Continuing Education

Relationship Violence Prevention Education in Schools: What’s Working, What’s Getting in the Way, and What Are Some Future Directions

Heather Meyer and Nan Stein

ABSTRACT

This article summarizes five K-12 school-based dating violence prevention curricula/programs that have gone through some form of evaluation and peer review. These programs were selected as a result of a broad and comprehensive review of the relationship violence literature that has been published in the past decade. Program objectives, components, outcomes, and evaluation procedures are compared and discussed. The programs that were reviewed were generally found to be not very effective at preventing relationship violence in the short term, and less effective in the long term, suggesting the need for more program depth, length, and a systematic, longitudinal process for collecting and analyzing data. Reasons for a lack of overall effectiveness in addition to suggestions for future programs and evaluations are discussed.

Relationship violence statistics are variable and range from under 10% to in excess of 60% depending on the demographics and/or size of the sample and whether students were middle/high school-aged or college students (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002; Foshee et al., 1996; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Kreiter et al., 1999; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; O’Keefe, 1997; O’Keefe & Treister, 1998; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Spencer & Bryant, 2000). According to the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 9.5% of high school students nationwide reported that at some point during the past year they were hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). When this data is examined on a state-by-state basis, the rates of relationship violence range from 6.9 to 18.1% (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). This survey also found that nationwide 7.7% of high school students had been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will in the past year.

Other studies have reported higher rates of relationship violence among teenagers. For example, one study of almost 2,000 eighth and ninth graders found that 25% reported that they had been victims of non-sexual relationship violence, whereas 8% reported that they had been victims of sexual relationship violence (Foshee et al., 1996). O’Keefe and Treister (1998) reported that in a sample of more than 1,000 public school students in Los Angeles, 45.5% of female students and 43.2% of male students said that they had been the recipients of some form of physical aggression within a dating relationship. In addition, almost 10% of male students and 17% of female students reported that a dating partner had forced them to perform sexual acts when

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they were not willing. A study by Malik et al. (1997) that included over 700 high school students found that 39% of the students reported that they had perpetrated an act of relationship violence, whereas 38% reported that they had been victimized in a dating relationship.

At what age or grade level are students most at risk for being victims of relationship violence? A study by Burcky, Reuterman, and Kopsky (1988) asked a sample of high school girls their age when they first experienced an incident of violence within a dating relationship. Approximately 29% of the sample reported that they had been 12 to 13 years old when they had first experienced an incident of relationship violence, 40% were 14 to 15 years old, and 29% were 16 to 17 years old. These statistics clearly suggest that relationship violence is a serious public health problem for adolescents in the United States. In addition, due to the age ranges at which adolescents appear to be most at risk, prevention programs should be implemented by ninth grade (at the latest) and ideally should target middle school aged students.

The goals of this article are to present the results of a comprehensive review of school-based adolescent relationship violence prevention programs that have been evaluated and undergone some form of peer review, to discuss the effectiveness of these programs in reducing relationship violence, and to make some recommendations about how programs might better address and prevent relationship violence.

METHODS

This review began with a broad survey of the literature programs/curricula that focused on relationship violence and had been implemented and evaluated in a school setting. The review was comprehensive and focused on a broad search of the literature (e.g., psychology, sociology, public health, school health, education) for peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters from 1992 to 2002, which included the evaluation of a school-based relationship violence prevention program. The key-words that were utilized in this search included relationship, dating, violence, victimization, adolescent, teen, program, curriculum, and evaluation. Because of our interest in focusing on the school setting, the review did not focus on relationship violence programs that were based in community settings, even if those programs had been evaluated.

RESULTS

The programs that were reviewed included Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 1998); Southside Teens About Respect (STAR) (Schewe, 2002); Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together (BRIGHT) (Avery-Leaf, Cascarci, O’Leary, & Cano, 1997); Teen Dating Violence Program (TDVP) (Macgowan, 1997); and the London Secondary Intervention Project on Violence in Intimate Relationships (LSIP) (Jaffe, Suderman, Reitzer, & Killip, 1992). What follows is a brief summary of the curricula/programs with a focus on the program length, depth, goals and objectives, and reported program outcomes (for more detailed information on each program please refer to Table 1). Then key issues and shortcomings that were identified in the programs are discussed, followed by recommendations for improving programs and curricula that address teen relationship violence.

