

## Research in Brief: School-Based Interventions to Prevent or Reduce Teen Dating Violence

The prevalence of dating violence in middle and high school is a significant concern for everyone. Adolescents who experience dating violence are at increased risk for physical and mental health problems, including severe depression and suicidal thoughts. Teen dating violence is also associated with poor academic performance, and can lead to long-term experience of abuse.

Prevention programs in adolescence can help teens to establish what constitutes a healthy, safe relationship, and can facilitate constructive conflict resolution strategies. These programs also teach students about resources available to them if they do experience abuse. There is a need for programs that bring about changes in attitude, and, in turn, changes in behaviour, including the perpetration of violence.

The research considered here, a meta-analysis, set out to determine the effects of middle and high school-based dating violence prevention programs on teens' knowledge of and attitudes toward dating violence, rape myths acceptance, dating violence perpetration, dating violence victimization, and conflict tactics.

### What is a Meta-Analysis?

A meta-analysis is a study that combines the results of several other studies. The approach involves selecting several high-quality studies in a specific area of research and analyzing their findings collectively. This method provides researchers with a larger sample size, and allows them to draw stronger conclusions than those based on individual studies.



### Why does this matter?

- ⇒ The incidence of teen dating violence is significant, including 10%-25% prevalence rates of both physical and verbal aggression among dating 9th-12th-graders.
- ⇒ Adolescents who experience dating violence are more likely to have poorer mental and physical health, poorer academic performance, and lower life satisfaction than those who do not.
- ⇒ There remains a need for school-based prevention programs that lead to measurable changes in behaviour, in areas including violence perpetration and victimization.

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Communities of practice in the KNSWB include: **Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, PREVNet, School Mental Health ASSIST, and the Social Planning Network of Ontario**

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## What did the researchers do?

The research team conducted a search of electronic bibliographic resources, government documents, grey literature databases (including organizations focused on teen dating/sexual violence prevention), and citations in other reviews; they also consulted researchers who had published work in the specific field of study. The results were narrowed down to 23 school-based (grades 6-12) prevention programs with goals of reducing or preventing teen dating violence and that measured impact on teen dating knowledge, attitudes, perpetration rates, and victimization rates; the majority of studies reviewed used control groups.

## What did they learn?

- **Dating Violence Knowledge:** Intervention program participants displayed significantly more knowledge about dating violence than did controls, a pattern which continued at follow-up.
- **Dating Violence Attitudes:** Prevention programs aimed at improving attitudes toward dating violence showed a small but significant effect in the intervention group, at both test and follow-up.
- **Rape Myths Acceptance:** Participants in programs aiming to educate students about rape myths were significantly less likely to accept those myths at post-test. No follow-up information was available.
- **Dating Violence Perpetration:** Intervention groups and control groups participating in programs aimed at reducing teen dating violence perpetration showed no significant difference in levels of perpetration at post-test or at follow-up.
- **Dating Violence Victimization:** Intervention participants were less likely to experience victimization relative to control participants, but the effect was no longer present at follow-up.
- **Conflict Tactics Scale:** Participants in intervention programs aiming to improve students' conflict tactics skills showed an increase in skill levels relative to control participants.

Overall, these findings reveal that, while most dating violence prevention programs had significant positive effects on students' knowledge and attitudes, the programs did not significantly affect their behaviour. Accordingly, the researchers stressed the need for programs that change attitudes in ways that also impact behaviour; they recommend incorporating skill-building elements to help fully develop the programs.

The review advocates collaboration between researchers and schools in order to ensure changes in attitude and knowledge translate to measurable behaviour changes; this will involve carefully addressing the reporting and confidentiality of dating violence perpetration and victimization.

The review also emphasized that school-based prevention programs are necessary, not only to prevent the immediate consequences of teen dating violence, but to help decrease the long-term escalation of violent behaviour into adult dating relationships.

The researchers suggest future research make use of longitudinal studies in order to more accurately establish the course dating violence takes throughout teens' development, so that the right kind of interventions can be implemented at the right time.

Subsequent studies should also explore further the social context of teen dating violence, specifically, the roles of bystanders and peers in intervention and/or victim support.

This brief summary was prepared from: De La Rue, L., Polanin, J. R., Espelage, D. L., Pigott, T. D. (2016) A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Interventions Aimed to Prevent or Reduce Violence in Teen Dating Relationships, *Review of Educational Research* 87(1), February 2017, pp. 1–28. DOI: 10.3102/0034654316632061

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