

## PROJECT SOAR: SPOTLIGHT ON ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS [606]

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### Abstract

Safe Dates is an evidence-based curriculum developed for eighth and ninth graders. In this study we evaluated its impact on sixth, seventh, ninth and tenth graders. Students reported decreased approval of aggression and increased knowledge about dating violence after implementation, suggesting that the curriculum can be used with younger students.

### Introduction

Dating violence is a significant public health problem impacting teens. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) in 2001, 9.8 percent of girls and 9.1 percent of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence in the last 12 months from a dating partner (Grunbaum 2002).

Despite the broadened perspective of intimate partner violence, violence perpetrated by and against adolescents in dating relationships has yet to emerge as a major focus of attention among reformers or researchers (Hickman, Jaycox, and Aranoff 2004, 124).

In one study of 5,414 public high school students, nearly 12 percent reported having been a victim of severe dating violence in the past 12 months, such violence defined as "being physically beaten up, like hitting, kicking or throwing someone down" (Coker et al. 2000). Other studies have reported wide variation in physical violence incidence rates, from 9 percent to 52 percent (Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, and O'Leary 1994; Roscoe and Callahan 1985). Overall, physical dating violence rates tend to cluster between 21 percent (Stacy, Schandel, Lannery, Conlon, and Milardo 1994) and 45 percent (Pederson and Thomas 1992). Higher rates are often associated with more inclusive definitions, such as mild, moderate and severe forms of physical dating violence.

Moreover, between 28 percent and 45 percent of middle school students experience sexual harassment by peers (Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, and O'Brien 1998; Connolly, McMaster, Craig, and Pepler 1997) and 7 percent to 15 percent have reported sexual victimization (Foshee, Linder, Bauman, Langwick, Arriaga, Heath, McMahan, and Bangdiwala 1996). In a survey of 200 female and 173 male high school students, 76.9 percent of female and 67.4 percent of male participants experienced one or more incidents of unwanted sexual activity (Jackson, Cram and Seymour 2000). In this same study, 17.5 percent of girls and 13.3 percent of boys had physical violence directed at them "in a serious way" in a dating relationship, and 21 percent of females and 19 percent of males had been physically hurt by a dating partner.

Both males and females receive and perpetrate dating violence (Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, and Bangdiwala 2001), though female teens receive more significant physical injuries and are more likely to be sexually victimized (Cohall, Cohall, Bannister, and Northridge 1999). Silverman, Raj, Mucci, and Hathaway (2001) found that one in five female students, regardless of race or ethnicity, reported being physically and/or

sexually abused by a dating partner. Moreover, Molidor and Tolman (1998) found that 0.3 percent of high school boys were forced into sexual activity by their partner, while 17.8 percent of high school girls were forced. At the same time, mounting evidence suggests that male youth are also at risk for dating violence. In one study, 37 percent of males inflicted violence and 39 percent received violence from their partner (White and Koss 1991). In another study, Foshee (1996) concluded that 27 percent of females initiated violence on at least one occasion. Taken together, many researchers conclude that physical aggression occurs in one-third of teen dating relationships (Avery-Leaf and Cascardi 2002).

Dating violence has serious physical and developmental consequences, including risk of injury or even death and interference with identity development. Wolfe, Kateena, Wekerle, and Pittman (2001) concluded that physical and sexual dating violence is associated with higher rates of substance misuse, unhealthy weight control behaviors, sexual risk behaviors, unintended pregnancy, and suicidality. South Carolina high school student victims of severe dating violence had higher rates of suicide ideation, illegal drug use, sexual risk-taking, and lower rates of life satisfaction (Coker et al. 2000). Likewise, young adult female victims of severe dating violence had higher rates of anxiety and depression than nonvictims (Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, Newman, Fagain, and Silva, 1997). Also in this study, in comparison to nonviolent peers, perpetrators of dating violence claimed higher rates of drug or alcohol dependence, anxiety, depression and psychotic symptoms, and fewer social supports. Very few studies, however, have directly examined the impact of dating violence. Domestic violence, which shares many features of dating violence, has, however, generated tremendous attention and compelling evidence that interpersonal violence contributes to many negative outcomes. For instance, domestic violence is associated with lower quality of life and a wide range of diseases and conditions, such as heart disease, cancer, post-traumatic stress, and drug and alcohol abuse (Hamberger and Phelan 2004). These findings, at least in part, very likely generalize to dating violence.