Program Objectives

There was some general agreement across the programs about the objectives that a curriculum on teen relationship violence should address (for more detailed descriptions of the individual program objectives, please refer to Table 1). The most common program objectives were to increase knowledge about relationship violence; change attitudes that justify or are supportive of relationship violence; increase the use of school or community based antiviolence programs; decrease verbal and physical aggression within dating relationships; increase help-seeking behavior; and improve conflict management skills. These objectives were generally built into the content of the curriculum as the focus of the different sessions, lessons, and/or presentations.

How Were Programs Evaluated for Effectiveness?

The programs varied in terms of the ways they were evaluated. The majority of the curricula/programs were evaluated using a treatment and nontreatment group format in which these two groups were compared on the same pre- and postprogram measures. The comprehensiveness of the evaluation also tended to vary by program. Some programs utilized lengthy surveys that included empirically tested scales, whereas others used a selection of items that addressed different aspects of relationship violence. More specifically, the Safe Dates program included items (approximately 166) and scales that evaluated psychological abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence in dating relationships. This survey also measured relationship violence norms, gender stereotyping, conflict management skills, and help-seeking behaviors. In contrast, the TDVP, which was evaluated by Macgowan (1997), was a 5 hour program that was evaluated using a 22-item survey on relationship violence. This empirical study of 440 sixth and eighth graders in Miami, FL, reported that the treatment group improved over the nontreatment group on 6 of the 22 individual items. When significant results were discussed, 2 of the items were related to knowledge about relationship violence and 4 of the items addressed attitudes about relationship violence. The contrast between the scope and quality of the evaluation of these relationship programs is fairly evident. For a more detailed description of the evaluation component of all of the programs, please refer to Table 1.

Were Programs Successful in Achieving Their Stated Objectives?

When objectives were examined and compared with the significant postprogram outcomes, students who participated in the program did not always demonstrate significant changes in attitudes and behavior related to relationship violence (for more
Table 1. Overview of the Programs Reviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Information</th>
<th>Program Overview/ Objectives</th>
<th>Research Study (or Studies)</th>
<th>Methods/Subjects of Evaluation</th>
<th>Reported Results/Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>STAR (Southside Teens about Respect)</td>
<td>4- to 10-session curriculum focused on increasing participants:  * knowledge of the extent, causes, and solutions of dating violence  * use and promotion of peer peace education  * use of school-based and community antiviolence programs  * attitudes that are not supportive of violence</td>
<td>Schewe (2002). Guidelines for developing rape prevention and risk reduction interventions: Lessons from evaluation research. In P. Schewe (Ed.), Preventing violence in relationships: Interventions across the lifespan. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association</td>
<td>Southside Chicago sample (94% African-American)  Attrition rate of students over a 2-year period was 61% (Time 1, N=333; Time 2, N=118).  Treatment (T) and nontreatment (NT) groups were compared for postprogram differences</td>
<td>Significant differences between treatment and nontreatment groups on the following:  * Dating violence test (knowledge about dating violence)  * Resources and help seeking questionnaire  No significant differences between T and NT groups on the following:  * Negative conflict behavior scale  * Relationship skills questionnaire  * Justification of violence scale  * Violence supportive attitudes questionnaire</td>
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<tr>
<td>BRIGHT (Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together)</td>
<td>5 session curriculum implemented in health classes that focused on:  * increasing knowledge about dating violence  * changing attitudes that justify dating violence  * decreasing verbal/physical aggression within dating relationship  * increasing help-seeking</td>
<td>Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O’Leary, &amp; Cano (1997). Efficacy of a dating violence prevention program on attitudes justifying aggression. Journal of Adolescent Health, 21, 11-17.</td>
<td>193 high school students  Treatment (T)=102  Nontreatment (NT)=90  80% White  11% Hispanic  4% African-American</td>
<td>* More girls than boys reported having been aggressive in a dating relationship  * Significant differences between T and NT groups on justification of interpersonal violence questionnaire  * No significant differences between T and NT on justification of dating jealousy and violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safe Dates</td>
<td>10-session curriculum, theater production, and poster contest  Focused on changing:  * dating violence norms  * gender role expectations  * conflict-management skills  * help-seeking behavior  * attributions for violence</td>
<td>Foshee et al. (1998). An evaluation of Safe Dates, an adolescent violence prevention program. American Journal of Public Health, 88, 45-50.  Foshee, Bauman, Ariaga, Helms, Koch, &amp; Linder (2000). The safe dates project. Prevention Researcher, 7, 5-7.</td>
<td>Participants from Rural North Carolina  * 1,886 eighth and ninth grade students  * 77% White, 19% African-American  Treatment (T) and nontreatment (NT) group design</td>
<td>T group improvements:  * less supportive of dating violence (DV) norms  * perceived fewer positive consequences from using DV  * used more constructive communication skills in response to anger  * less likely to engage in gender stereotyping  * more aware of victim/perpetrator services  Behavioral reports: T versus NT  * 25% less psychological abuse perpetration  * 60% less sexual violence perpetration  * 60% less violence perpetrated against current dating partner</td>
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The most commonly reported significant postprogram difference was that program participants increased their knowledge about relationship violence. However, the more relevant and difficult question to answer is how knowledge about relationship violence translates into actual violent behavior and the likelihood that one will engage in such behavior. Only a few of the programs demonstrated additional changes in participants' attitudes and patterns of thought.

