



## A critical review of interventions for the primary prevention of perpetration of partner violence

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### Abstract

There is growing consensus that preventing partner violence requires interventions that begin before partner violence begins. In recent years, a number of evaluations of primary prevention programs targeting partner violence have been published. This article presents a systematic review of recent interventions for primary prevention of partner violence. A total of 11 programs met inclusion criteria for the review. All 11 studies used some combination of feminist theory and social learning theory as a basis for the intervention. All targeted middle- or high-school aged students, and all but one were set in a school setting and were universal interventions (i.e., were not targeted to an at risk group). Interventions tended to be brief, with only two using interventions totaling more than 5 h in duration. Although a majority of studies were randomized trials, study quality was generally poor due to relatively short follow-up periods, high attrition rates, and poor measurement. Of the four studies that measured behavior, two found a positive intervention impact. Those two studies had the most comprehensive interventions, using both individual-level curricula and other community-based interventions. Both also employed rigorous designs. Conclusions about the overall efficacy of dating violence interventions are premature, but such programs are promising. We discuss recommendations regarding the content and evaluation of dating violence prevention programs.

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Much of the initial efforts to end violence between intimate partners focused on violence in adult relationships. Services to prevent partner violence targeting adult victims and perpetrators of partner violence took root in the form of shelters, advocacy, group counseling for victims and perpetrators of partner violence, and criminal justice and policy responses such as mandatory arrest policies and protective orders. Research was conducted to understand the prevalence of partner violence, the consequences of partner violence, and the cost of partner violence. This work has shown that partner violence is highly prevalent, with 22% of women experiencing abuse by a partner in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998) has serious physical and psychological consequences such as chronic pain (Kendall-Tackett, Marshall, & Ness, 2003), irritable bowel syndrome (Drossman, Lesserman, Toomey, & Hu, 1996), and various gynecological and reproductive health consequences (Campbell et al., 2002) costs approximately 5.8 billion per year in healthcare costs and lost productivity (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003).

Recently, more attention has been focused on partner violence in adolescence, and that work has shown that partner violence is highly prevalent in relationships among teens and younger adults. National estimates of the prevalence of partner violence among adolescents are difficult to ascertain, but various studies report rates between 20% and 46% (Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Consistent with the work on adult partner violence, studies of teens and young adults have shown that experiencing partner violence is associated with various negative physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences including, school failure, substance abuse, disordered eating, suicidal ideation, and sexual risk behavior (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Silverman et al., 2001). Additionally, there is evidence that less severe violence among adolescents and young adults can lead to more severe violence later in marital relationships (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994). These data suggest that a preventative approach to partner violence should focus on adolescents. Indeed, the major theories typically used to explain partner violence (e.g., feminist theory, social learning theory, conflict theory, attachment theory) would suggest that violence within relationships develops over the life-course, beginning in childhood and adolescence.

There have been a number of studies published evaluating efforts for the primary prevention of partner violence, and some qualitative reviews of that research (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002; Hickman et al., 2004). The goal of the current paper is to present findings from a systematic review of adolescent partner violence prevention programs that target perpetration of partner violence. The review includes studies published from 1990 through April 2003. This paper will describe the intervention approaches (content, setting, populations), evaluation approaches (study design, measures), and findings of those prevention programs. We also discuss recommendations for intervention development and evaluation of primary prevention programs targeting the perpetration of partner violence.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Scope of review and inclusion criteria

The review presented here was part of a broader review focusing on efforts that target the prevention of perpetration behavior (i.e., programs to prevent initial victimization or re-victimization only were not included). The studies in this paper are those that focused on primary prevention programs, that is, those that target individuals who were not known

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