



Research Snapshot

Bullying predicts dating violence and poor relationship quality among adolescents



What you need to know:

What is this research about?

Social relationships are an important feature of adolescence. In early adolescence youth spend much of their time interacting with peers. Eventually, they develop romantic relationships, often within the same peer group. Research shows that adolescents' experiences in friendships are similar to their experiences in dating relationships. This is important because aggression with peers (i.e., bullying) has been linked to similar aggressive behaviours in romantic relationships (i.e., dating violence). The current study examined this relationship. Specifically, this study investigated whether bullying predicted dating violence and negative relationship features in adolescent dating relationships.

“Dating relationships emerge at a time when peer group belonging and the need for acceptance are highest. It is critical to simultaneously address the role of aggression in each relationship context, particularly when adolescents are reinforced for their aggression.”

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used two methods to collect data in this study: a questionnaire and behaviour observations.

This study investigated whether bullying predicted dating violence and negative relationship features in adolescent dating relationships. Researchers found that aggression and bullying with peers significantly predicted both dating violence victimization and perpetration. Age and gender were important factors in this relationship.

Researchers asked 585 students in grades 9-11 (14-17 years old) who were either currently or previously involved in a dating relationship to complete a survey about bullying and dating violence. Participants answered 4 questions about how often they had been the perpetrator (i.e., the bully) in incidents of physical, social, verbal and cyberbullying in the past 3 months. They were then asked to think about an argument they had with their significant other and to report how often a variety of behaviours (e.g., “I insulted him or her with put downs”) occurred during these disagreements in the past year.

About a month after students completed the surveys, 44 opposite-sex couples participated in a 20-minute observation session. During the sessions, the couples worked together on 3 tasks. Sessions were videotaped and researchers examined the couple's interactions for behaviours indicative of relationship quality:

- **Positive affect:** Positive tone of voice, relaxed body language, smiling, laughing, making jokes.
- **Relationship support:** How well partners listened to each other; nodding, eye contact, not interrupting.
- **Conflict:** Sarcastic, critical, or defensive statements.
- **Withdrawal:** How often partners avoided interaction; removing themselves from the discussion, physically closing off.

What did the researchers find?

Findings indicated that bullying was a significant predictor of dating violence and poor relationship quality among adolescents. Peer bullying predicted both dating violence perpetration and victimization. This was true for older adolescents (16-17 years old) but not younger adolescents (14-15 years old). Gender also played an important role, as high levels of bullying were associated with the highest levels of dating violence perpetration among boys, but not girls.

Bullying also predicted relationships with fewer positive features and more indicators of poor relationship quality. Adolescents who reported higher levels of bullying displayed lower positive affect and relationship support and higher withdrawal compared to those who reported lower levels of bullying.

How can you use this research?

This study showed that bullying predicts dating violence and poor relationship quality in adolescent dating relationships. These results illustrate how peer and dating relationship contexts are interconnected during adolescence. Youth who display aggression and other unhealthy behaviours in one type of relationship are likely to do so in others as well.

These findings highlight the importance of helping youth develop healthy relationship skills. Research indicates that positive relationships predict multiple positive outcomes including social and psychological adjustment. Teaching adolescents the social and emotional skills to engage in healthy relationships could increase the likelihood of these outcomes across the lifespan and help reduce multiple forms of interpersonal violence.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Ellis, W. E., & Wolfe, D. A. (2014). Bullying predicts reported dating violence and observed qualities in adolescent dating relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 30*, 3043-3064.

About the Authors:

Wendy Ellis, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Kings University College, Western University. **David A. Wolfe**, Professor and Research Scholar at the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Faculty of Education, Western University.

Keywords: Adolescents; Bullying; Dating violence; Adolescent dating relationships

About this Summary: This summary was written by Caely Dunlop, MA Candidate at Western University. For further information about Western's Centre for School Mental Health, visit www.edu.uwo.ca/csmh.