

OMHNSS Information Brief

The Case for Dating Violence Prevention in Schools

This information brief was developed for the Ohio Mental Health Network for School Success (OMHNSS), by the Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs (CSBMHP) graduate research assistance Raven Cuellar. A copy of the brief and an expanded report of all OMHNSS information briefs are available at www.omnhss.org

Dating violence poses a prevalent and serious risk to the emotional and physical health of America's youth

- Between 10 and 45% of adolescents in the U.S. report having been physically or sexually abused by a dating partner.
- In a sample of high school students, 45% of girls and 43% of boys reported being a victim of physical dating violence. In addition, 17% of girls and 9% of boys had been coerced by their partners to perform a sex act.
- Between 28 and 45% of middle school students report having experienced sexual harassment at school.
- 70% of girls and 52% of boys who are abused by a dating partner report a physical injury.
- Adolescents in abusive relationships often perpetuate patterns of abuse into future relationships.

Dating Violence is defined as any attempt to control or dominate another person physically, sexually, or psychologically, resulting in harm

Adolescents experiencing dating violence are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, eating disorders, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, self-harm and suicidal behaviors, risky sexual behavior, and teenage pregnancy.

Schools have an important role to play in preventing dating violence

- Research suggests that friends play a critical role in influencing one another's behavior. Youths whose friends engage in dating violence or express approving attitudes of it are more likely to go on to abuse their own dating partners.
- When violence is modeled by peers who are in dating relationships, such behaviors are normalized and serve to justify dating abuse to other youths.
- Given the knowledge that the individual risk factor most powerfully linked to dating violence is the belief that such behavior is socially acceptable, the school climate represents an important environment in which to take a stand against dating violence.
- Schools reinforce dating violence when they fail to provide strong policies against sexual harassment, bullying, and peer aggression.
- Research highlights the importance of cultivating school climates that are incompatible with violence, threat, and coercion through strong policies and prevention efforts

There is a demonstrated need for effective programs to reduce and prevent the incidence of dating violence and to teach healthy relationship skills among youth

In order to experience healthy, non-violent relationships, adolescents must be given opportunities to develop relational skills in areas such as assertive communication, respect, and conflict resolution. Research has confirmed the efficacy of two evidence-based prevention programs that offer adolescents the chance to learn and practice relational skills:

The *Safe Dates* program consists of a 9-session psychoeducational curriculum that can be offered universally to all students as part of a health class curriculum. The sessions are designed to challenge beliefs that dating violence is normative and acceptable, to teach conflict resolution skills as healthy alternatives to partner aggression, and to help students learn how to seek help if they or someone they know is involved in dating violence. Information on the *Safe Dates* program can be obtained at www.hazelden.org/HAZ_MEDIA/safedates_research.pdf

The *Youth Relationships Project* targets adolescents who are at high risk for dating violence for inclusion in small groups. This program offers 18 sessions of psychoeducation on abuse and power dynamics, skills training, and social action. Information on the *Youth Relationships Project* can be obtained at www.euowrc.org/05.education/education_en/yyp_youth_manual/01.yrp.htm