Conceptual and Methodological Considerations for Assessment and Prevention of Adolescent Dating Violence and Stalking at School

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Although research has highlighted that dating violence is a serious and pervasive problem in many adolescent relationships, the prevalence and characteristics of such violence at schools is not fully understood. Yet, adolescents spend a great deal of time at school, and schools facilitate their relationships by providing numerous opportunities for dating partners to interact during the course of a typical day. School social workers are in a unique position to intervene in violent relationships while also educating students to prevent dating violence. This article defines dating violence as a constellation of different behaviors, reviews research about the prevalence of these behaviors at school, and discusses important conceptual and methodological considerations pertaining to the assessment and prevention of school-based dating violence. It is expected that such information will enhance school social workers’ and school personnel’s knowledge about dating violence and understanding of critical issues relating to adolescence and adolescent relationships and will inform efforts aimed at preventing dating violence at school.

KEY WORDS: adolescent dating violence; school social work; school violence; stalking

School violence is a serious and insidious problem extending beyond the rare shootings and lethal acts that grab news headlines and popular attention. There is a growing recognition among school social workers, school officials, parents, and researchers that children and adolescents frequently experience other, less sensationalized forms of school violence. Everyday violence, such as physical assaults and fighting, threats and intimidation, sexual harassment, or bullying, is clearly less explicit than lethal school violence, yet the immediate and long-term consequences can be similarly devastating for those students who experience it, who perpetrate it, or who are exposed to it.

Despite this increased attention on more covert aggression, one particularly prevalent and troubling type—adolescent dating violence—continues to be largely ignored as a form of school violence. There are several possible explanations for this oversight, including failure to recognize or acknowledge violence in adolescent relationships, adherence to narrow definitions of dating violence, and erroneous assumptions that dating violence occurs only at homes and parties. Such beliefs contrast markedly with evidence that dating violence is both prevalent in adolescent romantic relationships and a frequent occurrence at school. Estimates on the percentage of adolescents who experience or perpetrate physical dating violence range from 10 percent to 40 percent in most studies (Bergman, 1992; Burcky, Reuterman, & Kopsky, 1988; Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004; Molidor, Tolman, & Kober, 2000; O’Keefe, 1997) and, among youths involved in dating violence, approximately 35 percent to 40 percent report that physical violence or abuse happened in school buildings or on school grounds (Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Roscoe & Callahan, 1985).
Bennett and Fineran (1998) found the prevalence of severe dating violence like punching and sexual assault that occurred during school was 15 percent. Moreover, when such behaviors as sexual harassment or psychological abuse are included, the prevalence at school soars considerably higher. Fineran and Bennett (1998, 1999), for example, found that 84 percent of students at one high school said they have experienced sexual harassment at school. In a study of school bus drivers, 67 percent of drivers reported witnessing students make sexual comments or sexually explicit jokes (Allen, Young, Ashbaker, Heaton, & Parkinson, 2003).

Dating violence experienced during adolescence often produces serious, long-term negative consequences. Most notably, research shows that youths involved in dating violence are more likely to be involved in violent relationships as adults (Grasley, Wolfe, & Wekerle, 1999; O'Donnell et al., 2006). It is vitally important then that school social workers and educators develop a clear awareness of adolescents dating violence and a working knowledge about appropriate assessment and prevention strategies for tackling this problem at school. As a central location for adolescent peer interaction and socialization (Valois, MacDonald, Bretous, Fischer, & Drane, 2002), middle schools and high schools have a responsibility to monitor student behavior, identify warning signs for violence, and prevent violence while also teaching adolescents appropriate conflict resolution, interpersonal, and relationship skills.

Effective assessment and intervention requires knowledge and understanding about key issues pertaining to adolescence, adolescent development, and adolescent relationships. School social workers and school personnel also must consider culture and diversity issues that affect dating violence perpetration, victimization, and prevention. Relevant literature cited in this article was identified through extensive searches of popular databases, including PsycINFO, Social Work Abstracts, ERIC, PubMed, and Social Service Abstracts, among others. Searches were done periodically across a two-year period (2005 to 2007), and articles focused on dating violence, adolescent violence, and school violence were reviewed with an eye for those studies addressing adolescent dating violence at schools specifically. The reference sections from these studies likewise were reviewed and cited reference searches were done to help further identify the most recent studies available on these topics.

