

Primary and secondary prevention programs for dating violence: A review of the literature

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Abstract

Recent research has consistently demonstrated that a significant proportion of dating relationships are characterized by violent interactions. Aggression that occurs in the context of dating relationships is associated with a variety of deleterious effects in the context of the current relationship, and provides a potential trajectory to more severe forms of violence in later relationships. These data have led researchers and practitioners to develop and implement programs designed to prevent such violent dating behaviors. This comprehensive review examines the literature on primary and secondary prevention programs for dating violence, with emphases on methodological and theoretical issues. Ubiquitous limitations of the current research are identified, as well as future directions and implications for researchers and practitioners in the field.

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Although intimate partner violence has long been an area of theoretical and empirical interest for researchers, in the last few decades there has been an emerging interest in partner violence that occurs among young dating couples (Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Marshall & Rose, 1987). Aggression that occurs in the context of dating relationships of adolescents and young adults is often associated with a variety of deleterious effects on the individual partners in the relationship. Both victims and perpetrators of physical violence and psychological abuse tend to report lower self-

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esteem, reduced self-worth, and increased self-blame, anger, hurt and anxiety (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Jezl, Molidor, & Wright, 1996; Makepeace, 1986; Nightingale & Morrisette, 1993; Smith & Donnelly, 2001; Truman-Schram, Cann, Calhoun, & Vanwallendael, 2000). Additionally, individuals may display ineffective communication and problem solving skills, and may develop a perception that violence is an effective means through which one partner can influence the other. Further, violent interactions in dating relationships may be a precursor for marital forms of aggression (Carlson, 1987; Frieze, 2000; O'Leary et al., 1989; Smith & Donnelly, 2001).

A significant percentage of adolescents report either perpetration or victimization of dating aggression in their current or past relationships. It is estimated that approximately 20–37% of dating couples have experienced some form of violence in their relationship (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Magdol et al., 1997; White & Koss, 1991). When verbal aggression is included, prevalence rates may be as high as 70–88% (Lo & Sporkowski, 1989; White & Koss, 1991). When prevalence is examined separately for high school and college students, the rates of dating aggression is estimated at 10–25% among high school students (Roscoe and Kelsey, 1986; Sudermann and Jaffe, 1993 in Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998), and slightly higher at 20–30% among college students (Billingham, 1987; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Sharpe & Taylor, 1999). Therefore, adolescent groups form an at-risk subsample of the population, and are a potentially fruitful target for preventative and intervention efforts.

Given the potential physical, psychological, and social consequences of dating violence, attention and resources need to be devoted to preventing and ameliorating this form of aggression. As youths and adolescents become a focal point not only as victims of violent behavior, but also as perpetrators, practitioners in the mental health profession have a unique responsibility to seek to rectify and prevent these maladaptive patterns of behavior. Ideally, prevention programs can be initiated to circumvent or minimize violence and aggression in the context of dating relationships. Effective prevention programs are not only essential to prevent the immediate display of violence in young relationships, but are also important in terms of circumventing a possible future trajectory toward violence and violent relationships.

1. Dating violence defined

Prior to discussing prevention programs that have been implemented to address violence in dating relationships, it is useful to first explore definitional aspects of the construct of dating aggression. The range of violent behaviors that occur within the context of dating relationships is wide in breadth and function. The most obvious form of dating violence involves physical force, either through threat or actual act of physical aggression. This type of violent behavior is the form most often studied and assessed. Many researchers, in an effort to define the construct parsimoniously, adopt the following definition of dating violence proposed by Sugarman and Hotaling (1989): “the use or threat of physical force or restraint carried out with the intent of causing pain or injury to another”(p. 5) within the dating relationship. This operational definition is reflected in the content of the most commonly used assessment instruments for measuring intimate partner aggression (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001).

Although there are advantages in focusing on overt physical aggression, this narrow focus neglects other types of coercive or aggressive behavior often displayed in dating relationships and that may be functionally similar to physical violence. Until recently, very little work had been conducted with regard to other forms of dating aggression, most notably, verbal or emotional abuse and sexual violence (Hanley & O'Neill, 1997; Jackson, 1999; Murphy & Hoover, 2001; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000). Although the Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) definition is still prominent in the literature, more contemporary definitions have begun to include physical, sexual, and psychological forms of violence. Lavoie et al. (2000) defined teen dating violence as “...any behavior that is prejudicial to the partner's development or health by compromising his or her physical, psychological, or sexual integrity”(p. 8). Additionally, others have examined the concept of relationship violence as including any behavior that is intended to “...control or dominate another person physically, sexually, or psychologically, causing some level of harm”(Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999, p. 436).