### **Safe Dates Literature Review**

A variety of curricula have been developed to teach safe relationships and healthy dating (see Hickman et al. 2004 for a review), but the Safe Dates curriculum has been rated as one of the best (Meyer and Stein 2000) due to its evidence-based curriculum that reduces the frequency and intensity of dating violence and abusive relationships in students, and its long-term follow-up data (Foshee, Bauman et al. 2004). This curriculum has been reviewed by the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) and is recognized as a model program by SAMHSA, as an exemplary program by Safe and Drug Free Schools, and as a promising program by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs (OJJDP). The Safe Dates curriculum is linked to national academic standards for health education, life skills and relationships in sixth through twelfth grades and provides information on curriculum scope and sequence, which assists schools in adopting it as part of their overall plan. (<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov>).

Safe Dates is the only adolescent-focused dating violence prevention program to be evaluated at one-month, one-year, and four-years post- intervention (Foshee et al. 2004). Foshee (1998) and her colleagues were the first to evaluate Safe Dates and, concurrently, were the first to empirically investigate an adolescent, school-based dating violence program. Fourteen schools based in rural eastern North Carolina were stratified by grade (eighth and ninth graders), matched on school size and randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions. Treatment participants were exposed to school and community activities while control participants received community activities only. Treatment condition participating teachers (10 men, 6 women) received 20 hours of training on teen dating violence and the Safe Dates curriculum. Baseline questionnaires were completed by 1,866 participants (81 percent of total possible participants); 1,700 completed questionnaires at the one-month follow-up (90 percent). Measures evaluated four victimization and four perpetration outcome variables: psychological abuse, nonsexual violence, sexual violence, and violence in current relationship. Mediating variables were also evaluated: dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, awareness of services, help-seeking behavior, conflict management, communication skills, and response to anger.

Control and experimental schools were similar at baseline on all key variables. At baseline, 70 percent of participants reported dating. Among dating adolescents at baseline, 34.9 percent of the girls and 38.0 percent of the boys were victims of dating violence on at least one occasion. Among all participants at one-month follow-up, experimental participants reported less psychological abuse perpetration, less sexual violence perpetration, and less violence against a current dating partner compared to control participants. Moreover, a reduction in perpetration of violence held at follow-up both for adolescents reporting no dating violence at baseline and those who had a history of dating violence at baseline. Reductions in several mediating variables were also found, including dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, and awareness of services. However, control and experimental condition victimization rates were similar at follow-up: Exposure to school activities did not increase the likelihood that victims would stop being victimized. One explanation for this is that many study adolescents were dating people who were not in the sample. For example, 75 percent of the girls were dating partners in older grades than the study sample, and 75 percent of boys dated girls in a younger grade than the study sample. Consequently, it is likely that a significant portion of the victims had partners who were not in the study and, therefore, were not exposed to the intervention (pp. 49-50).

In a subsequent study Foshee et al. (2000) reported one-year follow-up data. Eighty-five percent (n=1603) of previous participants participated in this study and completed the instruments as before. At one-year follow-up, the short-term behavioral effects (e.g., psychological perpetration) had disappeared, although mediating variables, such as dating violence norms and awareness of community services for dating violence, were maintained. This finding as noted by Foshee et al., where behavioral effects fade and cognitive risk factors are maintained, is consistent with other empirical investigations of adolescent prevention programs. Foshee et al. include this additional explanation: “[The] Safe Dates program may not have been of sufficient intensity and duration to produce long-lasting effects. Perhaps the initial effects would have been prolonged or even increased with a booster intervention” (p. 1621).

Foshee et al. (2004) examined the impact of Safe Dates at four-year follow-up and the impact of a booster on previous program participants (n=10 schools). Following parental consent, between the two-year and three-year follow-up evaluations, one-half of treatment adolescents were randomly assigned to a booster condition. The booster included an eleven-page newsletter mailed to adolescents' homes and telephone contact by a health educator about four weeks post-mailing. Eighty-two percent of the booster pool completed the newsletter worksheets. Therefore, this study included three conditions: treatment only (n=124), treatment and booster (n=135), and control (n=201). In total, all participants completed survey instruments at baseline, one-month post, and one-year, two-years, three- years and four-years post-Safe Dates intervention.

