



The relevance of technology to the nature, prevalence and impact of Adolescent Dating Violence and Abuse: A research synthesis



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ABSTRACT

While an established literature has documented the nature and prevalence of traditional forms of Adolescent Dating Violence and Abuse (ADVA), less research has investigated the relevance of Electronic Communication Technology (ECT) such as mobile phones and communication tools via the Internet to ADVA and to psychological/emotional abuse and monitoring or controlling behaviors in particular. This paper reviews the literature on the nature, prevalence and impact of ADVA and what will be termed Technology Assisted Adolescent Dating Violence and Abuse (TAADVA). The review revealed a broad range of prevalence estimates for physical, psychological/emotional, and sexual dating violence in addition to abuse experienced or performed via ECT. Inconsistencies in prevalence reports are likely to be due to the various measures and methods used to investigate this phenomenon, however; this leads to difficulties when attempting to make accurate comparisons and generalizations. Limited research was found to have explored the impact of TAADVA compared to that of traditional ADVA. Nevertheless, ADVA and TAADVA were prevalent in a substantial number of adolescent romantic relationships in these studies. It is suggested that ECT provides a new avenue for ADVA rather than representing a new, unique form of abuse. Further research is needed to explore the nature, prevalence, and impact of ECT use for both abusive and non-abusive purposes within adolescent dating relationships, in addition to whether this creates new victims or perpetrators of such abuse. Implications of the findings of the review are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The term ‘adolescence’ has been defined as consisting of three developmental periods: early adolescence (typically ages 10–13), middle adolescence (ages 14–17), and late adolescence (age 18 until the early twenties) (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). During this developmental period of maturation, romantic relationships become increasingly central to the social life of most teenage youth through which adolescents seek to form a sense of both their self-identity and sexuality (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Sorensen, 2007). Research suggests that most adolescents begin initiating romantic relationships during early adolescence, which gradually progress from fewer, short, casual, and potentially frequent dating relationships, to more steady ones, or to a single steady relationship that becomes more dyadic as partners become more emotionally and sexually involved (Collins, 2003; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Davies & Windle, 2000; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Meier & Allen, 2009; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). International evidence from both the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) has reported the prevalence of adolescent involvement in dating activities. In the UK, between 83 and 88% of adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years old report that they have had at least one romantic relationship experience with a boyfriend or girlfriend (Barter, McCarty, Berridge, & Evans, 2009; Fox, Corr, Gadd, & Butler, 2013; Schütt, 2006). Researchers in the US have found that around 50% of adolescents aged 11–12 report having a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past three months (Miller, Gorman-Smith, Sullivan, Orpinas, & Simon, 2009; Simon, Miller, Gorman-Smith, Orpinas, & Sullivan, 2010). This percentage increases with regard to a slightly older sample of young people with 72% of adolescents aged between 13 and 16 years reporting that they are dating or have experience with dating (Eaton et al., 2010). It is clear from these statistics that a significant number of adolescents are involved in romantic relationships and dating activities, which appear to become increasingly prevalent as young people move through this developmental period of maturation.

Following surveys and interviews with adolescents, researchers have reported a range of dating activities, both non-sexual and sexual, that take place both in and outside of school (Carlson & Rose, 2012; Connolly et al., 2004; Fredland et al., 2005; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Waylen, Ness, McGovern, Wolke, & Low, 2010). These studies have highlighted the importance and progression of dating activities among adolescents both within group and personal settings, and in the exploration of sexually intimate behaviors from the early stages of adolescence. Involvement in dating activities during the adolescent time of relationship exploration may however, have both positive and negative outcomes. Adolescent romantic relationships

have been reported to be an integral part of the social scaffolding on which young-adult romantic relationships rest (Meier & Allen, 2009). Romantic partners can also be a major source of emotional support for adolescents in addition to such relationships providing a training ground for youth to develop interpersonal skills enabling them to learn how to form and maintain intimate relationships (Sorensen, 2007). Maintaining steady relationships over time, as opposed to following pathways into multiple casual relations, has also been associated with positive emotional adjustment and declines in depressive symptoms and problem behaviors (Davies & Windle, 2000). However, while romantic relationships have the potential to affect adolescent development positively, they can also place young people at risk for problems such as increased risk of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Furman, 2002) and relationships that include dating violence (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004).

Certain dating behaviors have been reported to place young people at risk of Adolescent Dating Violence and Abuse (ADVA). ADVA victimization has been associated with having ever had sexual intercourse (Eaton, Davis, Barrios, Brener, & Noonan, 2007) and having an increasing number of lifetime sexual partners has been associated with both victimization and perpetration of ADVA (Rivera-Rivera, Allen-Leigh, Rodríguez-Ortega, Chávez-Ayala, & Lazzano-Ponce, 2007). It has also been reported that it is not uncommon for adolescent girls to engage in romantic relationships with young men who are older than themselves (Barter et al., 2009; Fredland et al., 2005). Barter et al. (2009), for example, found that 58% of female respondents aged 13–17 years old reported having older partners, with 11% of partners being categorized as “much older”. Notably, Barter et al. (2009) identified that as the age difference between partners increased, so did girls’ negative evaluations of their relationships. Young women have also described pressures from their peers and the media to have boyfriends and develop committed relationships at a young age; pressures that seem to amplify their willingness to remain in relationships that include violence (Ismail, Berman, & Ward-Griffin, 2007). Concerningly, Smith, White, and Holland (2003) have also found that women who were physically assaulted as adolescents (from age 14 through their college years) were also at greater risk for revictimization during their college years (average age 21.4 years), highlighting concerns for the risk that experiencing ADVA during adolescence will lead to an increased chance of multiple abusive relationships in the future. In the US, ADVA has been recognized as a serious public health concern (Teten, Ball, Valle, Noonan, & Rosenbluth, 2009). Similarly, in the UK in September 2012, the Government agreed to amend the current definition of domestic violence to ‘domestic violence and abuse’, which now includes young people aged 16–17 years old in addition to adults aged 18 and over (Home Office, 2012a, p. 19). The amendment also included changing

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