Implicit in these more inclusive definitions of relationship aggression is an understanding of what is meant by both psychological and sexual abuse. In general, verbal, emotional, or psychological abuse involves the use of verbal or nonverbal acts intended to intimidate or hurt the other partner, or the use of threats functioning to coerce the victimized individual (Hanley & O'Neill, 1997; Murphy & Cascardi, 1999; Murphy & Hoover, 2001). In contrast to physically violent behaviors in which the intent is to cause bodily harm, emotional abuse threatens victimized individuals'

personal integrity, self-worth, and often evokes fear and increased dependency on perpetrating partners (Hanley & O'Neill, 1997; Smith & Donnelly, 2001). Sexual aggression can be conceptualized as intimidation or coercion to engage in sexual intercourse or other sexual acts, or to participate in those activities more frequently than the victim desires (Smith & Donnelly, 2001). When emotional or physically violent behaviors occur within the courtship relationship, it is probable that there is at least some degree of sexual coercion occurring, which can function to increase power differentials within the relationship (Smith & Donnelly, 2001).

In our attempts to understand and study dating violence, a primary focus on physical aggression creates a myopic view of the phenomena. Several studies have suggested that the different forms of violence are interrelated, and that verbal aggression often precedes physical aggression (Hyden, 1995; Jackson, 1999; Ryan, 1995; Stets & Henderson, 1991). In fact, Stets (1990) found that while verbal aggression occurred in the absence of physical violence in 50% of dating couples, physical aggression occurred without verbal aggression in only .2–.4% of dyads. This suggests that in most physically violent couples, verbal or emotional aggression is also occurring. In addition, emotional abuse may have unique, and perhaps more psychologically detrimental, effects on the victim. Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, and Polek (1990) demonstrated that over 70% of formerly victimized women reported that emotional abuse was more damaging than the physical abuse. Neglecting these forms of partner violence limits the conceptualization of dating violence and may hinder the development of effective interventions for preventing or managing courtship problems.

2. Prevention of dating violence

In light of the preceding data on the prevalence of dating violence, including physical, emotional, and sexual perpetration and victimization, it is imperative that researchers and clinicians address these maladaptive interpersonal behaviors. To date, several prevention programs have been developed and implemented, with widely varying methods and results. The remainder of this paper will review the literature on several prevention programs for dating violence and address overriding limitations and future directions for researchers and practitioners within this field.

Although there exists much variation with regard to theoretical underpinnings and techniques utilized in prevention programs for dating violence, prevention can be broadly divided into two subtypes: primary and secondary prevention. Primary prevention programs aim to circumvent violence in dating relationship before it occurs, often through either targeting the entire population within a school or utilizing data with regard to risk markers to present prevention programs to those individuals most likely to later become involved in violent intimate relationships. Primary prevention is successful when the first instance of violence in dating relationships is precluded (Foshee et al., 1996). In order to achieve this type of prevention, most practitioners target high school aged adolescents as this may provide a critical window of opportunity to mold appropriate attitudes and behaviors, since teenagers are likely just beginning to form dating relationships (Sudermann, Jaffe, & Hastings, 1995).

In contrast, secondary prevention programs are designed to address violence that is already occurring in a relationship, and are successful when either the victims leave violent dating relationships or the perpetrator(s) cease initiating violence (Foshee et al., 1996). There is much variation in the literature regarding the targets of the prevention programs, and, in some cases, researchers design their programs to address both primary and secondary dating violence. With few exceptions, prevention programs target either high school or college aged populations, usually within the school or the curriculum, although some programs have been initiated outside of the academic setting with similar aged participants.

3. Review of prevention programs

The Safe Dates Project, developed by Foshee et al. (1996, 1998), Foshee, Bauman, and Greene (2000), and Foshee et al. (2004), was designed to provide primary and secondary prevention of perpetration and victimization of dating violence in 8th and 9th grade adolescents. The theoretical framework for this program focused on changing dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, conflict-management skills, and, particularly for those already involved in a violent relationship, altering the cognitive factors associated with help-seeking behavior. Data were collected within the school in a predominately rural area, and approximately 80% of the students in the selected grades completed the self-report baseline questionnaires, and 91% of those adolescents completed the initial follow-up data. The study utilized a pre-test–post-test experimental design with random assignment of 14 schools within the county to treatment conditions. Participants in the control condition were exposed to only community activities, which included special

services for adolescents in violent relationships and community service provider training. Schools assigned to the treatment condition were exposed to the above community activities as well as a series of school activities, which included a theater production, 10-session curriculum provided by a trained presenter, and a poster contest. Thus, the purpose of the study was to compare students who were exposed to community activities only with those exposed to both school and community activities with respect to initiating violence, leaving an abusive relationship, and ceasing perpetration of aggression in a relationship. The design of the study did not allow evaluation of the effects of the school program alone or the community program alone as compared to a no-treatment control.