**DEFINING ADOLESCENT DATING VIOLENCE**

Reflecting trends in the adult dating violence literature, many studies have defined adolescent dating violence exclusively as a narrow list of physically violent behaviors. Howard and colleagues (2003), for example, define dating violence as being “hit, punched, or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend” (p. 12). Howard and Wang (2003) used a similar definition. Burcky et al. (1988) likewise defined this violence as “any act perpetrated by the male high school student against the female student that would result in bodily harm or injury” (p. 353).

Dating violence, however, is more correctly conceptualized as a constellation of several abusive and violent behaviors, including homicide, physical and sexual assault, theft and property damage, threats and harassment, kidnapping, stalking, economic deprivation, animal cruelty, intimidation, and psychological abuse (Hickman et al., 2004). Restrictive definitions (such as those cited in the preceding paragraph) clearly fail to measure the full spectrum of abusive behaviors in relationships. Nonetheless, although researchers have begun to expand their definitions of dating violence beyond only physical acts to include other abusive behaviors, there is still considerable inconsistency across studies and no single study known to me has measured the complete range of dating violence behaviors in a sample of adolescents.

When defining dating violence specific to adolescent couples, it is imperative to consider fundamental features of adolescence and adolescent development. Adolescence, or the stage of life distinguished by the transition from childhood to adulthood that usually begins with the onset of puberty, is a developmental period marked by emotional and physical immaturity, inexperience and difficulties in social and dating relationships, and regular conflict.
Although acts like pushing, hair pulling, name calling, and pinching are almost always abusive in adult relationships, adolescents might use such behaviors to seek attention, to be flirtatious, or to express romantic interest (Pittman, Wolfe, & Wekerle, 2000). Furthermore, many adolescent dating relationships can be characterized as unstable and subject to extreme fluctuations in which the couple may separate, reunite, separate, then reunite again and again in a cyclical manner. Such actions make it hard to differentiate acceptable contact from more worrisome behaviors like harassment and stalking (Haugaard & Seri, 2003, 2004). It also is not uncommon for adolescents to have recurrent discord with family members, peers, and dating partners or for adolescents to have multiple disputes per day (Grasley et al., 1999).

For these reasons, assessments of dating violence (also referred to as relationship, intimate partner, or courtship violence) must differentiate normative conflict and courting behaviors from those actions and conflicts that are violent and abusive (Grasley et al., 1999). Perhaps assessment of the perpetrator's intent and motive is the best way to make this distinction. Grasley and colleagues, for example, proposed that dating violence should be defined as "the abuse of power and control in an intimate or social dating relationship" (p. 211). Pittman and colleagues (2000) likewise defined dating violence as "any attempt to control or dominate another person physically, sexually, or emotionally, causing some level of harm" (p. 221). A defining characteristic of adolescent relationship violence then is this intent to harm or control a dating partner. Because these definitional criteria allow for the broad inclusion of multiple violent and abusive behaviors while still accounting for the influences of developmental level, they are highly functional and preferable to those definitions that describe a static list of behaviors.

**ADOLESCENT DATING VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL**

An initial review of the literature on adolescent dating violence at schools can be misleading. Although much of the research purports to discuss violence among "high school students," this is often more indicative of the study site and sampling plan than intent to focus on violence at schools. This is an important point of clarification because these studies typically explore the prevalence, nature, frequency, and consequences of dating violence without reporting the locations at which the violence occurs. Nonetheless, there is a small body of literature that addresses victimization and perpetration happening in school buildings and on school grounds. The following sections review this available literature focusing on those specific dating violence behaviors that are known or believed to be the most common at school, including physical and psychological abuse, sexual harassment, and stalking. The relationship between such behaviors as stalking or sexual harassment and partner violence has been largely ignored in previous discussions of adolescent dating violence (Fineran & Bennett, 1999). A more expansive review of the literature gives valuable insight for understanding dating violence in adolescence and for recognizing this violence as a serious form of school violence. This information is also important for directing assessment efforts.

