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A photograph of a young man and woman. The woman is on the left, seen from the back, with long dark hair. The man is on the right, looking towards the woman with a serious expression. He has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a dark t-shirt with a silver chain necklace.

Relationship Dynamics and Teen Dating Violence

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Introduction

Romantic relationships can be defining milestones and important learning opportunities in adolescence. Dating partners uniquely shape these dating relationships. Previous research efforts have focused on understanding the risk factors for teen dating violence (TDV) at the individual level; however, the context of the relationship, specifically relationship dynamics, may provide additional information about the risk for and protection against TDV.

Although romantic relationships are a common part of adolescence, unfortunately, not all of these relationships are healthy. A substantial percentage of dating teens report experiencing physical (18 percent), psychological (60 percent), or sexual (18 percent) violence in their relationships within the previous year.¹ Violence and abuse in adolescent dating relationships can have a wide range of short- and long-term negative effects for both victims and perpetrators.² Teen dating violence, a well-recognized term, describes a range of abusive behaviors that preteens, adolescents, and young adults experience in the context of a past or present romantic or dating relationship.³ These behaviors include physical and sexual violence, stalking, and psychological abuse.

Abuse does not always occur in the same way from one relationship to another. For example, one study that used data from 1,200 dating teens and young adults in the United States found that 70 percent of TDV physical

abuse perpetrators did not continue that behavior in a subsequent relationship.⁴ Another longitudinal study that followed dating youth in a Midwestern region of the United States found that a majority of young adults experience some form of violence in their relationships, but only 8 percent report abuse in all of their relationships.⁵ This shows that dating violence can change from relationship to relationship and that focusing on the context (specifically the dynamics of the romantic relationship) is a key to better understanding TDV.

Since 2006, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has fostered a research agenda that helps researchers and practitioners understand the complex factors that are associated with TDV victimization and perpetration. NIJ has also supported the evaluations of several prevention and intervention programs in both middle and high schools. These efforts have increased our knowledge about individual-level risk and protective factors for TDV, such as risky family backgrounds, poor self-regulation, and substance abuse.⁶ In addition, the field has a better understanding of how peer interactions can contribute to an adolescent's risk for and protection against dating violence.⁷

This Research in Brief examines the evidence from the perspective of an emerging theme: the role of relationship dynamics in dating violence. We primarily focus on findings from NIJ-funded research but also draw from the

broader literature on dating violence research, adolescent development, and romantic relationships to examine the unique associations between relationship dynamics and dating violence.

Many researchers have started to examine the contextual factors that contribute to TDV; however, there is still only a limited body of research that explores the role that relationship dynamics play in either protecting adolescents from dating violence or increasing their risk of involvement in an abusive romantic relationship. In particular, there is a dearth of research that looks at the association between positive relationship characteristics and dating violence. In this Research in Brief, the term *relationship dynamics* refers to a range of both positive and negative characteristics (e.g., relationship satisfaction, support, intimacy, closeness, jealousy, manipulation tactics). The term could also refer to dyadic interaction styles in established couples, although it is not addressed in this paper.

Adolescents bring unique experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors to their relationships, and each of these factors contributes to the quality of the romantic relationship.⁸ The dynamics between partners can encourage or discourage dating violence; accordingly, a better understanding of the dynamics of the relationship is important.

This Research in Brief addresses the following research questions about the association between relationship dynamics and TDV:

1. Which relationship dynamics increase the risk for TDV or protect against abuse?
2. How does the experience of TDV in one relationship influence the dynamics in subsequent relationships?
3. How does the association between relationship dynamics and TDV change during the transition from early teen years into young adulthood?

Which relationship dynamics increase the risk for TDV or protect against abuse?

It is intuitive to link negative relationship dynamics with TDV. In fact, when Vivolo-Kantor and colleagues⁹ studied 667 teens in 11th and 12th grade in a rural U.S. state, they found that negative relationship aspects, such as the use of manipulation tactics, increase the risk of TDV perpetration. However, when positive and negative relationship characteristics are explored at the same time, a more complex picture emerges. A five-wave longitudinal study called the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Survey (TARS) studied more than 1,200 teens and their relationship and contextual factors from early adolescence through adulthood; it provides important data on indicators of teen dating violence.¹⁰ In a sample of 956 teens from TARS, those who reported perpetrating dating violence also reported high levels of negative and positive relationship characteristics.¹¹ Specifically, perpetrators were likely to report high levels of jealousy, verbal conflict, and cheating but also reported high levels of instrumental support to and from a partner.