Baseline data were collected from all students, and revealed that 25.4% of the sample had been the victim of nonsexual dating violence, and 14% had perpetrated such aggression. Control and treatment groups were similar at baseline on all demographic and outcome variables. The outcome variables, assessed via self-administered questionnaires, included measures assessing victimization and perpetration of psychological abuse, nonsexual and sexual violence, and the use of physical violence in the current relationship. Additionally, the researchers assessed acceptance of prescribed and proscribed norms, perceived positive and negative consequences of dating violence, gender stereotyping, beliefs in the need for help and knowledge of resources available, communication skills, and responses to anger. The initial wave of outcome data, collected 1 month after program activities, revealed 25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual perpetration, and 60% less physical violence perpetrated in the treatment schools than in the control schools. Additionally, treatment schools revealed differences in the desired direction with regard to dating violence norms, gender stereotyping, and awareness of services available. In the primary prevention subsample, there was 28% less psychological abuse initiated in the treatment condition, and 27% less psychological abuse perpetration and 61% less sexual perpetration in the secondary prevention subsample of the treatment group, as compared to the control group. However, although the treatment schools demonstrated greater awareness of services available for help, there were no between group differences in help-seeking behavior, although help seeking increased in both control and treatment conditions from baseline. Additionally, self-reported victims of dating violence were not more likely to terminate the relationship in the treatment group than the control group. These results suggest that there is some evidence that the Safe Dates Project may provide some attitudinal and self-reported behavioral changes in dating violence perpetration immediately following the program.

In order to examine the durability of the effects of the Safe Dates program, Foshee et al. (2000) presented additional follow-up data on 85% of the original sample, collected one year following the prevention project. Results of this follow-up study suggested that adolescents in the treatment group were less accepting of dating violence, perceived more negative consequences from engaging in dating violence, and were more aware of victim and perpetrator services. However, no significant differences were found at one-year follow-up between the treatment and control groups on any of the behavioral outcomes. The authors note that while the program had positive effects on the cognitive risk factors of dating violence, these changes did not lead to changes in dating violence. These findings further support the need of research to target behavioral changes as the most imminent outcome, and not to assume that changes in attitudinal variables are necessarily indicative of behavior change. Additional follow-up was conducted at four-years post-treatment on approximately 48% of the original sample (Foshee et al., 2004), and revealed that adolescents in the treatment condition reported significantly less physical, serious physical, and sexual perpetration and victimization, as compared to the control group. These results suggest the long-term durability of self-reported reductions in perpetration and victimization associated with the Safe Dates Project.

Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, and Cano (1997) implemented a five-session prevention curriculum intended to change attitudinal correlates of dating violence. This program, implemented with both male and female high school students, was designed to address both perpetration and victimization of dating aggression in a didactic, skills-based forum. The specific goals of the program included promoting equity in dating relationships by highlighting the deleterious effects of inequality, challenging the conceptualization of violence as an acceptable conflict resolution tactic, encouraging constructive communication, and increasing knowledge of resources available for victims of dating violence. The five-session curriculum was implemented in health classes by trained teachers in selected classrooms. This study utilized a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the effect of the prevention program on attitudes justifying dating violence, with health classes randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. Rates of perpetration, victimization, and injury were similar across control and treatment groups. Approximately 190 male and female students completed a series of self-report measures assessing rates of perpetration and victimization of dating violence and attitudes justifying dating aggression. In addition, all participants completed a social desirability measure, in order to assess and control for possible biases in responses. Results from this study demonstrated that both males and females

in the treatment group were significantly less accepting of aggression in the context of a dating relationship compared to pre-treatment levels, and that this effect was not evident for the control group. Despite the promise of these results, it should be noted that the researchers observed a profound floor effect on the attitudinal measures at pre-test, as up to two-thirds of students endorsed items stating that dating violence is never acceptable. Thus, these measures were not sensitive enough to assess further changes in attitudes for these students as a result of the prevention program. Further, the post-test was conducted shortly after the completion of the prevention curriculum, and did not assess the longitudinal durability of such changes.

Lavoie, Vezina, Piche and Boivin (1995) compared two prevention programs, a short and a long form, which addressed various aspects of dating aggression, including sexual, psychological, and physical aggression. The short form of the program consisted of two classroom sessions, designed to target issues of control in relationships and understanding an individual's rights in a dating relationship, particularly with regard to one's responsibility for engaging in violent behavior. The longer form of the program included two additional activities, namely, watching a film about dating violence and writing fictional letters to a perpetrator and victim of dating violence. The purpose of this study was to assess changes in attitudes and knowledge as a result of these programs, and measure any differences in the degree of change across two randomly assigned high schools. Approximately 500 10th grade students completed the self-report measures across the two groups. A single self-report measure of knowledge and attitudes was given at pre and post intervention to assess any changes. Results of this study revealed that positive attitude changes were recorded following both the short and long forms of the program. Interestingly, the participants receiving the short form of the program showed greater improvements in the knowledge items than those in the long version. Additionally, although both female and male participants demonstrated improvements following the program, the females showed greater awareness of dating violence both at pre- and post-test. These data suggest that both a short and longer version of a primary prevention program can be effective in altering attitudes supporting dating violence, and to some degree, knowledge of factors related to dating aggression. However, it should be noted that the outcome measure utilized in this study was a single, 25-item measure, and did not include measures to assess social desirability of responses. Additionally, no long-term or behavioral data were collected in order to determine duration and objective changes in behavior of the participants.