Safe Date recipients at four-year follow-up reported lower levels of physical, serious physical, and sexual violence perpetration and victimization compared to controls. Foshee et al. argued that these long-term improvements can be explained in part by child and adolescent development: “Safe Dates was offered at the beginning of the adolescents' dating careers and included information and skills that could be incorporated into individual dating practices that continued through the high school years” (p. 623). This finding was moderated for participants who had received prior dating violence victimization. The booster did not demonstrate any significant benefit and was actually associated with higher rates of physical, serious physical, and sexual dating victimization among high-risk adolescents with a history of dating violence. Given this, Foshee et al. concluded: “Our findings suggest that boosters could have negative effects” (p. 623).

## **Present Study**

The Safe Dates curriculum was tested on eighth and ninth grade students, yet according to the manual, the researcher and publisher support its use with all middle and high school students. Little data are available on its appropriateness for younger middle school students. Schools often allot classroom time to health-related topics, such as dating violence, during these grades. However, schools often have little flexibility to modify

the scope and sequence of their curricula, even though they are unsure of the suitability of a curriculum for their students. Herein lays the first challenge: Research is needed to determine whether this curriculum is appropriate for students in these grades and to make recommendations for modifications, if necessary.

A second challenge for translating research into user friendly formats for schools is the need for age-appropriate measures of intervention outcomes that can be used in the classroom. Problems exist in the measurement of dating violence outcomes, such as perpetration and victimization, because these measures are too sensitive for use in schools, and they raise concerns about liability and abuse reporting. A third challenge is that many students are not dating, so additional measures of outcomes are necessary. A knowledge test of the curriculum is provided in the manual, yet there is no research supporting its use as an outcome measure. A measure of dating violence is needed that would be acceptable to schools, would be linked to the curriculum, and would show demonstrable changes as a result of having received the curriculum.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate our instruments, to determine the feasibility of expanding the curriculum to sixth graders, and to evaluate teacher satisfaction. We began with the following three hypotheses:

- I. The Safe Dates curriculum will improve knowledge about dating violence, including awareness of red flags, understanding of prevention and intervention strategies, and recognition of myths surrounding dating violence.
- II. Students will become less accepting of aggression among peers.
- III. Both males and females will show increased scores on these measures.

## **Method**

### **Subjects**

A total of 194 sixth, seventh, ninth and tenth graders participated in the project, including 31 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders from a rural school and 194 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders from an urban school participated in this project; there were 86 males and 108 females.

### **Safe Dates Curriculum**

The Safe Dates curriculum includes nine 45-minute lessons that focus on the following topics: defining caring versus abusive relationships, helping friends, understanding why people abuse, strategies for helping friends, overcoming gender stereotypes, developing communication skills for managing conflict, effectively handling anger, and preventing sexual assault. The curriculum also includes an optional poster contest and play, so that awareness activities will reach a larger student body. Each lesson is organized for easy implementation and includes a session-at-a-glance overview, learner outcomes, materials needed, and teacher preparation. Teachers can choose to deliver the curriculum in four, six, or nine sessions, which use a variety of teaching strategies, including games, role-plays, and class discussion.

### **Procedures**

Two classrooms at a rural middle school and nine classrooms at an urban high school were recruited, but no control group classrooms were available for comparison. Teachers used all nine sessions for this study. Human Subjects Approval was obtained at the university and district levels prior to the start of the project. The measures were administered immediately prior to, and following the completion of the curriculum, and teacher interviews were completed after the lessons were finished.

## Measures

### Safe Dates Knowledge Test

The Safe Dates Knowledge Test consists of seven short answer and ten true- false items that are linked to the curriculum. Scoring examples are provided in the manual and are directly linked to the sessions. Participants are asked to list examples of emotional dating abuse, physical dating abuse, red flags, strategies for helping friends, anger management, and protection against sexual assault. The senior author scored all the knowledge tests.