**Physical Violence**

Examples of physical dating violence are as follows: being punched, kicked, choked, pinched, slapped; having hair pulled; and being threatened with a weapon. Specific to schools, Bennett and Fineran (1998) found that the prevalence of severe dating violence (punching, kicking, beating, and sexual assault, among other acts) occurring during school was 15 percent. Molidor and Tolman (1998) reported that, among 635 high school students at one high school, 32.6 percent of male students and 31.3 percent of female students reported experiencing some form of physical violence in a dating relationship. Within this group, 42 percent of male and 43.2 percent of female students said that the violence occurred at school. Most of this violence occurred while the couple was alone, though approximately 45 percent of abused students stated that a peer or a group of peers was present when the abuse happened. In a similar study, Roscoe and Callahan (1985) surveyed 204 high school students
about their experiences with dating violence. Nine percent of the students reported being the victim of physical dating violence, 5 percent reported perpetrating such violence, and 4 percent said they had been in a relationship in which they were both physically abusive and abused. Thirty-five percent of students stated that this violence happened at school.

Though physical dating violence in adult couples is typically unidirectional with a male aggressor and a female victim, this is not necessarily true of violent adolescent relationships. Instead, violence in these relationships is often mutual, meaning that it is perpetrated and experienced by both partners. Gray and Foshee (1997) cited several studies reporting that, among dating adolescents, 40 percent to 70 percent said the violence was mutual. Other studies have similarly found that girls compared with boys are more likely to report inflicting physical violence (O'Keefe, 1997), though it is believed that some of this is done in self-defense (Hickmanet al., 2004; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; O'Keefe, 1997). One popular explanation for this phenomenon of mutual dating violence in adolescence is social learning theory. This theory postulates that violent behavior is actively learned through social observation, interaction, and modeling (Bandura, 1973). Dating violence thus might result from poor conflict resolution skills and occur between abusive partners rather than by one abusive individual (Billingham & Sack, 1986). Or, considering that peers are often present when dating violence happens at school (Molidor & Tolman, 1998) and most adolescents report knowing other adolescents involved in a violent relationship (Reuterman & Burcky, 1989), peer group influences might model and support the use of relationship violence.

There is evidence that exposure to family violence and domestic violence between parents predicts adolescent dating violence (Foshee et al., 1999). This is supported by research finding that adolescents who perpetrate physical dating violence have more positive outcome expectations, are more accepting of dating violence, and have fewer constructive conflict resolution skills (Foshee et al., 1999; Gray & Foshee, 1997).

### Sexual Harassment and Unwanted Sexual Activity

Rapes or violent sexual assaults at school, like an incident in Berkeley, California, wherein seven male middle school students were accused of kidnapping and sexually assaulting a female student with a learning disability (Lee, 2000), are rare. The more common types of sexual misconduct in adolescence instead appear to be sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual activity. Despite subtle differences in definition, these terms are often used interchangeably and are correctly viewed as part of the same spectrum of unwanted sexual behaviors involving an unwilling participant. The behaviors on this spectrum vary, with victims of sexual harassment being the subject of sexually explicit jokes or comments, being spied on while dressing or changing, being the subject of sexual rumors and lies, and being shown sexually graphic photographs, illustrations, or messages (Fineran & Bennett, 1998). Sexual coercion technically refers to nonphysical behaviors such as verbal pressure, lying, and deceit used to achieve sexual contact with an unwilling partner (DeGue & DiLillo, 2005), whereas unwanted sexual activities include unsolicited acts of kissing, hugging, genital contact, and sex (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000).

Whereas studies have shown consistently that approximately 67 percent to 87 percent of adolescents experience some form of sexual victimization (American Association of University Women, 1993; Fineran & Bennett, 1998; Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Jackson et al., 2000), the frequency between intimate partners at school is less clear. Jackson and colleagues (2000), for example, found that 67 percent of male and 76 percent of female adolescents experience at least one incident of unwanted sexual activity or sexual coercion and that significantly more boys
than girls report this happened at school. Yet they give no details about the specific percentage of unwanted sexual activity occurring at school or its nature and regularity. Unwanted sexual activity was also found to be more likely in long-term relationships than in new or casual relationships, and the most common reasons for engaging in unwanted sex were because the victim wanted to show love for a partner or because their partner wanted sex. These reasons reflect sexual coercion; though more information is needed (but not provided) to fully interpret the results. Fineran and Bennett (1998, 1999) similarly reported that 84 percent of 342 students at one high school said they have experienced sexual harassment at school and 25 percent of these students said that a current or former intimate partner was the perpetrator (Fineran & Bennett, 1998, 1999). Finally, though not yet empirically studied, it is expected that sexual misconduct occurring at school will be connected to sexual aggression off school grounds. Because sexual coercion and harassment often involve verbal pressure, sexually explicit dialogue, and manipulation and deceit, conversations between dating couples at school might be coercive in nature and intended to push unwanted sexual activity after school.

