

## Analyzing Youth and Adolescent Dating Abuse: Risk, Impact, Prevention

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The targeted career path in this analysis is an intermediate-senior level educator, focusing on risk prevention in youth between grades 7-12. The subgroup of youth at risk includes adolescents in secondary school with various ecological, social, and cognitive factors contributing to their vulnerability of engaging in adolescent dating abuse. The purpose of this essay is to develop an understanding of the risk factors and behavioural outcomes of both victims and perpetrators of adolescent dating abuse to improve one's ability to create and implement effective prevention programs within and beyond the education system. In order to comprehensively analyze the issue, it is necessary to address the risk and the nature of dating abuse, key concepts surrounding relationships, the ecological setting, the extent of the abuse and statistical trends, the risk of victimization and perpetration, how the risks interact with the environment, relevant theories, the individual and extended effects, and prevention methods and outcomes. The individual and extended impacts of youth at risk of adolescent dating abuse can be mitigated using the social learning theory in developing both institutional and individual targeted prevention programs to cope with risk factors.

### **Identifying the Risk and the Nature of Dating Abuse**

When working with youth and adolescents in a secondary school setting, there is a notable increase in youth's risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of dating abuse. Adolescent dating abuse can be any individual or combination of the following types of abuse: physical, psychological, and sexual abuse ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). Physical abuse is inflicting pain and causing bodily harm to your significant other. This can include but is not limited to punching, hitting, kicking, and pinching. Psychological abuse, also known as emotional abuse, involves threatening or harming their partner's self-worth, such as shaming, name-calling, controlling and jealous behaviours, and intentionally embarrassing their partner. Sexual abuse is the forceful engagement of a sexual act with an intimate partner without obtaining consent. The nature of adolescent dating abuse includes risks of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, resulting in compromising a youth's physical and psychological well-being.

### **Key Concepts**

In analyzing dating abuse amongst adolescents, it is critical to understand the expectations and standards of healthy relationships, unhealthy relationships, and the definition of adolescent dating violence. Healthy relationships sustain particular characteristics, including mutual respect, compromise, trust, emotional control, honesty, problem-solving, understanding self-confidence, and maintaining a healthy sexual relationship ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). Setting the expectation of a healthy relationship allows for a deeper understanding of where youth and their relationships lack specific characteristics and become unhealthy. Unhealthy relationships can be recognized through the characteristics of disrespect, control, intimidation, dishonesty, hostility, sexual violence, dependence, and physical violence ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). It can be challenging for youth and adolescents in the early stages of their romantic lives to understand the difference between what a healthy relationship is and what is unhealthy due to a lack of experience and knowledge. Without establishing specific characteristics that would be considered as red flags, it becomes even more difficult for youth to recognize indications of an unhealthy relationship. Thus, without recognizing and

understanding an unhealthy relationship, youth are unable to address that risk. Vagi et al. (2013) define adolescent dating violence as "a form of intimate partner violence that occurs between people who are 10-24 years old who are current or former dating partners" (634), addressing both the age and relationship criteria for adolescent dating violence. They argue that the developmental diversity in the ages of 10-24 is necessary when analyzing adolescent dating abuse because it includes early, middle, and late adolescence (Vagi et al. 2013, 634). This is the criteria of the youth and adolescents that will be discussed throughout the analysis.

### **Ecological Setting**

The ecological setting has three significant factors that have direct impacts on youth at risk of adolescent dating abuse: neighbourhood disorganization, extracurricular involvement, and parental supervision. The neighbourhood to which a youth is exposed influences their views of what behaviours are normalized, including developed attitudes towards the acceptability and likelihood of violence (Upton 2017, 11). This means that youth can become desensitized to violence and begin to habituate violent behaviours over time. High rates of intimate partner violence amongst adults and adolescents have been significantly associated with neighbourhood poverty (Upton 2017, 11). Thus, poverty and economic stress become significant ecologic factors in a youth's vulnerability to and risk of being both perpetrators and adolescent dating abuse victims.