Wolfe et al. (2003) developed a prevention program integrating current theoretical understandings of the developmental pathway of dating violence, random assignment to experimental groups, a more extensive outcome measure, and repeated follow up. The researchers hypothesized that youths receiving the program would evidence less violent perpetration and victimization in dating relationships, improved relationship skills, and decreased emotional distress. They further speculated that such effects would be mediated by the youth's level of involvement and investment in the program. Participants included adolescents who were considered at-risk for dating violence because of the history of maltreatment in their families. They were randomly assigned to either the prevention program or the control group. After attrition, 96 intervention participants and 62 control participants completed the study. Participants assigned to the control group received standard child protective services, which consisted of basic shelter and care as well as bimonthly visits from a social worker.

The youths assigned to the prevention program received an 18-session program that used a health-promotion approach to preventing violence by focusing on positive alternatives to aggression. The intervention used both skill and learning based approaches as well as addressing patriarchal values believed to contribute to dating violence. The curriculum incorporated three components: education and awareness of abuse and power dynamics in close relationships, skill development, and social action. Participants were followed for 16 months and assessed approximately 4.7 times. The measures included the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CARDI), the Trauma Symptom Checklist-40 (TSC-40), and the Adolescent Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (AICQ). Over time, treatment participants evidenced a significant reduction in physical abuse, all forms of victimization, and reports of emotional distress compared to the control group. Both the treatment and control groups reported a decrease over time, but the intervention group reported a greater decrease at a faster rate. However, the treatment participants did not demonstrate significant gains in healthy relationship skills compared to the control group, as was predicted. Additionally, the hypothesis that more involved participants would show greater improvement was not supported. These data are promising, although several limitations should be noted. All data were self-report, the random assignment was compromised in order to increase the number of participants receiving the intervention, and the data cannot be generalized to other populations. Additionally, there was considerable unexplained variance on most outcome measures, even after accounting for gender, intervention status, maltreatment history, and intervention process variables.

Researchers at the London Family Court Clinic in Ontario, Canada have also examined the effectiveness of primary prevention at changing attitudes and behavioral intentions with regard to dating violence. Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, and Kellip (1992) utilized a stratified random sample of students in four high schools ($N=737$). Two schools presented a half-day prevention program, consisting of an auditorium presentation and a classroom discussion, and two schools employed a full day intervention. The primary goals of this program were to increase knowledge about violence against women in intimate relationships, address sexist attitudes that may underlie violent behavior, increase knowledge of warning signs of potential abuse, and provide information regarding community resources available for perpetrators and victims of aggressive behavior. The study utilized a quasi-experimental pre-post-test design with a self-report measure created for the purpose of the study, which assessed knowledge about marital and dating assault, sex role attitudes, and behavioral intentions in a series of violence-related scenarios. The questionnaires were administered 1 week prior to the start of the intervention, 1 week following, and, at two sites, 6 weeks after the program.

Results of this program revealed significant positive changes in knowledge, attitude, and behavioral intentions at post-test, and most changes were maintained at the delayed follow-up testing. The researchers found a consistent gender difference, with females demonstrating more positive attitudes and stronger behavioral intentions than the male participants. Additionally, for males only, there was a proportion of scores that changed in the undesired direction following the intervention, which may suggest that some males experienced defensiveness as a result of the program, or alternatively, that some males were already engaged in abusive relationships and the program amplified their negative responses, and thus required secondary, rather than primary, prevention. A second study by the same authors (Sudermann and Jaffe, 1993 cited in Macgowan, 1997; Sudermann, Jaffe, & Hastings, 1995) utilized a modified form of the same measure and initiated a similar half-day program yielded comparable positive changes in attitude, knowledge, and behavioral intentions, suggesting some durability of the findings with a separate sample of students. These studies provide some evidence that one-day and half-day prevention programs affected changes in attitudes, knowledge and behavioral intentions of students, and that such changes were maintained for at least 6 weeks following intervention. Additionally, unlike other investigations, this project assessed behavioral intentions, which provides some indication of possible behavior change. However, these studies did not utilize a control comparison group, making it difficult to assess possible changes in attitudes and behaviors in the absence of the program. Additionally, the reliability and validity of the outcome measure had not been established, making conclusions regarding the efficacy of the program in addressing attitudinal and behavioral components of dating violence equivocal.