Psychological Abuse
Several studies document that psychological abuse is a regular experience in adolescent dating relationships. This abuse includes actions like sarcasm and derogatory remarks, emotional withholding, insults and name calling, being treated like an inferior person, being cursed at, being ignored (the “silent treatment”), and yelling. In one study, 11 percent of high school students reported experiencing threats, abusive language, or both in dating relationships and 28 percent reported experiencing this verbal abuse in addition to physical and sexual violence (Bergman, 1992). Jackson and colleagues (2000) found that 76 percent 82 percent of dating adolescents reported experiencing at least one incident of degradation, monopolization, and isolation. This emotional and psychological aggression most often followed a relationship breakup, jealousy, or alcohol use. Several studies have similarly documented a high prevalence rate of psychological abuse in college and adult dating relationships; other research has found that physical and sexual violence are almost always accompanied by psychological abuse (Molidor, 1995).

Though I know of no studies that report the frequency of psychological abuse specifically at school, the earlier-cited studies, in combination with the nature of this abuse and the realities of school, suggest that it is probably the most common form of dating violence on middle and high school campuses. Much of this abuse is verbal and therefore easier to perpetrate and conceal on school grounds than physically aggressive behaviors. Couples also have multiple chances to interact before and after school, between classes, in the lunchroom, and on the schoolyard, which provides numerous opportunities for abusive remarks and comments even if the victim is trying to avoid the perpetrator. Last, because psychological abuse is not as obviously abusive as hitting or slapping, schoolmates and teachers might be less likely to recognize it, report it, or intervene to stop it.

Stalking
One final, especially troubling—yet often-ignored—type of adolescent dating violence is stalking. Examples of stalking behaviors are as follows: incessant or inappropriate telephone calls and e-mail, obsessively following or lurking around a victim, watching or continually visiting a victim’s home or workplace, stealing or harming pets, repeatedly sending harassing letters or packages, theft of mail or personal items, and harassing a victim’s family members, friends, or associates. Since most of these behaviors do not involve the hunting and subsequent destruction of a victim as is implied by the term “stalking,” much of the scholarly discourse has shifted instead to using synonymous terms like “obsessional following,” “obsessive relational intrusions,” “unwanted pursuit behaviors,” and “intrusive contact” (Haugaard & Seri, 2003, 2004; McCann, 1998, 2000; Meloy, 1996; Sheridan, Blauuw, & Davies, 2003).

When defining stalking, as with adolescent dating violence overall, it is perhaps best to consider a perpetrator’s intent rather than a
laundry list of stalking behaviors. Three important criteria to consider when defining stalking are as follows: (1) the behaviors are unwanted, persistent, and have a pattern; (2) the behaviors make an implicit or explicit threat of harm to the victim; and (3) as a result of the behaviors and threats, the victim experiences reasonable fear (Haugaard & Seri, 2003; McCann, 2000; Meloy, 1998). Use of such criteria helps to differentiate between normative adolescent dating behaviors and stalking. For example, sending frequent notes to express romantic interest or repeatedly trying to reconcile following the end of a relationship are somewhat typical behaviors in adolescence and usually lack the intent to threaten, harm, or frighten the victim. These behaviors would therefore not be stalking. However, if these behaviors are persistent, if the letters are hostile or threatening, and if the reconciliation attempts involve unwanted contact and cause the victim to be fearful and change her routine, then they would absolutely be considered stalking behaviors.

