

Reducing teen dating violence

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By Communications Staff
Tuesday, August 4, 2009

A school program about healthy relationships built into the Grade 9 curriculum appears to reduce adolescent dating violence and increase condom use.

The study, conducted by researchers at The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and The University of Western Ontario, showed the reduction after two and a half years and seems to be more effective in boys.

The report is published in the August issue of Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, one of the JAMA/Archives journals. The researchers note between one-in-ten and one-in-five high-school teens are hit, slapped or beaten by an individual they are dating each year.

It has been shown that dating violence among adolescents can lead to intimate partner violence in adulthood and it is also associated with injuries, unsafe sex, substance use and suicide attempts.

David Wolfe, Director of CAMH's Centre for Prevention Science and Peter Jaffe, professor in the Faculty of Education at Western, together with their colleagues in 2004 to 2007 conducted a randomized trial of a 21-lesson curriculum delivered by teachers with special training in the dynamics of dating violence and healthy relationships.

The program is known as the "Fourth R: Skills for Youth Relationships." It was taught to 968 students at 10 randomly selected high schools. Rather than a stand-alone program, dating violence prevention was included with existing lessons about healthy relationships, sexual health and substance use prevention. The program included role-play exercises.

Another 754 students at 10 different schools were assigned to a control group, where similar objectives were targeted but without training or materials.

Two and a half years later the students were surveyed again - at the end of Grade 11. The rates of physical dating violence were greater in the control students (9.8 per cent) than in the students who participated in the program (7.4 per cent) – almost a 25 per cent difference.

Although both boys and girls typically perpetrate dating violence, the intervention had a stronger effect on boys; 7.1 percent of boys in the control group and 2.7 percent in the intervention group reported physical dating violence, compared with 12.1 percent of girls in the control group and 11.9 percent of those in the intervention group.

Sexually active boys in the program also reported a higher rate of condom use (114 of 168 or 67.9 percent versus 65 of 111 or 58.6 percent).

Wolfe stresses schools must find ways to address these issues and arm students with the tools to make healthy decisions.

"Adolescence is confusing enough, but when you couple this with peer pressure and self esteem issues, some youth can be easily overwhelmed," says Wolfe.

"This is a time of life when youth may first start dating and experimenting with drug use and sex, which can be difficult especially when you consider that kids are just learning how to socialize with one another in a more mature context."

Because the program met mandated education requirements in Ontario, no additional class time, scheduling or human resources assistance were needed. The average cost of training and materials was \$16 per student.

Jaffe, who also teaches future educators about keeping schools safe at Western, noted the potential of the program to meet the needs of students across Canada and the United States.

"The 4thR is now delivered in over 1,000 schools in Canada from coast to coast to coast and we are about to launch the program in five U.S. communities as part of universal prevention programs," says Jaffe.

"The success of the program is a tribute to the dedication of teachers in addressing students' needs in adolescence."

Five U.S. cities who received special funding for a "[Start Strong](#)" violence prevention program chose the 4thR program for their pilot schools. These cities include Boston, Providence (Rhode Island), the Bronx, Wichita (Kansas) and Boise (Idaho).

Jaffe says this approach utilizes role-playing so students have the opportunity to practice the messages they want to use, and the fact that this program is easily included as part of an existing curriculum, rather than requiring a separate program.

Two other Western researchers took part in the study – Allan Donner of the Department of Epidemiology & Biostatistics at Western's Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, and Wendy Ellis of the Department of Psychology of King's University College. Three of the authors have appointments in Education and Health Sciences including Claire Crooks, Debbie Chiodo and Ray Hughes. Ray Hughes is the national coordinator for the program and is involved in training teachers across Canada and the U.S.

More about the 4thR is available at <http://youthrelationships.org>.