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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Teens' and parents' perceived levels of helpfulness: An examination of suggested “things to say” to youth experiencing Teen Dating Violence



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A B S T R A C T

Teen Dating Violence (TDV) is a public health issue that has long lasting implications into adulthood. Making matters more precarious is the scant evidenced-based information available to parents to help them respond to teens' reports of TDV exposure. This study examined parental and youth perceptions of the helpfulness and likelihood of use of suggested parental responses to dating violence. Results indicated that parents' potential supportive comments about “rights” and “whose fault” were viewed as the most helpful and likely to be used. The least approved statements were connected to parents' threatening punishment. The most endorsed comments provide information without undermining the teens' self-esteem and offer insight about how parents can promote more helpful dialogs about teens' experiences with dating violence.

As the recognition of the problem of adolescent dating violence (ADV) increases, there is an increase in the frequency of reports about this public health issue. In fact, Mumford, Liu, and Taylor (2016) found that 37% of the respondents to the national Survey on Teen Violence and Intimate Relationships (STVIR) reported having been victimized in a dating relationship in the past year, and 69% experienced ADV at some point in their relationships. Mumford et al. (2016) report that dating violence equally impacts boys and girls; though, more girls than boys experience sexual and physical victimization (Mumford et al., 2016). However, in a different national study (Vagi, O'Malley-Olsen, Basile, & Vivolo-Kantor, 2015), nearly 21% of female adolescents and over 10% of male adolescents reported experiencing some form of adolescent dating violence (physical, sexual, or both) in the last 12 months; older adolescents reported more ADV exposure. These studies point to a substantial number of U.S. adolescents that are affected by dating violence every year, impacting various social, mental, and physical developmental dimensions of adolescents (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Clark et al., 2014; Howard & Wang, 2003).

The consequences of dating violence exposure in adolescence are wide-ranging and severe. Having experienced ADV has been associated with developing negative coping mechanisms such as substance use and antisocial behaviors (Debnam, Johnson, & Bradshaw, 2014; Exner-Corten, Exkenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Yahner, Dank, Zweig, & Lachman, 2014). Evidence is beginning to show that dating violence

has ramifications for youths' physical wellbeing. Exposure to dating violence increases the likelihood of having higher body mass indices leading to a host of negative physical health phenomena, including cardiovascular health risks (Clark et al., 2014). Further, Vagi et al. (2015) found significant associations between increased suicidality and exposure to ADV.

Little evidenced-based literature gives parents guidance on how to respond to their children after learning about their involvement in ADV. If parents search for guidance on how to initiate conversations or responses to dating violence, they are often provided with pamphlets. Parents may also find web sites that encourage them to respond to adolescents' reports of dating violence with a standard set of five suggested responses (City of Chicago, n.d.; Sousa, 2012; Texas Advocacy Project, 2017; The Dove Project, 2016). This study examined adolescents who have and have not experienced ADV as well as parents who have and have not experienced domestic violence about their self-reported perceptions of the helpfulness of parental responses to ADV recommended by media sources (Sousa, 2012; Texas Advocacy Project, 2017; The Dove Project, 2016).

While the effects of ADV experiences have far ranging implications for adolescents going into adulthood, knowledge about parental responses to and communication about dating violence is relatively understudied. Parental monitoring and responses to adolescents' risk taking behavior appears to be associated with fewer experiences with

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dating violence (Hicks, McRee, & Eisenberg, 2013; Howard, Qiu, & Boekeloo, 2003; Kast et al., 2016), but empowerment of parents to effectively engage with their adolescents about this sensitive topic is under-studied (Authors, 2015; Authors, 2016; Authors, 2017). Understanding how parents begin approaching their children about sensitive topics such as dating violence may help us understand the barriers that prevent them from responding helpfully—or responding at all.

1. Teen-parent communication and dating violence

Parental–teen communication is thought to be challenging during the developmental period of adolescence, as parents and adolescents often experience a breakdown in communication and an increase in adolescents' reliance on their peers during the teen years (Kobak, Rosenthal, Zajac, & Madsen, 2007; Richards, Branch, & Ray, 2014; Sabina, Cuevas, & Rodriguez, 2014). In spite of the knowledge that parents and adolescents may experience conflict, open and healthy adolescent–parent communication has been shown to be an important protective factor against ADV victimization (Corona, Gomes, Pope, Shaffer, & Yaros, 2016; Kast et al., 2015; Shaffer, Corona, Sullivan, Fuentes, & McDonald, 2017). Studies have also shown that adolescents do seek advice, opinions, and support from their parents concerning relationships and difficult life circumstances like dating violence (Albert, 2007; Authors, 2014; Hipwell et al., 2014; Ikramullah, Manlove, Cui, & Moore, 2009).

Further, research suggests that many adolescents still value parents' opinions and assistance (Albert, 2007; Ikramullah et al., 2009). Ikramullah et al. (2009), while examining data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997, found that over half of 12 to 14 year olds identified their parents as most influential in their decision-making about having sexual intercourse. When examining controlling behaviors in dating violence, a group of mainly African American adolescents said that they would seek help from both peers and adults (Authors, 2014). In all, about 41% of the sample said that they would talk with their mothers about controlling behaviors, and about a third of the sample indicated that they would speak with their fathers about the problem. A study by Hicks et al. (2013) suggest that a high level of communication with parents is a protective factor for adolescents in reducing negative experiences and increasing adolescents' knowledge and ability to discuss sensitive topics with their dating partners.