Jones (1987, 1991) examined the efficacy of a prevention program with junior and high school students using a matched comparison group. The Minnesota School Curriculum Project was a prevention program for secondary school students, and was designed to provide education regarding dating violence, explain risk factors for victimization, and build skills to prevent later abuse. The program was intended to be integrated into teachers' regular curriculum, and focused on defining terms related to dating violence, dispelling myths of interpersonal aggression, identifying correlates of perpetration, and improving interpersonal skills to circumvent later violence. The program was presented via discussions, activities, and selected audio-visual presentations. Information regarding the program was mailed to all school districts in the state, and teachers and administrators that decided to integrate the program into their curriculum (146 school districts) participated in an eight-hour training course. Once trained, the majority of the teachers were encouraged to integrate the program into their existing curriculum as they saw fit, leading to a variety of approaches and outcomes for each school. A subset of the teachers trained was asked to participate in an outcome evaluation study of the program. This sample was stratified by grade level and location of the school, and each school identified a nearby school to serve as a matched control. The study evaluated the effectiveness of a five-day prevention program for junior high students ($N=560$) and a six-day program for high school participants ($N=600$). The evaluation utilized a questionnaire assessing the students' knowledge and attitudes regarding dating aggression and their awareness of community resources available to victims and perpetrators of interpersonal aggression.

Results from this quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test study indicated that prior to the program, the experimental and matched control groups demonstrated similar knowledge about dating aggression, however at post-test, those students exposed to the program demonstrated statistically significantly improved scores. Additionally, the experimental group was somewhat more knowledgeable about general resources available to address issues of dating aggression following the intervention. However, there were no significant differences on attitude items between the control and treatment groups, suggesting that the program was not effective in altering attitudinal correlates to dating aggression. Additionally, this study, like the research discussed previously, found a significant gender difference across groups, with female students more frequently responding in the desired direction on the attitude items.

Macgowan (1997) examined the effectiveness of a prevention program with 440 middle school students utilizing a pre-test–post-test control design. The racial and ethnic composition of the participants was predominately African American, and consisted of students in grades six through eight. The prevention program, designed by Domestic Violence Intervention Services (Kraizer & Larson, 1993) was implemented over a five-day period in 1-hour increments. The specific goals of the program included helping students recognize dating violence, its causes, and facilitate decision-making to avoid or terminate an abusive relationship. The program was presented by trained teachers within the classroom setting and utilized both discussions and experiential exercises. The specific activities during each session included discussing violence and the role of self-esteem, power, and control in the manifestation of aggression, recognizing examples of abuse, and, during the final sessions, discussing features of positive relationships and building communication and problem-solving skills. The outcome measure, created by the researchers, was a self-report questionnaire that assessed knowledge and attitudes about physical, sexual, and nonphysical relationship violence, as well as attitudes related to addressing dating aggression. The reliability of this measure was within an acceptable range, although validity data were not independently collected. Results revealed that the treatment group scored significantly higher on the post-test measures than the control group, and that the treatment group post-test scores were significantly higher than their pre-test scores. Within the treatment condition, male students with higher academic ability made the highest gains. Specific analysis of the items contributing to the improved scores for the treatment group demonstrated that knowledge of dating aggression and attitudes about nonphysical aggression changed in the positive direction, while no changes were seen in attitudes about physical violence or tactics to deal with relationship aggression. Thus, although the overall scores showed improvement, this analysis suggests that the program did not demonstrate changes in the students' behavioral responses to deal with existing relationship violence or to take measures to avoid violent relationships.

Rosen and Bezold (1996) presented the results of a didactic prevention program for women at risk for dating violence victimization. Participants were high school and college-aged women referred for inclusion in the study by school counselors who identified them as at risk for, or currently involved in, an abusive relationship. The program was presented in a group forum of 3–5 students, and was designed to identify various types of violent behaviors that occur in dating relationships, explore the negative consequences of aggression, and develop improved interpersonal, empowerment, and self-esteem skills. The groups were held over the course of a semester, and consisted of nine one-hour sessions. Most of the sessions were educational in nature, and designed to present information about dating violence and attitudinal correlates that are related to victimization, although one session was designed specifically to teach decision-making and conflict resolution skills. Following the group sessions, participants completed written evaluations regarding the social validity and utility of the program, and the college-aged students participated in focus groups to assess the outcome of the program. That is, the study did not yield traditional empirical outcome data regarding attitudinal or behavioral changes in the participants' experiences, but rather gathered qualitative data assessing the subjects' satisfaction of the different components of the program.

Results revealed that participants reported general satisfaction with the various aspects of the study, particularly the in-depth analyses of relationship issues in general, the skill development portion, and the discussion of their personal rights in the relationship, and that they felt more empowered to deal with relationship violence issues. This suggests that the program was acceptable, and that participants subjectively noted positive changes in their ability to deal with violent situations. However, an obvious weakness of this methodology is the lack of empirical or controlled data to assess changes occurring over the course of the treatment. Additionally, no control group was utilized, making conclusions regarding this program tentative.