Extracurricular involvement is the engagement in extracurricular activities through school or within the community. Extracurricular and community activities often reduce some of the variables associated with neighbourhood disorganization and promote diversity among peer groups. Upton (2017) found that "adolescents often place a higher value on the opinion of peers, so having a diverse social network may reinforce respectful romantic relationships and protect potential victims from TDV" (13). Extracurricular involvement places importance on developing healthy relationships from acquaintances to peers. Thus, these skills become transferable to developing the foundation for healthy romantic relationships and reduce the risk of being a victim or perpetrator of adolescent dating abuse. Parental supervision is also a significant variable in the ecological setting that impacts the level of risk youth will be susceptible to adolescent dating abuse. The level of a parent's involvement can determine how aware they are of problems in their child's life, and as a result, determines their ability to adequately support their child (Upton 2017, 12). Parental guidance based on involvement can also be detrimental to adolescent dating abuse situations as the parents are responsible for accurately informing their youth and correcting any misconceptions brought forward by peers or others around them. Upton (2017) found that inadequate parental supervision was associated with higher rates of perpetration and adolescent dating abuse victimization (12). Thus, increased parental presence is a preventative factor in reducing adolescent dating abuse among youth.

### **Dating Violence Extent and Trends**

Dating violence is an ongoing concern amongst youth of all ages, genders, and ethnicities. From the ages of 11 through 17, 22% of women reported having their first experience of sexual, physical, or psychological abuse, and by the time they reach 24, this number more than doubles to 47% ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). Although the numbers were fewer, 15% of men reported having their first involvement with partner violence in that same period; increasing more than

double to 39% by the time they were 24 ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). When analyzing these numbers, it is crucial to consider that these were statistics from self-reported encounters, meaning that some inaccuracies were caused by those who may have experienced such abuse but did not disclose that information.

Looking at specific types of abuse, information from the Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System data suggests that within the past 12 months, about 10% of students have reported being physically abused by a romantic partner, and a range of 3-11% reported experiencing sexual violence ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). The rate of abuse significantly increases when asked to report emotional abuse experiences, with as many as 76% of adolescents reporting having experienced psychological abuse from a romantic partner ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). Although these statistics focus on a combination of male and female subjects, it is vital to address that relationship abuse is often seen as a women's issue. However, Reidy et al. (2017) found that male youth from high-risk communities are often disproportionately represented as perpetrators of adolescent dating abuse but from an early age are equally as likely to be victimized as young females (28).

A critical trend arising that is putting youth at higher risk of adolescent dating abuse is cyber-dating. According to Zweig et al. (2014), "Cyber dating abuse can be defined as the control, harassment, stalking, and abuse of one's dating partner via technology and social media" (1306). Cyberdating has similar psychological abuse characteristics, such as control, intended humiliation, and diminishing the victim's self-worth. However, Zweig et al. (2014) argue that it is a unique form of dating violence as perpetrators can publicly degrade and humiliate their partner to a new extent and now have access to the victim in any place at any time in their physical absence (1306). With the increase of technology use surrounding youth and adolescents, they are increasingly vulnerable to cyber dating abuse.

### **Risks of Victimization and Perpetration**

As seen in the statistics presented earlier, both the frequency and the severity of adolescent dating abuse increases as youth get older. The Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System found that youth who have experienced stressful life events or have symptoms of trauma live in poverty, experience neighbourhood violence, receive child protective services, participate in risky behaviours such as substance or alcohol abuse, engage in sexual activity and begin dating before age 16, have peers involved in dating abuse are at increased risk of adolescent relationship abuse ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). Some of which can be recognized by educators and other community members working with youth. On a more individual level, youth exposed to violence may believe that dating abuse is acceptable. This becomes even more prevalent in youth who have experienced harsh parenting, lack of supervision, or inconsistent discipline ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020). Thus, it is important for other external influences, such as educators, to establish the consequences of adolescent dating abuse, the boundaries of a healthy relationship, and resources for those who are victims of abuse to mitigate individual factors that increase the youth's vulnerability. Youth who develop low self-esteem, depression, are high tempered, exhibit maladaptive or antisocial behaviours, are at increased risk for becoming a victim of adolescent dating abuse; as such, providing the skills necessary to cope with these behaviours becomes increasingly critical ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020).

