

# **Teen Dating Violence**

## **KEY ISSUE**

### **Use of Violence by Girls and Boys in Heterosexual Teen Relationships**



prepared by

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# KEY ISSUE

## Use of Violence by Girls and Boys in Heterosexual Teen Relationships

Some studies about the dynamics and causes of violence in teen relationships have indicated that boys exposed to batterer behavior will repeat that behavior in their teen and adult relationships. It has also been suggested that girls who grow up witnessing batterer behavior will learn to accept violence from future intimate partners. This dynamic is known as the *intergenerational cycle of violence* and is loosely based on social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Albert Bandura, originator of the theory, states that “most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling; from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (Bandura, 1971). Reports from shelter staff, children’s counselors and battered women have indicated that children exposed to batterer behavior appear to have learned to imitate the behavior they observed in their efforts to get their needs met or to deal with conflict. Many male children act out aggressively toward peers and many female children assume passive roles in play and in conflict. Information taken from high school students also suggests that many young men imitate the violent behavior of their adult male role models in their own dating relationships (Schwartz, O’Leary & Kendziora, 1997).

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While the intergenerational cycle of violence has remained an accepted explanation for violence in some abusive teen dating relationships, theorists have recently considered other possibilities. The nexus between teen dating violence and other forms of youth violence is being explored. Other theorists and advocates for battered women have encouraged examination of the influence of societal acceptance and glorification of interpersonal violence – particularly misogyny. Whatever the theorists propose, the majority of information gathered over the years has indicated that teen dating violence, like adult domestic violence, involves male on female violence in most cases (Levy, 1991; Foshee, 1996; Silverman, J. et al, 2001).

Some recent studies, however, have challenged the supposition that young men are more likely to be the perpetrators of violence in teen dating relationships. These studies suggest that use of violence by teen girls is as severe and as frequent as the use of violence by teen boys in dating situations. In one of the earlier studies, 228 11<sup>th</sup> grade students (122 males and 106 females) from two urban public high schools were asked if they were physically aggressive in their dating relationships. In the total sample, nearly one half of the females and less than 20 percent of the males reported engaging in at least one physically aggressive

behavior against a dating partner in the context of a disagreement (Lavoie, Robitaille & Hebert, 2000). More recent work has shown similar findings. In interpreting the results from an Oregon Youth Study, Deborah Capaldi of the Oregon Social Learning Center concludes, in part, that “young women were more likely to initiate physical aggression than young men” and “young men were injured as well as young women” and were sometimes afraid of their partners (Capaldi, 2003).

Use of self-reports to gauge the incidence and severity of abusive behavior may indicate a high percentage of female-on-male violence in teen dating relationships, but closer examination of the findings often uncovers more complex interactions between young dating partners. In 1999, Foshee, Bauman and Linder reported that, while females are more likely to *report* being perpetrators of violence in dating relationships, the reasons for that violence and the types of violence used differ for boys and girls. Teen girls most often cite self-defense as the reason for their use of violence. On the other hand, boys often report that their violence serves to “intimidate,” “frighten” or “force the other person to give me something” (Brustin, 1995). With regard to the types and severity of abuse, girls, significantly more often than boys, report that they are the victims of more severe violence, such as being punched or forced to engage in sexual activity against their will. Boys report that they are more likely to receive less severe forms of physical violence from their partners – such as pinching, slapping, scratching and kicking (Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

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The impact of dating violence also appears to differ for male and female victims. Boys report no effect (“did not hurt at all”) or little effect (“hurt me a little”) in more than 90 percent of incidents, whereas, nearly 50 percent of girls report serious harm (“hurt me a lot”) and physical injury (“caused bruises, needed medical attention”) in one third of violent incidents. Girls report not being hurt at all in less than ten percent of incidents (Lavoie, Robitaille & Hebert, 2000). Among female victims, the most common response to partners’ violence was “fear,” followed closely by “emotionally hurt.” Male victims, most frequently indicate that they “thought it was funny” or experience “anger.” It appears that girls’ response to dating violence implies greater emotional and psychological injury (O’Keefe & Treister, 1998).

Advocates and many researchers refute results indicating that young girls use severe violence as frequently as boys. They cite confusion between self-defense response and primary aggression as a factor that colors self-reporting in research findings. They also criticize the accuracy of measurement tools, such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (DeKeseredy & Swartz, 1998), which are used in many studies to equate female with male violence. Finally, interviews and surveys that rely on self-reporting come under professional scrutiny for their dependence on the participants’ ability to objectively assess their own behavior. Data taken from self-

reports is likely to misinterpret the dynamics between partners. Advocates and interventionists are aware of the inclination of victims to self-blame and the tendency of perpetrators to deny responsibility when describing incidents of violence.

Increased numbers of studies involving larger and more diverse teen populations and tools designed to accurately gauge the severity, frequency and intent of violent acts are needed in order to more accurately compare violence initiated by girls with that perpetrated by boys.

**Advocates and interventionists are aware of the inclination of victims to self-blame and the tendency of perpetrators to deny responsibility when describing incidents of violence.**

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## ENCLOSURES

The enclosed materials (reprinted with permission) provide research findings, examples of promising projects and referral materials that offer basic information for those concerned with the use of violence by both males and females in teen dating violence:

Das Dasgupta, S. (2001). *Towards an understanding of women's use of non-lethal violence in intimate heterosexual relationships*. Harrisburg, PA: Applied Research Forum, National Electronic Network on Violence Against Women. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.vawnet.org>>

DeKeseredy, W.S. & Swartz, M.D. (1998). *Measuring the extent of woman abuse in intimate heterosexual relationships: A critique of the conflict tactics scales*. Harrisburg, PA: Applied Research Forum, National Electronic Network on Violence Against Women. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.vawnet.org>>

Bell, C. (2001). *Domestic violence: Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators?* Retrieved April 8, 2004 from <<http://www.ndvf.co.uk/calvinbellpaper.pdf>>

Kimmel, M. (2001). *Male Victims of Domestic Violence: A Substantive and Methodological Research Review*, A report to The Equality Committee of the Department of Education and Science, United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW). Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <<http://www.xyonline.net/malevictims.shtml>>

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## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional information on these and other teen-related issues is available through the following:

- Technical Assistance/Public Education Team of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence  
Telephone: 800-537-2238 and TTY: 800-553-2508

and other organizations comprising the Domestic Violence Resource Network (DVRN):

- Battered Women's Justice Project  
Telephone: 800-903-0111, Ext. 1 (Criminal Justice), Ext. 2 (Civil Justice), Ext. 3 (Defense);
- National Health Resource Center on Domestic Violence  
Telephone: 888-792-2873 and TTY: 800-595-4889;
- Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody  
Telephone: 800-52-PEACE (527-3223);
- Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women  
Telephone: 877-733-7623