

PREVENTING DATING VIOLENCE, SEXUAL VIOLENCE, AND STALKING IN HIGH SCHOOLS TO SUPPORT THE “WHOLE CHILD”

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Abstract

Dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking are personal, pervasive, and common among high school students. These types of violence are often peer-perpetrated and occur at school. Dating violence includes psychological and physical attacks one utilizes against his or her date. Sexual violence includes harassment and more serious assault such as rape. Stalking involves unwanted and intrusive behaviors that are repeated and induce fear in the victim. The experiences of violence deeply impact the “whole child.” It is recommended that high school administrators promote a culture supportive of victims and intolerant of violence by using evidence-based bystander strategies to prevent violence.

Keywords: dating violence, sexual violence, stalking, high school, violence prevention

Creating a safe school is one of the top priorities for educational leaders.

Research indicates that violent victimization is disproportionately seen in adolescents (Finkelhor, 2008; Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999; Young, Grey, & Boyd, 2009) including the serious acts of rape in which teens are significantly more vulnerable than adults (Finkelhor, 2008). The experiences of violence that are personal and pervasive in nature, such as dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking must be considered school safety issues particularly since these types of violence are often peer-perpetrated and occur at school (Coker et al., 2000; Haynie et al, 2013, Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011). Further, the violence deeply impacts “the whole child – the physical, social, emotional and intellectual aspects of the child” (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], n.d.). It is vital that high school administrators implement effective prevention measures with a thorough understanding of the violence and its impact on students.

The purpose of this article is to inform educational leaders about dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking among high school students as well as their impact on students' well-being and academic outcomes. The article concludes with recommendations on violence prevention relevant to Ohio high school administrators. This article originates from the dissertation study that investigated the relationship between high school students' violence victimization as well as perpetration and the students' active bystander behaviors, which are actions that can prevent violence from happening in the first place (Ozaki, 2017). This article aims to provide vital information to practitioners rather than reporting the findings of the research study.

Experience of Violence among High School Students

Dating Violence

Dating violence is physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse that one partner inflicts upon the other in a dating relationship (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). Recent teen dating trends such as “hooking-up” and “friends with benefits” in which youth engage in sexual activities with no serious relationship expectations (Break the Cycle, n.d.; Kelly, 2012), may make it difficult for youth to see themselves as victims due to the non-traditional nature of their relationships. Traditional or not, perpetrators may hit, shove, intimidate, isolate, monitor their dates, and force sexual acts (Break the Cycle, 2017). Some of these behaviors may occur electronically such as constant texting and posting the date's nude photo without consent (CDC, 2019). The perpetrators are often possessive of their partners and exhibit overt jealousy, using manipulation to keep partners to themselves. In the 2007 case of Johanna Orozco, an Ohio high school student, her high school boyfriend called her obsessively on the phone,

accused her of flirting with other boys, and beat her until she said she would stay with him. These behaviors escalated to the near fatal shooting of Johanna (Dissell, 2015).

Dating violence victimization. Psychological dating violence among high school students is especially common. A national study of 10th graders ($N = 2,524$) found that 31% of girls and 17% of boys were verbally abused by dates (Haynie et al., 2013). Much higher rates of psychological victimization, including threatening, monitoring, and manipulating, are reported from a longitudinal study of randomly selected 9th through 12th graders ($N = 550$): 53-59% for girls and 41-43% for boys (Orpinas, Nahapetyan, Song, Mcnicholas, & Reeves, 2012).

Although not as common as psychological abuse, physical abuse does occur. The 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a national representative study of high school students ($N = 14,765$), revealed that 8% of dating youth were victims of physical violence in the past year (Kann et al., 2018). The types of violence surveyed in YRBS include being hit, slammed into something, and injured with an object or weapon. Sexual violence was also reported by 7% of dating youth in the form of unwanted kisses and touches or physically forced intercourse (Kann et al., 2018). Similarly, an analysis of the 2008 National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) found that 6.4% of 12-17 year-olds ($N = 1,680$) were physically assaulted by their dates (Hamby, Finkelhor, & Turner, 2012).