The Dating Violence Intervention Program (DVIP), a prevention program for teens, was developed primarily in response to community service providers who began to see an increase in teen dating violence and continuity of violence in adolescence to adulthood (Sousa, 1991). The program was developed through the input of teenagers, and was designed to implement a prevention program at the high school level in order to provide education and change attitudes and behavioral responses to violence in intimate relationships. The program was implemented at a large high school, and included three educational sessions in the context of health classes, several school-wide activities, educator and administrator education, and a theater presentation. The curriculum focused on defining and identifying abuse in interpersonal relationships, exploring how power differentials may contribute to the manifestation of violence, how adherence to traditional gender roles may facilitate aggression, and suggestions for preventing violence. Although no formal evaluation of the program is reported, the author cited anecdotal evidence that students in the school have demonstrated attitude and behavioral changes as a result of the program, including confronting peers about abuse, distributing paraphernalia advocating the end of violence, and spontaneously speaking to students and media regarding

the program, in the absence of prompting from the DVIP staff. These subjective data, although equivocal because of lack of experimental control, suggest that students demonstrated idiosyncratic behavior changes following the program. However, although these findings are promising, in the absence of a control condition and empirical outcome data, it is difficult to evaluate the effects of the program.

A more recent study by Sousa (1999) described a Massachusetts state-regulated dating violence prevention program for students enrolled in grades six through twelve. The goals of the curriculum, known as the Teen Dating Violence Prevention and Intervention Program (TDVPIP), were to educate students and administrators regarding dating violence, offering and encouraging the use of services and peer support for victims of aggression, and to foster a zero-tolerance school culture for dating violence. The program has been implemented in more than 50 school districts across the state of Massachusetts, and included such activities as class discussions on dating violence, theatrical presentations and guest speakers, support groups for victims, and initiating school-wide policies for administrators to deal with relationship aggression. One school district developed a prevention program for males at risk for perpetration of dating violence. The curriculum was presented in the students' ninth grade health classes, and included a variety of extracurricular activities, such as parent information presentations, pamphlets, and theater performances on dating violence. Although both the victimization and perpetration programs have been in effect since 1994, the article did not report any empirical evidence that these curriculums are facilitating attitude or behavior change in students or administrators who have participated. Thus, although the program makes intuitive sense and has been assumed to affect factors related to dating violence, in the absence of empirical data, such changes are difficult to assess.

Hammond and Yung (1991) initiated a culturally sensitive prevention program that targeted interpersonal violence across various relationships, rather than limited to dating relationships in particular. Because this curriculum is complimentary to dating violence programs and could easily be modified to address dating aggression in isolation, it is included in the present review. The Positive Adolescents Choices Training (PACT) was designed as a health promotion and risk reduction prevention program targeted specifically at African-American teens. Based on the assumption that violent behavior occurs as a result of ineffective strategies to solve interpersonal problems, this program offered structured training on the specific behavioral components of social skills, including communication, problem-solving, and negotiation. The program was implemented in a middle school setting in which the majority of students were African-American and many were educationally and economically disadvantaged. This middle school was selected for participation in the study in part because violence-related suspensions and expulsions were among the highest in the district at this location, and more than 50% of the students reported at least one incident of violence in their personal experiences. The PACT project involved small-group training of 10–12 youths, with the participants being selected for inclusion by teachers based on a relative deficit of appropriate skills, behavioral problems, or prior victimization. Groups met for approximately 37 sessions over the course of the semester and sessions consisted of training in providing positive and negative feedback, accepting feedback, resisting peer pressure, problem-solving, and negotiation skills. In order to facilitate skill acquisition, participants were introduced to the specific behavioral components of each skill, observed peer models, practiced the skill themselves, and engaged in videotaped role plays utilizing the skills. To assess changes in the above skill areas, two graduate observers, 16 teachers, and the participants themselves rated demonstrations of target behavior both before and after the program, and school records were evaluated in terms of aggressive behavior, suspensions, and expulsions for a subsample of 15 participants in the study.

Observational results revealed that participants in the study demonstrated improvement in all target areas, with the most profound changes occurring in those skills that were most deficient prior to the training. Analysis of school records indicated less involvement in violence-related behavior and no suspensions or expulsions by those participants who completed the study. A comparison group of 13 students who did not participate in PACT revealed several suspensions and two expulsions related to violence, suggesting that those involved in the study were less likely to be involved in violent school behavior as compared to their peers. Thus, at least immediately following participation in PACT, incidences of violence and skills believed to be related to more positive interpersonal problem-solving skills showed improvement. However, it should be noted that the size of the sample participating in the outcome data was very small, and longitudinal and external data were not collected.