The BRIGHT program highlighted a decrease in the acceptance of violence as a way to resolve conflicts with a dating partner (Justification of Interpersonal Violence Scale), but no differences in the likelihood a program participant would justify jealous, coercive, or violent behavior against a dating partner (Justification of Dating

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<td>London Secondary Interventions Project on Violence in Intimate Relationships (LSIP) Curriculum created by London Family Court Clinic, Ontario, Canada Evaluated by: Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, &amp; Killip (1992)</td>
<td>Large group presentation and a classroom discussion component (2 half-day and 2 full-day interventions) Program addressed: * students' knowledge about abusive relationships * dating violence attitudes * behavioral intentions related to intervening in dating violence</td>
<td>Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, &amp; Killip (1992). An evaluation of a secondary school primary prevention program on violence in intimate relationships, Violence and Victims, 7, 129-146.</td>
<td>Four high schools (737 high school students) Students completed the LFCC Questionnaire on Violence in Intimate Relationships (48 items) Pre- and posttest design: * Statistically significant change in the desired direction occurred with 11 of 48 items overall related to knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions surrounding dating violence. * Changes in undesired direction were found on 8 of 48 items for boys (related to coercion to have sex—e.g., “It is ok for a male to hold a female down and force her to have sex if she gets him sexually excited”).</td>
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**Table 1. (Continued)**

*Details please refer to Table 1.*
Jealousy and Violence Scale). Safe Dates identified that program participants were less likely to support dating violence norms, perceived fewer positive consequences for engaging in relationship violence, were less likely to engage in gender stereotyping, and were more aware of victim/perpetrator services in their community.

The STAR program demonstrated an increase in knowledge about resources and help-seeking behavior, but no differences between the treatment and nontreatment groups in terms of negative conflict behaviors (Conflict Behavior Scale). It is interesting to note that although the LSIP demonstrated a statistically significant change on a number of desired items (related to knowledge and attitudes about dating violence), an almost equal number of items showed changes in the undesired direction (e.g., after taking part in the program, participants were more likely to respond that it was “OK for a male to hold a female down and force her to have sex if she gets him sexually excited.”)

Questions of program effectiveness that have been raised by this analysis include what comprehensive and meaningful change is, why some programs demonstrated significant change in participants’ attitudes after the program, and how we should approach changes in the “undesired” direction when dealing with prevention programs. Perhaps some of this relates to the comprehensiveness of the intervention program.