Dating violence perpetration. Research on dating violence perpetration by youth is limited. One study used a nationally representative sample of 10th graders ($N = 2,524$) and found that 21% reported abusing their dates psychologically (e.g., insulting, making threats) while 9% abused physically (e.g., pushing, throwing something at them)

(Haynie et al., 2013). In a large, cross-sectional study of high school students in Kentucky ($N = 14,190$), 20% of dating youth reported perpetrating psychological or physical dating violence (Coker et al., 2014).

Sexual Violence

In high schools, sexual violence often takes a form of sexual harassment which involves non-contact behaviors, such as telling sexual jokes, spreading sexual rumors, pressuring for sexual activities, and calling someone gay or lesbian, but may also include more severe forms such as flashing, sexual touches, and forcing sexual acts (e.g., Hill & Kearn, 2011; U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2008). The USDE (2008) also includes impact of sexual harassment in its definition as an act that “denies or limits a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from a school’s education program” (p.3).

Sexual violence victimization. Sexual harassment is very common in high schools. The 2008 NatSCEV found that 16% of 14 to 17 year-olds were sexually harassed in their lifetime (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013). Other national representative studies found much higher rates of sexual harassment in high schools. American Association of University Women ([AAUW], 2001) found that over 80% of 8th through 11th graders ($N = 2,064$) had been sexually harassed at some point in their entire school career. Ten years later, another AAUW study reported that 48% of 1,965 students in 7th to 12th grades were sexually harassed with such acts as sexual comments, homophobic name calling, and sexual touches during the school year (Hill & Kearn, 2011). More severe forms of sexual violence are also reported. A statewide survey of Kentucky high school students ($N = 18,0303$) revealed that 18.5% of the respondents experienced unwanted sexual activities in the past year (Williams et al., 2014). Further,

7.4% of national sample of high school students reported being forced to have sexual intercourse ever in their lifetime by various perpetrators including peers in 2017 YRBS (Kann et al., 2018).

One important point for high school administrators to recognize is that the high school age group is the largest sexual violence victim group when compared to other age-groups. For example, an analysis of 2008 NatCEV revealed that high school youth (5.1%) had much higher rate of sexual assault victimization compared to middle (0.9%) and elementary (0.7%) school youth (Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, 2015). The same goes for sexual harassment and flashing where 11.6% of high school students reported victimization compared to middle (3.2%) and elementary (0.7%) school students.

Another point to note is the significant gender difference. Girls (56%) were sexually harassed significantly more than boys (40%) in a national study (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Similarly, Young et al. (2009) reported that the rate of female sexual harassment victimization (75%) doubled that of their male counterparts. In the 2017 YRBS, the rate of sexual assault victimization among girls almost tripled that of boys (11.3% vs 3.5%) regardless of their race and grade level (Kann et al., 2018).

Sexual violence perpetration. Past research clearly indicates that peer-to-peer sexual violence is common. A study of 7th through 12th graders ($N = 1,086$) revealed that various sexual violence, ranging from unwanted kisses and hugs to oral sex and rape, were perpetrated by a date (15%), an acquaintance (19%), or a friend (46%) (Young et al., 2009). In another study ($N = 2,999$), 14% of 14-17 year-old victims of sexual assaults, sexual harassment, and flashing reported their perpetrators were peers (Turner et al.,

2011). Clear et al. (2014) found that 8.5% of 18,090 respondents sexually harassed another high school student by telling sexual jokes, making sexual gestures or remarks, or asking to hookup after being told no. AAUW (2001) reported that 54% of 8th to 11th grade students ($N = 2,064$) sexually harassed another student by telling sexual jokes, calling them gay or lesbian, or sexually touching. Almost all of these types of acts, according to the 2010 AAUW study, were peer-perpetrated (Hill & Kearl, 2011). It is especially noteworthy that many peer-perpetrated sexual violence events occur at school. For example, 72% of sexual harassment, 37% of flashing, and 43% of sexual assault including completed rape occurred in the school property, according to one national study (Turner et al., 2011).