Despite a wave of recent research on stalking behavior in adult relationships, there is a dearth of research on adolescent stalking (Emer, 2001; McCann, 1998, 2000, 2001a), and stalking generally has been excluded from discussions of adolescent dating violence. This exclusion might be because not all stalking involves dating partners (or former dating partners). Instead, stalkers are popularly classified into three distinct categories: erotomania, love obsession, and simple obsession (Zona, Sharma, & Lane, 1993). The first two categories involve delusions and psychiatric disorders, whereas the third category refers to stalkers who target former dating partners.

Despite the need for more research, there are case reports, small empirical studies, and anecdotal evidence all suggesting that stalking does occur after the dissolution of adolescent dating relationships (McCann, 2003). In two studies of 13 and 26 child and adolescent obsession followers, respectively, McCann (2000, 2001b) found that 14 percent to 19 percent had stalked an intimate partner. Furthermore, McCann (2001a) cited a Massachusetts study that counted the number of restraining orders issued against adolescents for threatening, abusive, and stalking acts by adolescents. Though this study includes more than stalking, it reports that a shocking 757 restraining orders were issued in a 10-month period. Further evidence also comes from studies of college undergraduates, in which many students who report stalking or being stalked by a former dating partner say that this relationship began in high school (Haugaard & Seri, 2003).

Two theories support the emergence of stalking in adolescents—attachment and identity. McCann (1998) described stalking as a “disturbance in attachment,” and he noted that the attachment histories of stalkers often include the loss of an important attachment figure early in life (McCann, 2000). Adult stalkers also are more likely than nonstalkers to have overprotective fathers and insecure attachment styles (Tonin, 2001). This all suggests that the seeds for stalking perpetration are planted early in a child’s life. Similarly, stalking in children and adolescents has been conceptualized as a problem in identity formation wherein an adolescent defends himself against the shame of rejection by acting out in a harassing and controlling manner (McCann, 2003). Additional risk factors for adolescent stalking of former dating partners include being unable to appropriately handle feelings of jealousy and rejection, poor social skills, difficulties in relationship formation, substance use, and mental health problems like conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder (McCann, 2003; Roberts, 2002).

Though the prevalence of adolescent stalking in general—and at school specifically—remains unclear, McCann (1998, 2001a) gives schools the primary responsibility for early identification and intervention in adolescent stalking incidents. Citing a handful of case reports of adolescent stalkers, he noted that schools are often in the first and best position to identify stalking. This may be especially important in cases of ex-partner stalking because the victim and perpetrator would have numerous opportunities to come in contact through the course of the school day. Research on adult stalkers has also shown that this particular subtype of stalker (simple obsession) is more dangerous and more likely to be violent (Meloy, Davis, & Lovette, 2001; Palarea,
Though the association between victim–stalker relationship, threats, and subsequent violence has not been adequately studied among adolescents (McCann, 2001b, 2002), the potential danger inherent in stalking of former dating partners clearly places obsessional following within the constellation of worrisome adolescent dating violence behaviors at school.

**ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION**

**Special Considerations in Adolescent Assessment**

Assessing the size and scope of adolescent dating violence problems at school can be challenging. As Pittman and colleagues (2000) noted, teenage relationships are usually brief yet often characterized by intense and frequent contact between dating partners. This makes it difficult to measure the prevalence of dating violence and to evaluate any longitudinal changes in violent behaviors. Assessment is further complicated by the limited number of standardized instruments designed and tested for measuring dating violence among adolescents (Pittman et al., 2000; one notable exception is the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory by Wolfe et al., 2001). Although more screening tools are available for use with adults, care should be taken when using these tools with an adolescent population. Adolescence is a unique time marked by rapid cognitive, emotional, and physical changes. Thus, behaviors like impulsivity and a sense of invincibility that might suggest mental health problems in adults are normal in adolescence and might be misinterpreted when inappropriate tools are applied (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001).

Beyond considering unique aspects of adolescence, it is important to assess cultural diversity issues. Although this is always recommended as part of a comprehensive assessment, it is especially critical regarding dating violence at schools because culture can affect one’s language and communication style, attitudes, values, views of others, and response to interventions (Thorton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2002). For example, it has been suggested that adult men of color perform better in batterer intervention programs when they work with ethnically similar staff (Peacock & Rothman, 2001). Though this has not been studied in adolescent dating violence prevention programs, it is an interesting consideration when planning interventions.