Similarly, in a qualitative study, Corona et al. (2016) found that 85% of the mothers engaged in conversations with their adolescents about dating violence. The authors found that healthier messages about risky dating behaviors, such as exploring the meaning of love, definitions of dating abuse, and sharing mothers' personal experiences with unhealthy dating relationships increased adolescents' communication with parents about ADV. Shaffer et al. (2017) found among Latino parents and adolescents that it was important to develop open, trusting communication to be able to talk about dating violence both in terms of prevention as well as once an ADV experience has occurred. In a larger study, Kast, Eisenberg, and Sieving (2016) focused on Hispanic and multiracial Latino youth and found that youths' perceptions of parental caring and high levels of general parental communication with youth were protective factors against experiencing ADV. However, Authors (2015) found some parents recognize ADV as a serious public health concern but offered potentially inappropriate responses. Over half of the parents (62.1%, fathers; 53.4%, mothers) said they would urge the victim to talk with their dating partner about the abuse, and approximately a third would point out the positive aspects of the dating relationship with the victim (Authors, 2015). When parents were asked about possible responses they might make, fathers (17.8%) indicated they were more likely than mothers (8.8%) to respond with punishments to their adolescents' report of ADV experiences. In spite of finding evidence for inappropriate parental responses, the study suggests that parents, in general, would urge their adolescents to talk with them, that

they would not ignore their adolescents' reports of ADV, and would urge their children to stop dating their abusive partner (Authors, 2015).

Rothman, Miller, Terpeluk, Glauber, and Randel (2011) found in a national survey that a small percentage of parents (5.1%) in their study would not know what to say to their children about dating violence. Moreover, Rothman and colleagues found that 28.1% of parents indicated reluctance to talk about ADV with children they felt were too young, and 8.5% said that they felt their child would learn from experience. These findings suggest that some parents do not have the tools or confidence to discuss sensitive subjects like ADV with their children. Empowering parents with appropriate tools, such as suggested helpful responses, to effectively begin opening dialog about dating violence is as important in helping parents effectively respond to ADV as the adolescents' perception of the parents' ability to handle this traumatic experience.

2. Increasing parental interventions in adolescent dating violence

Several model programs strive to increase parental intervention in adolescent dating violence (i.e., Families for Safe Dates; Dating Matters; De Koker, Mathews, Zuch, Bastien, & Mason-Jones, 2014; Foshee et al., 2012; Rizo, Macy, Ermentrout, & Johns, 2011; Tharp, 2012; Wisniewski, Jia, Xu, Rosson, & Carroll, 2015). In general, parental intervention programs focus on enhancing communication between parents and adolescents as well as correcting troublesome adolescent behavior (Foshee et al., 2016; Foshee et al., 2012; Rizo et al., 2011). However, some researchers note a disconnect between parents' and adolescents' perceptions of improved communication. More parents than adolescents perceived better communication after completing a dating violence intervention (Foshee et al., 2012). Further, dating violence interventions which employed individual and community based components were found to be the most effective in preventing dating violence (De Koker et al., 2014).

A study by Corona et al. (2016) reported that mothers looked for teachable moments about dating violence when the media (i.e., T.V. shows, social media, news) offered opportunities for discussion. In this study, and others, some parents also reflected on their own experiences with dating or intimate partner violence with their children to help them understand what it is and what they can do if they find themselves in a violent relationship (Corona et al., 2016). These examples are encouraging demonstrations about how parents are initiating conversations and/or responses to ADV with their children.

Various media sources suggest helpful responses to say to youth who have witnessed or experienced ADV and are reporting to parents for the first time (City of Chicago, n.d.; Sousa, 2012; Texas Advocacy Project, 2017; The Dove Project, 2016). The first apparent set of suggested responses to intimate partner violence (IPV) guided *emergency physicians* in handling patients' reports of IPV (Alpert, 1995). These suggested responses were the author's ideas of responses that could be helpful for physicians in eliciting more information about a suspected IPV experience (for original suggested responses, see Alpert, 1995).

Though there is not a clear evolution of these phrases, it appears that over time, these suggested responses may have been modified to fit the current needs of vulnerable populations and teens, such as the suggested responses cited earlier (i.e., Sousa, 2012; Texas Advocacy Project, 2017). Although these recommended responses seem reasonable, to the Authors' knowledge these responses have not been assessed for adolescent or parental perceptions of their helpfulness. The concept of helpfulness is important, because adolescents' perception of how efficacious parents are in handling reports of ADV appears to be connected to how forthcoming they are in disclosing dating violence to their parents (Corona et al., 2015). The suggested responses or “things to say” are as follows: 1) I care about what happens to you. I love you and I want to help. 2) It is the abuser who has a problem, not you. It is not your responsibility to help this person change. 3) The abuse is not your fault. You are not to blame, no matter how guilty the person doing

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