Expanding on the notion that both negative and positive relationship characteristics play a role in TDV, Copp and colleagues¹² further explored the TARS data set with a subsample of 879 teens to see how relationship quality indicators differ between teens who experienced any victimization or perpetration of dating violence and teens who did not. The researchers found that teens who report dating violence also report more controlling behaviors, jealousy, verbal conflict, and sexual nonexclusivity (cheating) than teens who do not experience any form of dating violence. Teens who do not report TDV report more trust, sexual intimacy, and commitment. There were no differences between the dating violence group and the nondating violence group on feelings of love and intimate self-disclosure (sharing intimate details of one's personal life).

Similarly, findings from the National Survey on Teen Relationships and Intimate Violence (STRiV) study also suggest that negative relationship quality is associated

with more dating abuse in relationships. STRiV is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of 2,354 teens ages 10-19 that focuses specifically on romantic relationships. Taylor and colleagues¹³ examined a subsample — approximately 345 teens who reported being in a current or recent dating relationship — in both waves of the STRiV data set. The researchers found that dating teens who reported less controlling behaviors in the relationship were 39 percent less likely to report psychological victimization and 46 percent less likely to report physical or sexual victimization. Teens who felt more feelings of passionate love in their relationships were 38 percent less likely to report physical or sexual abuse a year later. Like in the TARS study, there were no associations between intimate self-disclosure and any type of teen dating violence.

Observational studies provide another way of looking at the association between relationship quality and dating violence. In an ongoing NIJ-funded study,¹⁴ preliminary data from an observational study of 58 teen couples in the New York area¹⁵ showed that self-reported verbal aggression in the relationship was associated with less relationship satisfaction, closeness, and observed positivity, and more observed hostility. Self-reports of physical aggression were associated with more observed hostility but were not associated with relationship satisfaction or closeness.

In another ongoing NIJ-funded research project,¹⁶ Matson and colleagues¹⁷ used a daily diary study via cell phone to collect various aspects of current relationship dynamics from a group of 158 predominantly African American female adolescents in Baltimore, Maryland. The adolescents provided daily information on abusive incidents and feelings of jealousy, closeness, trust, and commitment toward their partners. Early data suggest a complex relationship between relational aspects such as closeness, trust, and commitment and TDV perpetration and victimization such that, even around the time of violent incidents, adolescents report positive feelings about their partners.

Overall, the findings from these studies show that negative relationship characteristics, such as jealousy,

verbal conflict, and controlling behaviors, contribute to TDV. Interestingly, only one study found that a positive relationship dynamic — passionate love — shows a protective effect against TDV. The other positive relationship qualities did not seem to differ between teens who experienced TDV and those who did not. In fact, Matson and colleagues¹⁸ show that positive and negative aspects of relationships co-occur within the same day, even in relationships characterized by abuse and violence.

How does the experience of TDV in one relationship influence the dynamics in subsequent relationships?

Over time, relationship dynamics and TDV may influence one another in a cyclical manner. To track such influences, Jeffrey Temple, Ph.D., at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston has been examining relationship experiences and contextual factors from a group of about 1,000 youth since they were freshmen and sophomores in high school in 2011 and 2012.¹⁹ Recent analyses of 705 of those teens with dating experience²⁰ found that teens who experience psychological abuse in their relationships were more likely to avoid bonding with their romantic partner a year later. Specifically, these youth were more likely to report having a difficult time relying on their partner in times of need, discussing problems, or feeling comfortable opening up to their partner. Youth who find it difficult to create bonds with their partners were more likely to experience physical victimization at the next yearly follow-up. Further, worrying about not being able to bond with a partner was associated with future psychological victimization.

Although the research is preliminary, it appears that early relationship experiences are important in future dynamics and subsequent TDV risk, pointing to the potential bidirectional association between relationship dynamics and TDV.

