

Dating violence in teen years can have lasting impact

10 December 2012, by Carina Storrs, Healthday Reporter



Study found victims more likely to repeat history in adult relationships, practice unhealthy behaviors

(HealthDay)—Teenagers who experience dating violence could be more likely to get involved in violent relationships and have health problems as young adults, a new study suggests.

Researchers analyzed surveys of nearly 6,000 [teens](#) across the United States that were taken when the teens were between the ages of 12 and 18, and again five years later. The surveys asked about physical and [psychological violence](#) in romantic relationships, and also about feeling depressed, having [suicidal thoughts](#), drinking and doing drugs.

"What stood out was, across both genders and types of victimization, teens who experienced teen [dating violence](#) were two to three times more likely to be re-victimized by a partner in [young adulthood](#)," said study author Deineria Exner-Cortens, a graduate student in the department of human development at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

Exner-Cortens and her colleagues also found that teens who were victims of dating violence faced higher rates of depression, suicidal thoughts and heavy drinking, which varied by gender.

The findings were published online Dec. 10 and in the January 2013 print issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

"[Romantic relationships](#) are really important developmental experiences, where [teens] develop their identity," Exner-Cortens said. "If these relationships aren't going very well, it somehow skews their view of what a healthy relationship is and their healthy development."

Previous research from nationwide surveys has found that about 20 percent of teens said they have experienced psychological violence in their relationship, such as being insulted or threatened.

Approximately 9 percent of teens reported that they experienced physical dating violence, such as being slapped, according to the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

In the current study, Exner-Cortens and her colleagues looked at data that had been collected on nearly 5,700 heterosexual adolescents who had been in a dating or [sexual relationship](#) in the past year. The surveys, which were part of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, included 52 middle schools and 80 high schools across the United States representing both urban and rural areas.

In the first round of surveys, interviewers asked the teens about psychological and [physical violence](#). Interviewers also assessed whether the participants had depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, low self-esteem or antisocial behavior; had engaged in risky sexual behavior such as not using a condom; tried to control their weight through means such as vomiting or diet pills; or engaged in heavy drinking, cigarette smoking or illegal drug use.

Five years later, interviewers asked participants the same questions, when they were between the ages of 18 and 25, but instead of asking about both psychological and physical violence, they inquired about adult intimate [partner violence](#), which is based only on physical violence.

Exner-Cortens and her colleagues found that psychological violence on its own could increase the likelihood of several unhealthy behaviors for girls and boys.

Girls were 44 percent more likely to drink heavily and 87 percent more likely to have partner violence as [young adults](#), whereas boys were more likely to have antisocial behavior, 90 percent more likely to have suicidal thoughts, 34 percent more likely to use marijuana and more than twice as likely to experience partner violence as young adults.

The researchers found, however, that psychological and physical violence together seemed to have more long-term effects on girls than boys. Although girls who were victims of this type of teen dating violence were more likely to have symptoms of depression, twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts, 50 percent more likely to smoke and about three times as likely to have partner violence, the only association among boys was that they were three and a half times more likely to have partner violence.

This gender difference in long-term health outcomes of physical violence could be because girls experience physical violence differently than boys, Exner-Cortens said. "Males are more likely to laugh off physical violence, whereas girls feel it as a more fearful [experience]," she explained.

Although the findings do not prove that teen dating violence causes adult intimate partner violence or other health effects, it does suggest it is a risk factor, Exner-Cortens said.

Pamela Orpinas, professor of health promotion and behavior at the University of Georgia, was not surprised by the findings. Previous research has shown that teen dating violence is associated with a number of other health risk behaviors, she said.

"What is unclear is whether young people who have teen dating violence already have some other health-related problems," Orpinas said.

The findings underscore the need to screen teens for dating violence and intervene, the study authors said. "Parents, schools and health care providers

all have important roles to play," Exner-Cortens said.

Adults who are close to the teens can play a big part in intervention, Orpinas said.

Parents can talk to their teens about their relationships in a positive and caring way, and make sure they know what is appropriate behavior in a relationship, Orpinas said. If parents feel that their child is having dating problems, they can try to get help from a school counselor or therapist, she added.

"We've done a lot of focus groups with adolescents on this topic, and consistently they say they would like to be able to talk with teachers and counselors and social workers about relationship issues," Orpinas said.

More information: For more information and support on teen dating violence, visit the [American Academy of Pediatrics Connected Kids program](#).

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APA citation: Dating violence in teen years can have lasting impact (2012, December 10) retrieved 4 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-dating-violence-teen-years-impact.html>

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