**Comprehensiveness of the Programs**

The depth/length of the curriculum varied by program from 5 sessions (e.g., Avery-Leaf et al., 1997) to a 10-session program integrated into health classes (Foshee et al., 1998). Not surprisingly, the programs with the least amount of contact with students appeared to have the lowest impact in terms of student outcomes. Foshee’s evaluation of Safe Dates (a 10-session, integrated curriculum), which included 1,886 eighth- and ninth-grade students in rural North Carolina, demonstrated that those students who had been exposed to the Safe Dates curriculum were less supportive of relationship violence norms, perceived fewer positive consequences for engaging in violent behavior within a dating relationship, used more constructive communication skills in response to anger, were less likely to engage in gender stereotyping, and were more aware of victim/perpetrator services (Foshee et al., 1998). In addition, this comprehensive program demonstrated that students who had completed the Safe Dates program reported 25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual violence perpetration, and 60% less violence perpetrated against a current dating partner (Foshee et al., 1998).

In comparison with Safe Dates, many of the other programs reviewed were much shorter in duration. For example, the BRIGHT program is a five-session (1 hour each) curriculum, integrated into health classes. A study by Avery-Leaf and colleagues (1997), which included 193 high school students, revealed that program participants were less accepting of relationship violence during an argument after completing the BRIGHT program. However, at the conclusion of the program there were no significant differences between the treatment and nontreatment groups on their justification of relationship aggression. Thus, when one compares the outcomes of a program of short duration (such as BRIGHT) with Safe Dates, Foshee’s significant evaluation results are much more comprehensive. This would seem to suggest that the more deeply embedded the program is within the classroom curriculum over time, the more likely it is to produce significant changes in behavior.

**How Long Is a Program Effective?**

Only a few of the programs reviewed have conducted substantial longitudinal follow-up to see whether the effects of a relationship violence prevention/intervention program are sustained over time. For example, Schewe’s (2002) evaluation of the STAR program demonstrated changes in behavior and attitudes over a 2-year period; however, the attrition rate in this sample (61%) must be taken into consideration when considering these results.

Foshee (2004) has some longitudinal data from the evaluation of her Safe Dates program that followed up on program participants 2, 3, and 4 years after they participated in the program. The study revealed lower levels of sexual violence, psychological abuse, and relationship abuse perpetration amongst participants up to 4 years after participating in the program, when compared with a control group. Program effectiveness over time is one of the most important indicators of meaningful change.

**DISCUSSION**

**Improving Relationship Violence Prevention Programs: Programmatic Suggestions**

The following suggestions are for improving the design and implementation of relationship violence prevention programs, based on the prior review.

- Design clear program objectives that are quantifiable and/or measurable through quantitative and/or qualitative methods. Program goals and objectives need to map onto the curriculum/program and be measured by reliable methods that have been subject to rigorous scientific review. If the program goals and objectives are not met after the initial evaluation, changes may need to be made in the program/curriculum to better address program goals. This should be an ongoing process where the program is informing the evaluation and vice versa.

- Limit or eliminate “add on” or “peripheral” programs that are not integrated into the official curricula of the school. The prevention literature has repeatedly demonstrated that these kinds of programs are not as effective in bringing about behavioral and attitudinal change as programs that are integrated into the existing curricula. Two of the programs that were discussed (Safe Dates and BRIGHT) were part of the health curriculum, although only for 5–10 sessions. The others were more typical of “add on” programs.

- Integrate the relationship violence curriculum into the classroom over a significant period of time. Many of the relationship vio-
rence prevention programs were not inte-
grated into the classroom (e.g., a 1-hour
assembly) or consisted of a short-term in-
tervention (a few hours to a few days). The
longest program that was reviewed was a
10-session curriculum (Safe Dates). It is
difficult to imagine that this complex issue
can be addressed in 10 one-hour sessions,
and perhaps this was one of the reasons that
the program objectives often did not con-
sistently map onto the program outcomes
when the evaluation was completed.

Because high stakes tests are driving edu-
cation today, it is clear that schools will be
reluctant to introduce relationship violence
prevention programs that are outside of the
traditional subject areas (e.g., math, science,
English). However, integrating themes of
relationship violence prevention into these
subject areas could help so that teachers do
not feel that they will be “deviating” too
much from the tests and taking time away
from preparing their students for those tests.

