

Prevention of and Interventions for Dating and Sexual Violence in Adolescence

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KEYWORDS

- Dating violence • Sexual violence • Adolescence • Violence prevention
- Relationship abuse

KEY POINTS

- Dating violence (also known as adolescent relationship abuse) and sexual violence are prevalent from the middle school years throughout adolescence and peak in young adulthood.
- Dating and sexual violence victimization are associated with multiple poor physical and mental health consequences, including unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- Health care providers can promote healthy adolescent sexual relationships by offering universal education and brief anticipatory guidance with all adolescent patients about healthy and unhealthy relationships and sexual consent.

BACKGROUND

Prevalence of Adolescent Relationship Abuse and Sexual Violence

Adolescence is a critical developmental period for exploring sexual and gender identity, sexual attractions, relationships, dating, and intimacy. The middle school years represent a particularly critical stage for relationship abuse and sexual violence education and prevention, as many youth start establishing romantic or sexual relationships for the first time.^{1,2} Sexual harassment increases during middle school,^{3–6} with studies identifying such experiences as early as sixth grade and persisting into high school.^{7–10} Increased interactions with the opposite sex during the middle school years correlate with increasing rates of opposite-sex aggressive encounters in middle school.⁴ Even though younger adolescents have less experience with formal dating relationships, early gender-based conflicts do occur.^{1,11} Advances in brain development science

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indicate that the highly dynamic pubertal transition (the hallmark of middle school years) is a period of intense social emotional learning, changes in thought regulation and reasoning, and empathy maturity.¹² For most tweens and young teens, new peer and social influences come into play, and pressure to conform may be felt in powerful ways. This may be the first time behaviors they have seen in their families, and lessons learned from peers and popular culture, manifest in their own relationships. Health care providers play a key role in providing anticipatory guidance to their patients in early adolescence regarding the importance of healthy romantic and sexual relationships.

Teen dating violence (herein referred to as adolescent relationship abuse [ARA]) denotes the emotional, physical, or sexual abuse of a dating or sexual partner. The abuse can take place in person, online or via texting, or through a third party (eg, a peer conveying a message or threat). Abusive and controlling behaviors may take the form of monitoring a partner's cell phone use, telling partners what they can wear, controlling where and with whom they hang out, manipulating contraceptive use, and other possessive behaviors. The term "adolescent relationship abuse," rather than "teen dating violence," helps to emphasize that abusive and controlling behaviors can occur in early adolescence (before teen years) and extend into young adulthood (the highest prevalence of partner violence is among young adults ages 18–24), spanning all of adolescence. The term "abuse" helps underscore that many abusive behaviors are neither physical nor violent. Similarly, adolescents use many terms (not only "dating") to refer to their sexual and intimate relationships.

Nationwide, approximately 1 in 10 high school students has been hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend. Sexual violence is also common in the context of ARA. The most recent national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey findings of high school students included a question about sexual violence victimization in the context of a dating relationship with 14% of adolescent girls and 6% of adolescent boys reporting such violence in the past year.¹³ Sexual violence (SV) (including sexual coercion, nonconsensual sexual contact, and rape) is common, with 28% to 56% of women in college samples reporting at least 1 such experience.^{14,15} More than three-quarters of women who have been sexually assaulted report that the first of such experiences occurred before the age of 25, underscoring that partner and sexual violence are adolescent and young adult concerns.¹⁶

Unique characteristics of adolescent relationship abuse

Depending on the adolescent's stage of social/emotional development, the young person may not recognize the warning signs of abuse, confusing the controlling behaviors and possessiveness as signs of "true love." Similarly, a young person may defer seeking care due to multiple barriers, including fear of breaches of confidentiality, lack of trust in adult providers, a desire to protect the abusive partner, self-blame, and inability to access care. The health care provider should always consider the adolescent's developmental stage, and discuss concrete and specific behaviors ("does she or he get mad at you if you don't respond to his or her calls right away?") rather than vague questions, such as "Are you in an abusive relationship?" In addition, in some communities, adolescents use different terms to describe ARA.¹⁷ Knowledge of and/or clarifying the use of local terms for relationships can create a shared understanding of what behaviors constitute ARA and may help initiate the discussion of ARA.

Reproductive coercion

ARA is associated with increased sexual risk behavior and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).¹⁸ ARA also has been associated with teen pregnancy, with up to

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