4. Limitations and future directions

The programs reviewed above, although a step in the right direction toward ameliorating dating violence, represent a first effort at addressing the issue, and the research base is clearly in need of refinement and improvement. Direct

comparison of these studies is complicated by disparate outcome variables and instrumentation, participant characteristics, and type and length of treatment. Thus, the following discussion will attempt to identify broad themes and limitations in order to direct future research and clinical endeavors. The most obvious limitation of the dating violence prevention research is the relative lack of outcome research evaluating the effects of such programs on behavioral and attitude change. That is, although several school and community-based programs have been initiated since the 1980s, many of these are not evaluating the outcome of the program on the participants, and are simply assuming that changes are occurring. In fact, a number of studies (i.e., [Nightingale & Morrissette, 1993](#); [Rosen & Bezold, 1996](#); [Sousa, 1991, 1999](#)) reported no or very limited and anecdotal evidence that the prevention program provided effective change in the participants attitudes or behaviors. [Sousa \(1991, 1999\)](#) reported a prevention program that has been implemented in all Massachusetts schools over the course of three years by trained teachers. However, no formalized assessment of attitudinal or behavior changes has been conducted examining the efficacy of the program.

Additionally, [Rosen and Bezold \(1996\)](#) conducted a secondary prevention program for adolescent females currently involved in dating violence, utilizing a support group model, but reported only anecdotal self-report of the utility and social validity of the program. Similarly, [Nightingale and Morrissette \(1993\)](#) reported a program implemented in high schools over the course of several years, again with no outcome data demonstrating the effectiveness of the program. From a research perspective, it is essential that formalized assessment is conducted in order to determine the efficacy of a program, and represents an obvious weakness in the literature at this time. Further, when outcome data were collected, it was, with few exceptions, self-report of changes noted by the participants themselves. Although the limitations of self-report measures are well-known, researchers in the field of dating violence may be particularly at risk for data being distorted when collected in this manner. With the exception of [Avery-Leaf et al. \(1997\)](#) and [Wolfe et al. \(2003\)](#) all of the studies reviewed utilized self-report measures that were unstandardized and created for the purpose of the study. Not only does this limit comparison between studies, the reliability and validity were, on the whole, not examined, thus calling into question their psychometric utility.

Other concerns related to outcome data instrumentation are also worth noting. First, with few exceptions (e.g. [Avery-Leaf et al., 1997](#)), formal evaluation of social desirability was not assessed in the prevention programs discussed above, which is a conspicuous limitation of the literature, especially considering the sensitive nature of the subject matter of the outcome data. Particularly with an adolescent population who may be accustomed to responding in ways in order to please a perceived authority figure, socially desirable responses may be of particular concern. Given the social and cultural stigma of perpetrating or receipt of dating aggression, it is reasonable to question the accuracy of the self-report data, and incidences of dating violence may be much higher than our assessments estimate. In fact, researchers have reported that adolescents rarely confide in adults regarding violent behavior ([Sousa, 1999](#); [Jackson et al., 2000](#)), so it is reasonable that they would behave consistently on self-report measures, even if the questionnaires were confidential. Many individuals report significant distress and shame regarding their dating violence experiences, and some research suggests that up to 55% do not self-disclose to anyone ([Jackson et al., 2000](#)). Additionally, given that the majority of the programs utilized a quasi-experimental pre-post-test design, the possible effects of repeated testing must be considered. Thus, although self-report measures are widely used in the prevention literature and represent a convenient data collection method, researchers must be cognizant of the inherent weaknesses of this approach. An important future direction for research in this field is to move toward multi-modal assessment, incorporating self-report, independent and teacher ratings, permanent products, and physiological components of dating violence.

On the whole, most of the research on dating violence prevention programs utilize an middle school, adolescent, or college-age sample. While this certainly is a convenient sampling method and ensures a large number of participants, restricting the range and sampling method greatly inhibits the generalizability of these results. There are likely a group of adolescents who, although similar in age, are not in school, either through drop-out or truancy, and the results of these studies are not necessarily applicable to these populations. Additionally, by focusing exclusively on individuals in school systems, the efficacy of these prevention programs has not been demonstrated with other older dating couples. It may be that prevention efforts and the factors that contribute to the manifestation and amelioration of dating violence are unique for older samples of dating individuals, and that innovative programs must be implemented for these populations as well as those individuals who may not be well-represented in the school systems.

Additionally, the majority of the programs collect data from one partner, and extrapolate the results to the relationship. It is entirely possible that this extrapolation is unwarranted, and in fact, several researchers have found that

the participants' dating partners were either older or younger than the prevention sample, and thus, were not receiving the prevention intervention (Foshee et al., 1996). Thus, it would serve the research base well to cast the participant net more widely in dating violence prevention programs, in order to expand the breadth of individuals to which the data may apply.