Stalking

Stalking can be defined as “one or more of a constellation of behaviors that (a) are repeatedly directed toward a specific individual (the “target”), (b) are unwelcome and intrusive, and (c) induce fear or concern in the target” (Wesstrup & Fremouw, 1998, p.258). It may be difficult for educators to identify stalking from other types of youthful behaviors. When teens are excited about new friendships or romantic interests, some may engage in “following” behaviors (Scott, Ash, & Elwyn, 2007). When the youth acts obsessively, the “following” may create fear in the target which then would be considered stalking (Scott et al., 2007). In general, stalking includes unwanted following in-person and online as well as phone calls and text messages (Purcell, Moller, Flower, & Mullen, 2009). A stalker may also unexpectedly show up at home or other places the victim frequents, leave unwanted gifts, use social networking and technology to track the target, and use others to obtain information about the victim (Loveisrespect, n.d.). Stalking may

occur as part of dating violence particularly when one partner tries to keep the other from leaving.

Stalking victimization. Fisher et al. (2014) conducted the first population-based study in the United States on stalking in high schools and found that 16.5% of 18,013 Kentucky youth were stalked in the past year. Adult respondents (18% women and 7% men) of the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) revealed that their first experience of stalking victimization was in their adolescence (Black et al., 2011). In Australia, one of the first empirical research on juvenile stalkers based on stalking protective order applications ($N = 299$) found that, among all of the victims, 69% were females and 71% were high school students (Purcell, Pathe, & Mullen, 2010).

Stalking perpetration. In the aforementioned study by Fisher and colleagues (2014), the self-report of stalking perpetration was much lower than victimization (5.3% vs 16.5%). Among the stalking victims in the study, 23% stated that the stalker was from the same high school. Further, 33% of victims reported that they feared an ex-dating partner the most as the stalker (Fisher et al., 2014). In an Australian juvenile stalking study ($N = 299$), 70% of the stalkers were high school students who were current or former schoolmates (24%), acquaintances (23%), or ex-dating partners (21%) (Purcell et al., 2009).

Co-occurrence of Violence

While it is disturbing that high school students are involved in any one type of violence described above, research suggests that some experience multiple types of violence as victims, perpetrators, or both. Understanding the complex reality of violence

among high school students should inform educators who have opportunities to support students.

Research shows that one type of violent victimization often predicts another. Among a nationally representative sample of 2 to 17 year-olds ($N = 2,030$), a great majority of victims (i.e., 97% peer sexual assault, 92% rape, 91% flashing, 87% verbal sexual harassment, and 76% dating violence) were also victims in more than 4 and an average of 7 kinds of violence perpetrated by peers or adults in the past year (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). Among the 12-17 year-old youth in the NatSCEV study, victims of rape (25%), flashing (20%), and sexual harassment (18%) were also physically abused by their dates significantly more than non-victims (Hamby et al., 2012). The same study also found that 60% of physical dating violence victims were sexually violated in their lifetime.

Research on adult criminal offender and college student populations suggests that perpetrators of violence tend to be a small number of individuals who repeatedly commit the same and/or different violent acts (Hamby & Grych, 2013; Lisak & Miller, 2002). Although scarce, adolescent research shows a similar pattern. Perpetration of one kind of violence (sexual assault, physical violence against peers, and physical violence against dates) predicted another type of violence among males in a study of 16 to 20 year-old European and Mexican American youth ($N = 247$) (Ozer, Tschann, Pasch, & Flores, 2004). In a Canadian study of 633 students in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades, both boys (19%) and girls (26%) engaged in multiple forms of dating violence (psychological, physical, and sexual) (Sears, Byers, & Price, 2007).

Further, victimization-perpetration is also reported. Among a randomly selected sample of high school students ($N = 2,090$), 45% of victims reported perpetrating physical dating violence and the 43% of perpetrators reported physical abuse by their dates (Champion, Foley, Sigmon-Smith, Sutfin, & DuRant, 2008). In the Kentucky high school survey ($N = 14,090$), 48% of dating violence victims reported also perpetrating compared to 7% of non-victims (Coker et al., 2014). In regards to sexual harassment, among 1,965 high school students, 92% of girls and 80% of boys who sexually harassed others were also being harassed (Hill & Kearl, 2011).

The Impact of Violence on High School Students

Experience of violence is often traumatic. Trauma is caused by: an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014, p.7)

High school students victimized in dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking may be traumatized and have difficulty in their daily functioning at home as well as school.