Just as risk factors contribute to adolescent dating abuse victimization, some variables make youth susceptible to becoming a perpetrator. As an educator, there is then an added

responsibility in addressing both victimization and perpetration of adolescent dating abuse. According to the Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System, "Many of these are developmentally normal in youths such as little to no relationship experience, vulnerability to peer pressure, and unsophisticated communication skills" ("Teen Dating Violence" 2020), leading to a higher risk of intentionally or unintentionally becoming an abuser. Thus, as an educator, it is critical to expose youth to concepts surrounding healthy and unhealthy relationships, encourage confidence to cope with peer pressure, and further develop communication skills as mitigating techniques. The survey also found that youth who believe using threats and violence as leverage is acceptable to have difficulty managing their anger, associate themselves with violent peers, have low self-esteem and depression, lack parental supervision and support, and are exposed to violence in the home or community are increasingly vulnerable to becoming a perpetrator of adolescent relationship abuse.

### **Risks and the Environment**

The variables listed as being risk factors of both victimization and perpetration of adolescent dating abuse are closely linked with the environment. Risk factors such as lack of parental supervision and support, witnessing violence at home, being exposed to harsh parenting, and believing that dating violence is acceptable are all associated with the home environment. Increases of violence at home and the acceptance of violent behaviours desensitize and normalize those types of behaviours in youth during their early developmental years. Each risk factor is closely linked with the next, so when youth are exposed to one, they quickly become vulnerable to another, which leads to a higher risk of becoming a victim to or being the abuser. For example, a youth who witnesses his father physically abusing his mother will also be susceptible to believing that these violent behaviours are acceptable because they have learned in the home. Once these experiences become internalized, they can manifest during the adolescent years in other forms, such as adolescent dating abuse.

Other environmental risk factors such as living in poverty, coming from disadvantaged homes, being exposed to neighbourhood violence, association with violent peers, and engaging in risky behaviours such as alcohol and substance abuse also increase a youth's vulnerability to adolescent dating abuse. Similar to risk factors that occur within the home, the external variables are also closely intertwined, increasing a youth's susceptibility to multiple risk factors. For example, youth exposed to neighbourhood violence such as gang violence are more likely to become associated with violent peers, developmentally normalizing violent behaviours. Specifically looking at substance use, Temple et al. (2013) found that there is a consistent link between substance use and domestic violence in adult and college samples, which were equally as relevant for results for adolescent dating abuse and substance abuse (597).

### **Social Learning Theory**

Psychologist Albert Bandura developed the social learning theory that he explains as "a general theory of human behaviour that posits that cognitions, behaviour, and environment interact to explain the acquisition, instigation, and maintenance of criminal behaviour" (Cullen & Wilcox 2010, 67). For example, cognitive factors such as a youth's understanding of how to deal with emotions, environmental factors such as the home they are raised in, and their behavioural output influence each other. Thus, a child growing up in a violent household will likely cognitively

habituate that behaviour and, by default, produce similar abusive or subservient behaviours and, in this context, would be at higher risk of being involved in adolescent relationship abuse. Bandura argues that humans can develop forethought, learn behaviours by observing other's behaviour, the ability to self-regulate their behaviour through their behavioural incentives, and are capable of self-reflection (Cullen & Wilcox 2010, 68). Thus, criminal and violent behaviour is not innate.

Bandura expanded on the social learning theory by recognizing two types of learning: direct learning and indirect learning. Direct learning is "an elementary and basic form of behavioural learning in which the person who performs the criminal behaviour directly experiences the consequences of it and, through these consequences, learns to continue or discontinue the behaviour" (Cullen & Wilcox 2010, 68). For example, youth is caught by a school faculty member commenting inappropriate names on his girlfriend's photo online because he is upset that another male had commented on it. As a result, he is forced to remove the comment and must serve a suspension. After he has completed his suspension and removed the comment, he will determine whether the consequence outweighed what he had gained from the behaviour and decide whether he will continue the behaviour or learn to discontinue it. This means that if abusive behaviours are not adequately addressed, those behaviours become reinforced positively.

Indirect learning, as Bandura describes it is when "people indirectly, or vicariously, learn behaviour as they watch its performance and its resultant consequences in a process called observational learning" (Cullen & Wilcox 2010, 68). For example, a child witnessed his father hitting his mother whenever he is angry. He sees how his father's mood changes after he hits his mother and that he appears to feel better. As a result, when the child is in high school and has a girlfriend of his own, she talks to another guy at a party, and as a result, he hits her. The behaviour of him hitting his girlfriend because he is angry can be a consequence of his behaviours and learned from his mother and father when he was a child. Thus, if abusive relationships are introduced during the early developmental years, behaviour can be learned as acceptable and desirable rather than unacceptable.