Cultural factors also might influence a student’s willingness to seek help or report dating violence. Black and Weisz (2003) found that African American middle school students were more willing to seek help from family members than were European American youths. In contrast, Jaycox et al. (2006) reported Latino adolescents were reluctant to tell family members or clergy. They speculated that this might be related to the stigma often associated with talking about dating and violence in these communities. Another key cultural consideration is English-language proficiency (Jaycox et al., 2006). Students with lower proficiency clearly will benefit less from interventions done in English only. These students also might have more difficulty seeking help. Finally, it is important to remember that many ethnic minority students reside in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates and high crime rates, have unstable family or housing situations, and have more difficulty accessing resources (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000; Smith & Guerra, 2006). Assessments and interventions therefore should be considerate of those factors outside of school that affect adolescents and might contribute to unhealthy dating violence attitudes and problems.

It also is important to be cognizant of adolescent jargon and definitions as they pertain to dating and relationships. For example, adolescents might not be familiar with terms like “partner” or “dating relationship” but instead use terms like “hooking up,” “going out,” “crushing,” and “friends with privileges” to describe involvement with dating partners (Hickman et al., 2004, p. 138; Pittman et al., 2000, p. 221). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that these terms often are used interchangeably to describe both casual and serious relationships as well as planned and unplanned sexual encounters. There also are regional and cultural variations in adolescent lingo. One strategy then to consider when assessing dating violence is to conduct focus groups or
even informal meetings with students to learn about local terminology and its meanings at that school (Pittman et al., 2000).

**Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Interventions**

Many popular responses to all types of school violence are tertiary prevention interventions, or those interventions that involve students who have already committed violent acts, with the goal of preventing future violence (Fields & McNamara, 2003). Examples include referral to a conflict resolution group and placement in a specialized or alternative school. Although these interventions can have some benefit to specific individuals, school social workers and other staff frequently lack the resources, funding, and time necessary to perform complete psychosocial and risk assessments and deliver personalized violence prevention services to individual students (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Moreover, fear of punishment and social judgment will complicate the identification of dating violent students. Students fearing school sanctions if identified as a perpetrator of dating violence, for example, are unlikely to admit such behaviors on a survey or in an interview. As a result, identification of violent students most likely will be done only through official referrals to the principal’s office or other disciplinary actions. Such methods undoubtedly will underestimate the prevalence of dating violence at school and only reach a small percentage of students actually involved in violent relationships. Consequently, the effects of tertiary prevention interventions on the student body overall is expectedly minimal (Fields & McNamara, 2003) and not cost-effective.

By comparison, secondary prevention interventions target those students who are determined to be at a high risk of dating violence perpetration or victimization. As with tertiary prevention, attempts to identify such high-risk individuals are fraught with problems and limitations. For example, it is unlikely that students will respond honestly to a survey or screening instrument that requests their name and personal data in combination with information about their involvement in socially undesirable behaviors like dating violence. If responses are thus affected by social desirability, the validity of any tool is compromised (Streiner & Norman, 2003). Moreover, even among those students subsequently identified at high risk of involvement in violence, some will never behave violently. This means that screening efforts will result in a high number of “false positives,” or students inaccurately predicted to be violent (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001).

For all of these reasons, primary prevention interventions, or those targeting all students at a school, are believed to be the most effective at reducing the number of dating violence incidences. Research has found that such school-wide interventions are cost-effective and have a significant positive effect on students (Fields & McNamara, 2003). Furthermore, the high prevalence and pervasiveness of dating violence among adolescents generally—and at school specifically—show that this is a problem directly affecting more than a small minority of students. Next, students often are aware of violence in peers’ relationships and even present when this violence occurs (Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Reuterman & Burcky, 1989). This implies that the impact of dating violence extends beyond only dating couples.