Violence Victimization and Health and Behavioral Outcomes

Research clearly shows negative health and behavioral impacts of dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking on youth. A 2015 YRBS study ($n = 10,443$) found that physical and sexual dating violence victimization had significant association with non-medical use of prescription drugs (Clayton, Lowry, Basile, Demissie, & Bohm, 2017). In another cross-sectional study ($N = 27,785$), high school students with frequent recent

alcohol use or recent marijuana use had increased odds of physical and verbal dating violence victimization compared to those with no to little alcohol or marijuana use (Parker, Debnam, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2016).

A longitudinal national representative study compared middle and high school dating violence victims and non-victims on several outcomes including substance abuse, mental health, and behaviors (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013). Female victims experienced significantly more heavy episodic drinking, depression, suicidal thoughts, smoking, and dating violence victimization five years later at age 18 through 25. Male victims in the study reported increase in anti-social behaviors, suicidal thoughts, marijuana use, and dating violence victimization. In another longitudinal study of 8th-12th graders ($N = 3,328$), psychological dating violence victimization predicted increased alcohol use as well as symptoms of depression and anxiety while physical victimization predicted increase in marijuana use and cigarette smoking (Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Chang, & Ennett, 2013).

In a national study of 6 through 17 year-olds ($N = 3,164$), sexual victimization including assault and harassment were strongly associated with trauma symptoms such as anger, anxiety, and depression regardless of the severity of the incident (Turner et al., 2015). Hill and Kearl (2011) also reported that 87% of those sexually harassed experienced negative impact, including feeling sick to their stomach (31%), having trouble sleeping (19%), and getting into trouble at school (10%). Stalking victims reported more symptoms of post-traumatic stress and mood disorders, hopelessness, alcohol use, binge drinking, and physical dating violence victimization than non-victims in a random sample of 1,236 high school students (Reidy, Smith-Darden, & Kernsmith,

2016). All three studies above revealed that girls experienced significantly more and severe symptoms as consequences of the victimization compared to boys.

Violence Victimization and Educational Outcomes

Current research demonstrates negative impact of violence victimization on educational outcomes. Among a convenience sample of high school students in New England ($n = 2,101$) dating violence victims suffered from significantly higher levels of depression as well as suicidal ideation and received lower grade compared to non-victims (Banyard & Cross, 2008). More than 12% of sexual victimization were associated with missing school in a national study of 3,164 youth ages 6 to 17 (Turner et al., 2015). A 2009 YRBS study found that female high school students with grades consisting of Ds or Fs were at higher odds of victimization in physical dating violence and in rape by physical force compared to girls with mostly As or Bs (Hammig & Jozkowski, 2013). Another national study found that 32% of sexually harassed high school students did not want to go to school, 30% had difficulty studying, and 12% actually stayed home (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Other impacts of sexual harassment related to school life from the same study include getting into trouble at school (10%), changing their route to school (9%), and quitting an activity or sport (8%).

Additionally, a Newfoundland study of high school students ($N = 1,539$) found that sexual harassment victims, compared to non-victims, experienced significantly more negative educational outcome in the form of reduced in-class participation and lower grades (Duffy, Wareham, & Walsh, 2004). More recently, an investigation of the impacts of childhood violence victimization on educational outcome using systematic review of 67 studies and meta analyses of 43 studies from across the globe found that

sexual violence victims scored 25% percentile points lower than non-victims on standardized tests (Fry et al., 2018). Fry and colleagues (2018) also reported that childhood victims of any type of violence, including dating violence and peer-perpetrated sexual and physical assaults, showed a 13% probability of not graduating from school compared to non-victims.