### **Individual and Extended Effects**

The extended effects of adolescent dating abuse on the community and society generate a serious public health concern as it increases adolescent risk behaviours, poor academic performance, and sexual risk-taking (Ball et al. 2015, S40). According to Ball et al. (2015), adolescent dating violence has chronic impacts on adolescents' physical, mental, and reproductive health, educational outcomes, and the potential continuation of abusive relationships across multiple relationships into adulthood (S40). This adversely has extended emotional and potentially financial effects on family and friends as they have established a relationship with the victim or perpetrator. Baiden et al. (2019) found that adolescent dating abuse has chronic effects on the individual's mental health, such as depression, smoking, anxiety, alcohol, illicit drug use, risky sexual behaviours such as multiple sexual partners, teenage pregnancy, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and overall diminished quality of life (3). At such a developmentally sensitive age, diminished quality of life can provoke extreme suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. During their study, Baiden et al. (2019) found that "among adolescents ages 14 to 17 years... adolescents who experienced TDV were at higher risk for planning and/or attempting suicide compared to their non-victimized

counterparts" (3). Although this is an individual effect, it also moves beyond the individual to create an extended impact on the family who lost their relative and the community who lost a member.

### **Prevention Methods and Outcomes**

There are two approaches that are critical to developing effective preventative and mediating measures. Ball et al. (2015) implemented a "curriculum-based support group model that strives to create a positive peer environment, increase relationship skills, and promote norms for equal and respectful relationships" (S40). This program targeted middle and secondary school students who have been pre-exposed to violence and created a 24-week dating abuse prevention program (Ball et al. 2015, S41). This program's intended outcome was to develop positive relationship behaviours in youth and create awareness of the support systems in place for victims. However, the program indicated a need for counsellors to be more aware of a students' exposure to violence in order to increase their capabilities of referring students to the program (Ball et al. 2015, S40). By increasing faculty awareness, there becomes a more extensive support system to mediate youth who have already been exposed to violence and prevent students who are considered to be at high risk of adolescent dating abuse. This not only benefits the youth at risk, but it also is beneficial to the faculty who work individually with the youth.

In conjunction with the Expect Respect Support Group Model, the Shifting Boundaries program would also be beneficial to youth at risk and educators. The Shifting Boundaries classroom intervention six information sessions on establishing boundaries and safe relationships and the laws and consequences of dating abuse (Taylor et al. 2014, S20). More specifically, "The six-session curriculum emphasized the consequences of DV/H, laws related to DV/H, the setting and communicating of one's boundaries in interpersonal relationships, and the role of bystanders as interveners" (Taylor et al. 2014, S22). The program was focused on developing critical foundational skills for building a healthy and respectful romantic relationship and how to react when presented with a situation of abuse. At the 6-month follow-up, there were "significant reductions in the frequency of sexual harassment (SH) perpetration and victimization; and the prevalence and frequency of sexual dating violence victimization; and the frequency of total dating violence and perpetration" (Taylor et al. 2014, S20). Thus, the prevention program was successful in not only mitigating the risks to victims of adolescent dating violence but they were also able to impact the perpetrators of dating abuse positively.

### **Conclusion**

When developing both institutional and individual-focused prevention programs, it is critical to incorporate the social learning theory in program development to effectively mitigate individual and extended impacts of youth at risk of adolescent dating abuse. When analyzing a critical topic such as adolescent dating violence, it is crucial to understand the topic to mitigate the risks and build prevention and intervention programs effectively. This includes building foundational knowledge on the critical concepts related to the risk, such as the definition of adolescent dating abuse and the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships, addressing the ecological setting and the impact this has on youth at risk, understanding current trends and the extent of the risk, and establishing the causes of the risk. Then moving forward, this knowledge leads to building connections between the individual and extended effects, recognizing theories that

illustrate the cause and effect relationship, develop prevention methods, and predicting the outcomes of those methods. Therefore, by recognizing adolescent dating abuse as a current issue amongst youth and developing an understanding of the risks associated with the issue, educators and others working with youth can begin developing ways to mitigate and prevent youth from the damaging impacts of adolescent dating abuse.

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