



Original article

Bullying as a Longitudinal Predictor of Adolescent Dating Violence



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: One suggested approach to preventing adolescent dating violence is to prevent behavioral precursors to dating violence, such as bullying. However, no longitudinal study has examined bullying as a behavioral precursor to dating violence. In this study, longitudinal data were used to examine (1) whether direct and indirect bullying perpetration in the sixth grade predicted the onset of physical dating violence perpetration by the eighth grade and (2) whether the associations varied by sex and race/ethnicity of the adolescent.

Methods: Data were collected in school from sixth graders in three primarily rural counties and then again when students were in the eighth grade. Analyses were conducted with 1,154 adolescents who had not perpetrated dating violence at the sixth-grade assessment. The sample was 47% male, 29% black, and 10% of another race/ethnicity than black or white.

Results: Direct bullying, defined as hitting, slapping, or picking on another kid in the sixth grade, predicted the onset of physical dating violence perpetration by the eighth grade, controlling for indirect bullying and potential confounders. Although indirect bullying, defined as spreading false rumors and excluding students from friendship groups, was associated with the onset of physical dating violence perpetration in bivariate analyses, it did not predict the onset of physical dating violence when controlling for direct bullying. None of the associations examined varied by sex or race/ethnicity of the adolescents.

Conclusions: Our findings suggest that efforts targeted at preventing direct bullying may also prevent the onset of physical dating violence.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

This longitudinal study found that direct bullying, defined as hitting, slapping, or picking on another kid in the sixth grade, predicted the onset of physical dating violence perpetration by the eighth grade, suggesting that efforts at preventing direct bullying may also prevent the onset of adolescent physical dating violence.

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Adolescent dating violence has negative consequences for health and well-being across the life span [1,2]. Thus, its prevention is essential. It has been suggested that prevention of dating violence should begin with prevention of the behavioral precursors to dating violence, such as bullying [3–5]. It is not clear, however, that bullying is, in fact, a precursor to dating violence. Bullying has been correlated with adolescent dating violence perpetration [4,6–8] and adult intimate partner violence perpetration [9] in cross-sectional studies, and bullying has been found to predict sexual harassment, an early form of gender-based dominance and control [10], for both boys and girls

in middle school [11,12]. However, no study has used longitudinal data that controls the temporality of relationships to determine whether bullying predicts later dating violence perpetration.

There are several potential theoretical and empirical explanations for an association between bullying and dating violence perpetration. Connolly et al. [4] found that bullies began dating earlier than nonbullies; participated earlier in more advanced types of dating (i.e., dyadic vs. group); reported less affection, commitment, and intimacy with boy/girlfriends; and less positive and equitable views of boy/girlfriends. These characteristics may increase the likelihood that youth who bully will become abusive to dating partners. These two behaviors may also share similar risk factors, including lack of empathy, trait anger, and need for power and control; deficits in emotion regulation and executive functioning that preclude the development of effective conflict resolution and anger management skills; substance use; normative beliefs that are accepting of aggression; and exposure to family violence that could shape these more proximal shared risk factors [13]. Moffitt [14] suggested that manifestations of aggression change with development when new social opportunities arise. Thus, these risk factors could result in bullying in early adolescence but then manifest as aggression against dates when the opportunity for dating arises.

It is also possible that the act of bullying itself results in or leads to conditions that facilitate the use of violence against dates. Evidence suggests that when adolescents bully, it increases their social status [15,16], possibly because bullying is viewed by peers as challenging adult authority, which is attractive at a time when achieving independence from adults is a central developmental task [7,9,14]. In turn, high social status has been linked with dating violence perpetration for both boys and girls [17], possibly resulting from several mechanisms. Faris and Felmlee [18] suggest that high social status enables aggression because high-status adolescents have greater control over information (e.g., rumors) and resources (e.g., social options on weekends) and thus are better positioned to manipulate social situations and exert power and control over dates. Also, high-status adolescents have increased access to partners and thus may be less fearful of the negative consequences that use of violence could have on a dating relationship. Connolly et al. [4] suggest that youth who bully and are then thrust into dating because of their high status may not have developed the social skills needed for dating, which could increase the likelihood of responding poorly to conflict with dating partners. Finally, early adolescent dating has the potential for producing embarrassing situations, such as those that arise from insensitive comments made by a date in front of others, which could threaten their social status. One way of decreasing the likelihood of embarrassing dating situations is to exert control over the dating partners in the form of violence.

The present study

In the study reported here, longitudinal data were used to test the hypothesis that bullying perpetration in the sixth grade (typically ages 11–12 years) predicts the onset of physical dating violence perpetration by the eighth grade (typically ages 13–14 years). Middle school (typically grades 6–8 in the United States) is the optimal time to capture transitions from bullying to abusing dating partners. Bullying increases at the beginning of middle school and then decreases over the middle school years [11]. As bullying decreases, mixed-gender interactions

and dating increase [4,11]; by eighth grade, 40%–60% of adolescents report dating [19,20]. As dating increases, so does physical dating violence: 15%–21% of middle school adolescents report using physical violence against a dating partner [20–22]. We examined both direct bullying, which typically includes physical violence or intimidation and verbal bullying such as name-calling and teasing, and indirect bullying (sometimes referred to as social or relational bullying), which includes behaviors that are intended to harm others through spreading rumors that result in social exclusion or manipulation of relationships [15,18]. We also looked at whether support for the hypothesis varied by sex and race/ethnicity of the adolescent because sex [23] and race/ethnicity [24] differences have been found in the etiology of dating violence, and the correlation between bullying and dating abuse has been found to be stronger for boys than girls [4].

Methods

Study overview

Data came from the Context Study, a multiwave longitudinal investigation of contextual influences on adolescent health-risk behaviors [25,26]. In that study, adolescents from three public school systems in three primarily rural North Carolina counties completed self-administered questionnaires when they were in the sixth and eighth grades. The school systems included 13 schools with middle school grades. Adolescents were eligible for participation if they were able to complete the survey in English and were not in special education programs or out of school because of long-term suspension. Parents had the opportunity to refuse consent for their child's participation by returning a written form or calling a toll-free number. Assent was obtained before the administration of the survey from adolescents whose parents did not refuse their child's participation. Trained data collectors administered the questionnaires in classrooms. The Institutional Review Board for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill approved the study.

Analytical sample

A total of 1,854 sixth-grade adolescents completed the baseline survey, representing 88% of those eligible. Of these, 1,401 (76%) completed the eighth-grade follow-up assessment. To control the temporality of relationships, adolescents who reported having ever hit or threatened a dating partner at the sixth-grade assessment ($n = 103$) or who were missing data on these two items at the baseline assessment ($n = 35$) were eliminated from the analyses. Another 109 adolescents were deleted from the analyses because they did not respond to the sixth-grade bullying perpetration questions ($n = 2$), eighth-grade dating status ($n = 85$), or dating violence perpetration measures ($n = 22$). Thus, the final analytic sample included 1,154 sixth-grade adolescents who had never hit or threatened a dating partner and had no missing data on the bullying, dating status, and dating violence variables. This analytical sample was approximately 47% male, 29% black, and 10% other race/ethnicity including Latino, Asian, American-Indian, or mixed race. At the sixth-grade assessment, approximately 33% of participants reported that the highest education obtained by either parent was high school or less and 6% reported living with only one parent or caregiver.

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