### Normative Beliefs about Aggression

This measure (Huesmann and Guerra, 1997) consists of 20 items, which comprise three main scales:

- General Approval of Aggression
- Approval of Retaliation against Aggression
- Total Approval of Aggression

Items are scored using a four-point scale from 1=It's perfectly wrong to 4=It's perfectly ok.

## Results

Pretest and posttest data are available for 29 sixth and seventh graders and for 108 ninth and tenth graders.

### Safe Dates Knowledge

Both male and female middle school students showed significant improvement on their knowledge of dating violence ( $p < 0.01$ ). Ninth grade males and females also significantly improved their knowledge scores, but 10th graders showed no significant improvement.

Most students had an entry level understanding of dating violence at the pretest, probably due to other instruction in health classes. For example, students recognized physical dating violence as hitting, slapping, and pushing and recognized emotional dating violence as name-calling and putdowns. Students tended to rely on easily observable markers of violence, such as observing the act of hitting, and they showed less sophistication in their understanding of more subtle forms of violence, such as jealousy, spreading rumors, and isolating a partner. We also examined students' learning about strategies for helping friends. Most students relied on simple answers, such as "Tell them to leave" and "Take them to a counselor" and did not report an understanding of the specific strategies, such as "Don't gossip," "Believe their story" and "Let the victim make their own decisions." Most students recognized the myths associated with dating violence such as "Both females and males abuse other people" and "Any forced activity is sexual assault, even kissing." However, most students failed to recognize the following items as myths: "Sometimes a person's response to anger is uncontrollable," "Conflict will occur in all relationships," and "Date and acquaintance rape occur most often in teenagers." The knowledge test is currently being revised and expanded to increase the number of items and to systematize the scoring.

### Normative Beliefs about Aggression

On this measure, middle school males did not significantly improve their normative beliefs about aggression, but female middle school students did ( $p < 0.05$ ). High school males and females showed significantly more disapproval of retaliation after aggression, and more total disapproval. However, neither group showed change in its general approval of aggression.

## Teacher and Student Perceptions

Teacher interviews were conducted to obtain their perceptions about the curriculum. Teachers reported that the curriculum is engaging for students and easy to teach. Most of their students have seen abusive relationships, at home, on television, or among their peers. Teachers reported that students in the seventh through the ninth grades generally grasped the curriculum, while sixth graders had more difficulty. Younger students reported the most difficulty with the gender stereotyping, in part because of challenging terminology. Student interviews suggested that, prior to the curriculum, sixth graders had little knowledge of dating violence.

## Discussion

The data show that middle school students as well as ninth graders improved in their knowledge of dating violence, but tenth graders did not. Female middle school students showed overall improvement in their normative beliefs about the use of aggression in conflict. High school students showed more disapproval toward the use of aggression to retaliate after they had been exposed to the curriculum. These results should be viewed with some caution, since no control groups were included in the study. As a result, the changes in the students' knowledge and beliefs cannot be solely attributed to the curriculum. Additional explanations, such as maturation and exposure to other classroom information, must be ruled out as competing explanations.

The data do provide sufficient evidence to suggest that measures, such as knowledge and beliefs, are generally appropriate for measuring outcomes in the sixth through ninth grades; however, tenth graders showed no increase in knowledge about dating violence. It is possible that these students had a more sophisticated understanding of dating violence than younger students and that a more detailed measure of knowledge about dating violence is appropriate for them. Data are currently being collected on a modified version of the knowledge test to test this hypothesis.

Further controlled research is needed to examine strategies for teaching dating violence to middle and high school students. Although sixth graders' knowledge scores did improve, teachers reported that these young students did not benefit from the curriculum as much as the older students did. Sixth graders may benefit more from exposure to information on bullying and school-based violence. Older high school students did not improve in their knowledge about dating violence. It is unclear whether there was a ceiling effect on the knowledge measure for these students, and research is ongoing at this point to evaluate this question. Older students may also need information on more sophisticated and subtle forms of dating violence and strategies for addressing them. Adding involvement with community agencies, presentations from victims of violence, and role-playing for skill development should be considered.

Intimate partner violence is a significant problem in our society, but dating violence has only recently become a significant focus for researchers. Ongoing work is needed to determine how to (1) teach students at different ages about relationship violence, (2) measure behavioral change, and (3) change norms at the individual, schools, and community levels.

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