The prevention programs reviewed above, although some reported specific skill-building components (i.e. Hammond & Yung, 1991; Rosen & Bezold, 1996), others either did not include specific skill-building components, or did not completely describe those aspects of the programs in their manuscripts. Many of the programs identified as the major goals of the prevention program to educate participants on the incidence and prevalence of dating violence, attitudinal correlates of violence including the function of myths, power differentials, and traditional gender roles, as well as providing psychoeducation on the types of resources available for perpetrators and victims of dating violence. Although these are clearly important facets of dating violence, without a skill-building component integrating specific training to improve proficiency of communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills (and specifically the use of role-playing, modeling, and rehearsal) the likelihood of behavior change is improbable. While some programs noted in the literature did incorporate minimal skill building components (Foshee et al., 1996, 1998; Macgowan, 1997) these aspects need to be incorporated consistently and methodically in order to provide alternate responses to dating violence, either now (secondary prevention) or in future relationships (primary prevention). For example, Rosen and Bezold (1996), over the course of their nine week prevention program, provided specific training in conflict-resolution and decision making skills in only one (the last) session of their program. Evidence from other literatures (i.e., sexual assault prevention) have demonstrated that programs that focus on attitudinal or educational components exclusively will not likely be effective in changing behavior. It is reasonable to speculate that the same would hold true here; unless specific training and feedback on skills such as conflict-resolution, problem-solving, and anger management are incorporated, lasting and pervasive behavior change is unlikely. Thus, future researchers should consider designing programs that include a significant skill-building component, in addition to addressing possible misconceptions of the causes and contributory factors relating to dating aggression.

An additional limitation of the literature is a pervasive lack of follow-up data on participants' attitudes, knowledge, utilization of new skills, and help-seeking behavior. Only two studies (Foshee et al., 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004; Jaffe et al., 1992) in the present review conducted follow-up sessions to determine the durability of the effects of the prevention program. Jaffe et al. (1992; Sudermann and Jaffe, 1993 as cited in Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999) conducted their follow-up sessions at 6 weeks following the program and demonstrated that changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behavioral intentions were maintained at 6 weeks following intervention for the treatment group. Foshee et al. (1996, 1998, 2000, 2004) is exemplary relative to other studies in this regard, since they conducted follow-up sessions at one year and four years following initiation of the prevention program. Their follow-up data revealed that attitudes toward the use of violence and knowledge of dating violence and resources for help were maintained, although behavioral effects disappeared at one year post-program. This is critical information regarding the utility of prevention programs on behavioral change, and future researchers need to consider longer term follow-up to determine the lasting effect of the prevention efforts, as initiated by Foshee et al. (1996, 1998, 2000, 2004).

As we continue to understand aggression in dating relationships and develop programs designed to prevent such behavior, it is also useful to begin from an understanding of the social contextual factors present in adolescent experiences and relationships in general. Adolescence is a time of exploration, transition, and social development, and prevention programs must be framed within that context. Thus, it may be useful to integrate other powerful social forces within the adolescent culture, notably the peer culture and associated pressure, in designing prevention programs to affect intimate relationships (Leff, 2004). Consistent with that understanding, recent researchers have advocated for prevention programs designed to develop healthy relationships and make responsible choices within the social context of adolescence (Wolfe, 2006).

The final, and most urgent direction for future researchers is to examine the effects of prevention programs on the changes in the participant's behavior, in addition to improvements in attitudinal correlates of dating aggression. Most programs (Avery-Leaf et al., 1997; Jones, 1987, 1991; Lavoie, Vezina, Piche, & Boivin 1995; Macgowan, 1997) assess knowledge of and attitudes regarding dating violence, but provide no objective measure of actual behavior change in either avoiding, terminating, or redressing violence in interpersonal relationships. A slightly better assessment strategy, utilized by Jaffe et al. (1992) and Sudermann and Jaffe (1993 as cited in Wekerle and Wolfe, 1999) in their primary/secondary prevention program with high school students, assessed self-reported behavioral intentions, which, although an improvement over solely attitudinal measures, still assesses a self-reported behavioral

inclination, rather than a behavior change. Self-reported behavioral intentions are likely highly influenced by social desirability variables, particularly within treatment groups, and may be completely incongruent with the actual behavior of the individual.

There exists a critical need in the literature for researchers to examine the longitudinal behavior change that occurs as a result of the prevention programs. Although attitude change and behavioral intentions are preliminary and less costly economically and in terms of subject attrition, the actual effects of the programs cannot be assessed in the absence of data on behavior change. This direction is essential in terms of primary and secondary prevention, in order to determine if the programs are circumventing future violence or terminating current aggression. Until we begin to study the effects of the prevention curricula on dating violence behaviors of the participants, any improvements in the current programs will be preliminary and greatly limited.

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