Factors Associated with Violence Perpetration

Research on the impact of violence generally examines the consequences suffered by the victims. For perpetrators, studies generally investigate predictive or risk factors. In a study that followed 1,042 high school students for 6 years, trauma symptoms including numbing and avoidance were associated with dating violence perpetration (Shorey et al., 2018). Similarly, in a one-year longitudinal study of Canadian high school students ($N = 1,317$), trauma symptoms such as re-experiencing trauma and hyperarousal predicted psychological dating violence perpetration among boys while anger related to trauma predicted physical and psychological dating violence perpetration among girls (Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, & Grasley, 2004). In the 6-year longitudinal study of high school students ($N = 1,031$), history of violence against dates, exposure to parental partner violence, childhood maltreatment victimization, and low conflict resolution competency predicted future physical and sexual dating violence perpetration (Cohen, Shorey, Menon, & Temple, 2018). Further, mental health issues and acceptance of violence in dating relationships were predictors of dating violence perpetration among adolescents according to a systematic review of 20 longitudinal studies (Vagi et al., 2013). They also found that some academic measures such as good grades and higher verbal IQ were protective factors against perpetration of dating violence.

Conclusion

This article provided the definitions and prevalence of dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking among high school students and detailed their impacts on the students. Review of the literature demonstrates the urgency of the issue faced by high school students and calls for serious attention from educational leaders.

In particular, it must be recognized that sexual violence is especially damaging. Victimization that are sexual in nature, regardless of the severity of the act, tend to have more damaging effects on youth than non-sexual victimization. Additionally, gender differences do exist in experience of violence. Extant research shows that female students are victimized significantly more in various types of sexual violence and are negatively impacted more than male students. However, for dating violence, some studies found that boys and girls are equally violent toward dates, or girls report more use of violence against dates than boys. On the other hand, other studies found that more boys than girls perpetrate dating violence. Because of the complicated nature of the relational dynamics, simple conclusions should not be reached. Power imbalance within the couple and individual relationships' unique contexts must be considered when assisting students of any gender. Further, school administrators must be aware that perpetrators may be traumatized youth. Studies on adverse childhood experiences (ACE) suggest that childhood traumatic experiences are rampant and often predict future victimization and perpetration (Foster, Gower, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2017; Fox, Perez, Cass, Baglivio, & Epps, 2015). While their current hurtful action must be condemned, individual hardship and its impact on their current attitudes and behaviors must be considered when assisting students.

Recommendations for School Administrators

It is crucial to recognize that student victims do not share about their experience with adults at school even though many are victimized at school. For instance, a national study found that a significantly small percentage of students reported sexual harassment victimization to their teachers (9%), compared to friends (23%), parent/family (27%), and no one (50%) while almost half of the in-person incidents occurred at school (Hill & Kearl, 2011). It is imperative that high school administrators explore ways that the teachers and other adults within the school play a supportive role to students experiencing violence. Indeed, schools do act as a protective factor against violence for students according to research. In a study of 10th graders ($N = 638$), while relational victimization at school was associated with increased likelihood of dropping out of school, school connectedness and presence of a caring adult at school were associated with decreased odds of dropping out (Orpinas & Raczynski, 2016). For the school to be a protective factor for high school students experiencing violence, cultivating the culture of support for victims as part of efforts to prevent violence is recommended.

One of the evidence-based approaches in violence prevention is the bystander approach, a model of primary prevention which aims to prevent violence from happening in the first place. The bystander approach aims to equip all community members with knowledge and skills that allow them to intervene safely while promoting the culture that is intolerant of violence and supportive of victims (See Ozaki, 2017, for review). As an innovative approach to prevent violence, bystander programs have proliferated throughout the United States in the last decade and have demonstrated effectiveness in several studies, including one large randomized control trial in high schools. From their

five-year study ($N = 89,707$), Coker and colleagues (2017) report significantly lower rates of violence in intervention schools compared to control schools, including 21% lower sexual violence perpetration in intervention schools in the fourth year of program implementation.

This article demonstrated the urgent needs for educational leaders to recognize dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking in high schools. Understanding potential impacts of violence on students allows educators to support students so they are encouraged to stay in school and succeed. Attending to personal experiences of violence among students supports the notion that the school administrators, teachers, and staff care about the needs and success of “the whole child” (ODE, n.d.). A recent letter from the Ohio governor to superintendents indicated the availability of funding dedicated to prevention education and encouraged collaboration with community partners (DeWine, 2019). In their efforts to create safe schools and advocate for success for all students, high school administrators are highly encouraged to seek evidence-based programs implemented successfully in various districts across the United States.

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