There is a need for an ongoing review of
the literature that discusses “best practices.”
There is a need for an ongoing review of
relationship violence programs/curricula to
highlight why some programs are suc-
cessful, why some are not, and what we can
learn from programmatic successes and
failures. In addition, no one has looked at
the specific goals/objectives and the imple-
mentation procedure for other prevention
curriculum (in terms of violence, smoking
cessation, or other public health concerns)
and compared successful programs in these
realms to the relationship violence pre-
vention curriculum. A comparison might
help us learn how other programs bring
about meaningful change over time and
what methods or program components
could inform relationship violence preven-
tion programs.

Improving Relationship Violence
Prevention Programs: The Evaluation

Two critical issues that need to be exam-
ined and some consensus reached, are what
“significant” changes in relationship vio-
ence attitudes and behaviors are, and what
changes imply program success/effective-
ness. The findings from the Macgowan
(1997) study highlight a very important
point about the evaluation of relationship
violence prevention programs. There needs
to be some consistency across programs and
evaluators about the definition of the terms
“significant change” or “meaningful
change.” Is it a significant change if a stu-
dent moves from “strongly agreeing” that
hitting a dating partner is a good way to
show them how you feel to “agreeing” on a
Likert-type scale after participating in the
program? Or should students be tested on
multiple scales, using multiple methods?
Some of the programs used only the analy-
sis of survey items to evaluate whether stu-
dents changed their behaviors, even if the
programs consisted of only a few sessions
with students.

Another suggestion for improving rela-
tionship violence prevention program
evaluations includes collecting information
from teachers or program staff/administra-
tors. Information from these individuals
who played key roles in the implementation
of the program may help to shed some light
on how attitudinal/behavioral changes in
program participants may have come about,
and more specifically what aspects of the
program seemed effective and which
seemed ineffective (see e.g., Stein, 2001). In
addition, programs need to move beyond
the standard pre- and posttests with the stu-
dents, which typically test only cognitive
change and barely get to the level of behav-
ioral and attitudinal change. The majority
of the programs/curricula examined in this
review were evaluated using a survey-based
instrument. The comprehensiveness of
these surveys ranged from 22 items to more
than 150 items. A gap in the evaluation of
these programs appeared to be any kind of
qualitative analysis, which may be able to
shed light on the meaning of these results.
It is also very important that programs at-
tempt to build in longitudinal analysis so
that behavioral change can be documented
toever.

There also needs to be a more rigorous
examination of why some researchers (e.g.,
Jaffe et al., 1992) have found that a number
of participants (particularly male students)
change in “undesired” directions after com-
pleting a dating violence prevention cur-
riculum/program (e.g., being more likely to
agree that it is OK for a male to hold down
a female and force her to have sex if she gets
him sexually excited). Certainly the goal of
a relationship violence prevention program
is not to have participants’ attitudes or be-
haviors change in the undesired direction;
thus, programs need to be particularly sen-
titive to and aware of this possibility.

Ideally, program evaluation should be
continuous and comprehensive with an eye
toward informing program changes on an
ongoing basis. The evaluation process
should continuously inform the program
implementation for the program to be most
effective. And once a program has been de-
termined to be effective (through high-
quality evaluation), it is important that
these results be published and distributed
so that other schools and districts can try
to replicate an effective program.

CONCLUSION

This review of relationship violence pre-
vention programs revealed the importance
of clear program goals and objectives, high-
quality evaluation, and the need for pro-
grams to be fully integrated into the school
curricula. Strategies for how these goals
might be achieved have been discussed, in-
cluding developing relationship violence
curricula that fit into more traditional dis-
ciplines (e.g., English, social studies), focus-
ing on gaining access to students through
health classes, and utilizing a high-quality
evaluation process. It is important to note
that this review did not come close to cov-
ering the myriad of relationship violence
prevention programs that exist. In fact,
some of the programs that emerged in this
review in the format of curricula or final
reports appeared to be very promising, yet
we did not include them because they had
not gone through a peer-review process (see
e.g., Joyce, 2003). We encourage these agen-
cies/organizations to publish their results so
that others may replicate these programs.
Relationship violence prevention is a seri-
ous public health issue, and we are calling
on professionals to evaluate their programs and disseminate their results so that all students are exposed to high-quality programs that have been successfully integrated into classroom curricula.

REFERENCES