**Characteristics of Effective Dating Violence Prevention Programs**

Though more research is needed to identify effective dating violence prevention programs for adolescents (Hickman et al., 2004), there are a few school-based programs with some demonstrated effectiveness (for example, Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O’Leary, & Cano, 1997; Foshee et al., 1998). These effective programs typically integrate an instructional curriculum with efforts to improve the school environment. For example, the Safe Dates program uses a 10-session educational curriculum combined with students’ performance of a theatrical play about dating violence and creation of posters about preventing dating violence (Foshee et al., 1998). Another example is Ending Violence, a three-class-session dating violence prevention program centered on legal issues and targeted to Latino youths. This program has been shown
to increase adolescents’ knowledge about dating violence and legal options (Jaycox et al., 2006). Regarding instructional and educational content, it is important that dating violence prevention programs aim to reduce negative gender stereotypes that encourage male and female aggression, counter attitudes that justify dating violence, and teach students pro-social and positive relationship skills (Avery-Leaf et al., 1997; Grasley et al., 1999). It also is vitally important that the programs teach appropriate conflict resolution skills.

Schoolwide programs also should educate students about the full spectrum of dating violence behaviors and promote open discussions about dating violence. Such lessons will raise awareness and responsibility among students, teachers, staff, and parents (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005) while also empowering individual students to seek help if they are abused or abusive. This will facilitate their involvement in more intense, specialized services. Finally, because adolescents are more likely to tell a peer than a teacher or parent about relationship violence, programs should teach helping skills so classmates will know how to listen, respond appropriately, and assist the victimized student (Jackson et al., 2000).

Other schoolwide strategies to consider that support formal dating violence prevention programs while also making their own contributions to school safety are school-based teams, community collaborations, and increased monitoring of the school building and grounds. Specifically, Eisenbraun (2007) suggested that schools create collaborative teams consisting of teachers, administrators, social workers, and other professionals who can assist in assessment and intervention planning around school violence issues. Molidor and Tolman (1998) similarly advocate for linking school-based programs to community groups like mental health service providers and legal and medical experts as a way to enhance knowledge about dating violence while also opening access to resources outside of school. Finally, research has shown that school violence often occurs in “unowned” places, or those places like hallways, cafeterias, parking lots, and other locations typically void of adult supervision (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999). Increasing the presence of adults in these areas therefore will reduce violence occurring there.

To identify locations at school most prone to violence, Astor and colleagues (1999) provided students with a map of the school and asked them to indicate areas where violence occurred. Such an activity is simple, easily replicated at individual schools, and provides students with a safe outlet for transmitting information about school and dating violence. It also is recommended that school buildings be kept clean, in good repair, and free of graffiti. Although seemingly minor, increased care given to the school’s physical environment can reduce violence and student misbehavior (Eisenbraun, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Adolescent dating violence that occurs at schools poses unique challenges for identification, assessment, and intervention. Efforts to reduce such violence require the following: teaching conflict resolution skills and pro-social behaviors, combating dangerous gender stereotypes, and enhancing the physical environment of the school, among other actions. Moreover, school social workers and school administrators must be aware of legal issues unique to violent dating situations. For example, although adult stalking victims are typically encouraged to seek a legal restraining order against their follower, such an act is complicated at schools because victim and perpetrator may have shared classes or activities that force contact and interaction (McCann, 2003). Other legal strategies to separate victims from their assailants likewise have encountered difficulty and resistance. This is evidenced by an Illinois court case in which a sexually assaulted female student tried unsuccessfully to have the perpetrator transferred to a different school (Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

In response to such complex needs and issues, school social workers, parents, teachers, and all school employees must assume a greater responsibility for student and school safety. School social workers perhaps are in the best position to lead such violence prevention efforts. They have the training and skills to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the dating violence problem.
at school and in the school environment as well as implement prevention interventions reaching a larger number of students than those aimed at one or two classrooms only. School social workers can also coordinate service delivery at the school and act as a liaison between school officials, teachers, parents, and the community. Furthermore, research shows that adolescents often are reluctant to report violence to teachers and school officials (Black & Weisz, 2003); thus, as an alternative to traditional school personnel, school social workers might be an important resource for many students seeking help for dating violence problems. Also, by providing information about dating violence and its prevention to parents, school social workers can help those students who seek help from family members outside of school. Finally, school social workers should seek to evaluate the effectiveness of any interventions and violence prevention programs they implement. This is a critical step to identifying best practices for reducing adolescent dating violence problems at schools while helping to establish more healthy adolescent relationships and more open, honest communication among youths.

REFERENCES


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