awareness (Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, 2008). The information provided within the report supplies readers with details on modalities used by the programs, such as: (a) peer group sessions, (b) youth leadership training, (c) school-wide prevention strategies, (e) student, parent, school personnel training, (f) and how the program incorporates technology to reach students.

In addition to the initiatives described in the 2008 study conducted at the University of Texas at Austin, school districts can access resources in through their local women’s shelters. School districts located in or near Houston, Texas, have access to agencies such as the Houston Area Women’s Shelter, Montgomery County Women’s Shelter, and Planned Parenthood. Professionals and educators can log on to the Houston Area Women’s Shelter and Montgomery County Women’s Shelter’s websites to schedule training for professionals and educators on dating violence. The trainings provided by these shelters help to support Zweig and Dank’s recommendation for school faculty and staff to receive training on TDV that will help to identify and address dating harassment and abuse.

Along with the training offered to professionals and educators, adolescent awareness programs are available. The Houston Area’s Women Center offers a workshop on TDV called The Teen Effect Workshop. The program description states:

The repercussions of teen dating violence are impossible to ignore- they hurt not just the young people victimized but also their families, friends, schools, and communities. The goal of this training is to raise individual awareness about teen dating violence, teach healthy relationship skills and prevent the devastating cycle of abuse. This training is designed for both young people and the adults in their lives. (Houston Area Women’s Shelter, 2013, para. 3).

The training is available to youth free of charge and adults pay an enrollment fee of $35. Even though adults and youth are welcome to attend, the adult sessions and youth sessions are held in separate rooms. Another program available for educating youth on TDV are the lesson plans created by Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood offers educators free access to a library of curriculum and includes lesson plans on healthy relationships. The lesson plans are developed for use within the school setting and walk the school personnel leading the program through: (a) lesson objectives, (b) agenda for the lesson, (c) activities, and (d) a pre-written script (Planned Parenthood, 2013).

**Role of Schools in Prevention**

Even though adolescents spend an excess of seven hours a day in school, which allows for an opportunity for engaging in TDV or being a bystander, TDV is often not addressed in schools (Theriot, 2008). Adolescents involved in TDV are also at risk of experiencing mental health concerns if there is insufficient school support for victims of violence (Stadler, Feife, Rohrmann, Vermeiren, & Poutska, 2010). By educating school professionals, healthcare providers, and law enforcement officials, the awareness of TDV may enable adults to provide victims with legal remedies, counseling assistance, and the needed support to end violent relationships. Unfortunately, there is a lack of awareness on how school personnel may support students, resulting in schools falling short when it comes to supporting victims of TDV (Mayes, 2008).

Mayes (2008) offers recommendations on how schools can appropriately aid students experiencing abuse by classmates. In Mayes’ (2008) recommendations, he states that action is necessary and doing nothing is not acceptable. In order to create a plan on how to handle situations in which students on the same campus are in an abusive relationship, the proper education of all staff (principals, teachers, counselors, and paraprofessional staff), through staff development, is necessary (Mayes, 2008). The plan should include implementation of dating violence awareness programs, counseling for affected students, and a resource list available to parents and students on how to seek assistance if they have been or know someone who has been affected by TDV (Mayes, 2008).

**Conclusion**

In sum, schools have the ability to make a major impact on promoting awareness of TDV and have access to curriculum that can influence adolescent attitudes on healthy and unhealthy dating relationships. Evidence of legislative support is seen through school mandates to incorporate TDV prevention programs within school districts across the country. Texas’ House Bill 121 mandates that a comprehensive program geared towards educating students, staff and parents on TDV, as well as ensuring that victims have access to counseling services.

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