How does the association between relationship dynamics and TDV change during the transition from early teen years into young adulthood?

The evidence suggests that in young adulthood, romantic relationships tend to increase in duration and are higher in quality.²¹ This pattern was also seen in the TARS data

set,²² which tracked teens into adulthood. As young adults developed higher quality relationships, they moved away from abusive behaviors. During the transition, as trust, intimacy, and commitment increased, the occurrences of relationship abuse decreased.

Evidence also shows that if a relationship starts strong, it stays strong. One study examined the impact of the Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers program (LIFT)²³ in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States for 15 years; the study also captured some relationship dynamics that may be related to dating violence. Analysis from the LIFT study, using 50 couples who were partnered through the transition from adolescence into young adulthood,²⁴ showed that satisfaction remained high at age 24 for the couples who reported high relationship satisfaction at the beginning of their relationships. Couples who reported lower relationship quality at the beginning of young adulthood were more likely to report current physical and psychological abuse in their relationships.

Having positive experiences early in adolescence can potentially reduce the likelihood that teens will experience dating violence in young adulthood. These experiences can create beneficial relationship patterns that may carry over with subsequent partners, or even with the same partner over time.

Implications

This Research in Brief highlights the importance of considering the relationship dynamics in TDV and the roles of both positive and negative relationship dynamics. Studies show that positive feelings such as trust, closeness, and commitment are also present in unhealthy relationships. Young people who are in unhealthy relationships may not be as receptive to interventions that fail to recognize the positive experiences of teens in these relationships. Expanding the use of programs that acknowledge and address the entire relationship context can potentially increase the effectiveness of TDV prevention and intervention efforts.

Understanding how positive and negative relationship dynamics are associated with TDV is important in order

to develop prevention programming that incorporates information on how to enhance the positive relationship qualities that may protect against dating violence. Understanding relationship dynamics is also important when working with adolescents to reduce the negative qualities that may put them at risk for dating violence. In addition, it is important for adults to validate adolescents' relationships by acknowledging their positive aspects, even when the relationships show signs of being unhealthy.

Teens, like many adults, may be more likely to weigh the risk of being in an abusive relationship against the benefits of experiencing its positive aspects; therefore, they may remain in potentially dangerous relationships. This indicates a need for programs to have a broad goal of promoting positive and ongoing opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful and safe romantic relationships. It may also include the idea that some teens might benefit from programs that teach them the skills they need to promote and maintain healthy relationships. Oudekerk and colleagues²⁵ suggest that this may include interactions with peers as a way to set the groundwork for developing positive dating relationships.

Finally, this work points out that promoting healthy decisions about whether, how, and when to terminate a dating relationship is a skill set that requires more attention. In addition, more research is needed to determine whether there are safe and effective methods (other than terminating a relationship) for managing and addressing dating abuse in adolescent relationships.

Conclusion

The emerging evidence shows that the dynamics of dating relationships play a vital role in the outcomes and safety of both partners in the relationship. Not surprisingly, negative relationship dynamics are a risk factor for TDV, yet researchers are only beginning to understand the nuances of the role of positive relationship dynamics. On one hand, there is evidence that positive dynamics can serve as protective factors and decrease the chances of experiencing dating violence. On the other hand, there is evidence that in the context of an abusive dating relationship, the positive relationship qualities do

not change and may prevent a teen from terminating a dangerous and unhealthy relationship. As such, programs and policies aimed at preventing TDV should take into consideration the positive relationship aspects that coexist with the negative aspects in unhealthy relationships.

As we continue to improve efforts to address TDV, we must explore all contexts and dynamics at play. With many youth facing the possibility that dating relationships can become unhealthy even when positive aspects are present, it is important to take a holistic approach to this issue.

For More Information

The studies discussed in this report are available online in the *Compendium of Research on Violence Against Women 1993-2016* published by the Crime, Violence, and Victimization Research Division of the NIJ Office of Research and Evaluation, at <https://>

www.nij.gov/publications/pages/publication-detail.aspx?ncjnumber=223572.

Visit nij.ojp.gov, keywords “Teen Dating Violence.”

About the Authors

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