

# Research & Advocacy Digest

Linking Advocates & Researchers

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## Sexual Violence in Teen Dating Relationships

### Letter From The Editor

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The spring edition of the *Digest* focuses on teen dating violence, an issue that is gaining more and more attention on both the local and national levels, largely in part to the hard work of advocates. We are continuing to adapt advocacy and prevention programs to meet the needs of teen survivors and find new ways to engage communities in addressing this problem. This is an exciting time in our movement! A creative energy has sparked; innovative programs are being developed and advocates from the sexual violence, domestic violence, sexual health, and youth advocacy fields are working together to create social change.

Dating violence looks different for teens than it does for adults. Teens often lack access to information and support, they face unique societal pressures, they have limited experience in dating and sexual activity, they lack autonomy in many settings, and the list goes on. Therefore, providing supportive advocacy requires an understanding of youth culture and often requires a different approach. Fortunately, there are a number of resources that have already been developed to support advocates, community members, and teens in doing this work.

Addressing emotional, physical, and sexual violence in teen relationships also calls on us to look at the bigger picture. The prominence of this type of violence in teen relationships provides strong evidence that domestic and sexual violence is influenced and supported by society's norms and values. Some important questions to keep asking include: Where are teens learning about healthy and unhealthy relationships? How can we support teens in addressing the issue of sexual violence on both the individual level and on the greater societal level? In what ways do pop culture and media messaging impact teens? How can society empower teens to lead lives free from violence and abuse?

In the interview segment of this issue Heather Hensman Kettrey, co-author of the research article *Teen Magazines as Educational Texts on Dating Violence: The \$2.99 Approach*, addresses some of these important,

#### Contributors

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challenging questions. The additional research articles reviewed offer advocates practical and up-to-date information, present data on the nature and prevalence of teen dating violence, provide context and talking points for some of the bigger picture considerations, as well as offer recommendations on ways to incorporate the research findings into advocacy and prevention strategies.

In closing, it is important to note that there is an ongoing struggle to find appropriate terminology to describe the issue of teen dating violence. How do we make sure we use language that resonates with teens? Does the label “teen dating violence” adequately promote conversations about sexual violence and coercion? This is an ongoing dialogue, and for this publication the term “teen dating violence” includes emotional, physical, and sexual violence. ■

# Interview with Heather Hensman Kettrey

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*Heather Hensman Kettrey is a PhD candidate in the department of Sociology at Vanderbilt University. Her research focuses on gender & sexuality, violence against women, gender & media, and collective behavior & social movements. Some of her current research projects include investigations of the portrayal of rape myths in Playboy over a fifty-year period (to appear in the journal Violence Against Women in 2012), newspapers' differential emphasis on female and male sexual desire in coverage of female genital cutting and male circumcision (co-authored with Laura Carpenter, Vanderbilt University), and newspaper disparagement of the virginity pledge movement in relation to the emergence of research questioning the effects of pledging on adolescent sexual behavior and health. Her dissertation explores the relationship between college women's acknowledgement of personal sexual subjectivity/desire and their sexual health/safety.*

## **WCSAP: What inspired you to do this research?**

HHK: Generally speaking, this project appealed to a number of my research interests: sexuality, gender and media, violence against women, and adolescence. More specifically, I was inspired by my reading of the extant research on media representations of violence against women. I found research exploring the manner in which women's magazines portray intimate partner violence (IPV) to adult readers, as well as research on the manner in which teen magazines depict gender roles, sexual scripts, and body image. However, I could not find a single study exploring teen magazines' representation of dating violence to its adolescent readers. This was surprising, considering the fact that research indicates that IPV is equally or more prevalent in adolescence compared to adulthood.

This seemed like a huge void because past research indicates teens are likely to access teen magazines for relationship advice, but are unlikely to approach adults with relationship problems such as IPV. While adolescent readers are by no means “duped” into believing everything they read in these magazines, studies indicate that some readers are likely to see this genre as a useful resource for relationship advice. Thus, I thought it was important to examine the messages teens receive about IPV from teen magazines in order to find a starting point for conversations between adults and teens regarding IPV.

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**WCSAP: There are so many messages teens are receiving about healthy and unhealthy relationships. In your review was there anything that stood out as particularly problematic? In what ways do you think advocates can help address these areas of concern?**

While some teen magazine articles highlighted cultural factors that contribute to the problem of IPV (such as sexism, social tolerance of violence, etc.), we found that teen magazines were much more likely to portray IPV as an individual problem faced by specific victims.

HHK: My co-author and I looked for themes used by teen magazines to portray IPV as either an individual problem or a larger, cultural problem. While some teen magazine articles highlighted cultural factors that contribute to the problem of IPV (such as sexism, social tolerance of violence, etc.), we found that teen magazines were much more likely to portray IPV as an individual problem faced by specific victims. Relaying the intimate details of an adolescent victim's experience with IPV may be appealing to readers, as it offers a concrete case that may allow readers to identify with the

victim. However, when teen magazines highlight specific details about individual victims more prominently than cultural factors that contribute to IPV, teen readers' attempts to construct meaning around IPV is reduced to the basis of characteristics of a particular victim and relationship.

For example, and among other themes, we identified patterns in which magazines portrayed victims as naïve and emphasized psychological counseling for victims as a solution to IPV. While counseling can certainly be beneficial in helping victims overcome the traumatic effects of IPV, the potential problem with these themes is that readers may begin to assume that the victim's naivete or other psychological characteristics contributed to the violence and, consequently, believe that they will be immune from experiencing IPV themselves if they are simply more savvy than the young women depicted in these magazines. This message is compounded by the fact that the majority of teen magazine articles in our sample included checklists highlighting steps that readers can take to avoid becoming a victim of IPV. While providing a practical resource to readers, the checklists may simultaneously lead young women to the conclusion that it is their responsibility to prevent dating violence (rather than the responsibility of potential abusers or of larger collective efforts for societal change). As a consequence, teen readers may be left feeling that they must battle a large and pervasive cultural problem in isolation. Thus, it is important for advocates to recognize that teens may be receiving an incomplete picture of IPV and be prepared to supplement their understanding with information that removes blame and responsibility from individual victims.

**WCSAP: In your research it was mentioned that teens often turn to teen magazines for education and counseling because of a distrust of adults. Any tips on how advocates can build rapport with teens and become effective allies?**

HHK: Some past research indicates that teen victims of IPV are not likely to seek help from adults, but I am not sure that this is a result of distrust. Rather, teens do not always recognize their experience as abusive. Thus, the challenge is not necessarily that adults need to build rapport with the adolescents in their lives, as much as they need to lay the groundwork to help adolescents recognize when a relationship is abusive. This can be achieved through discussion

around “teachable moments” that present themselves in daily encounters. For example, if they find themselves watching television with a teen and a depiction of IPV appears on the screen, adults can use that as a springboard for discussion. The highly publicized case of Rihanna and Chris Brown is an example of an opportune moment to have such a discussion with teens. Adults can begin by asking open-ended questions, such as asking the teen what he or she thinks about what they saw and what can be done about it (for example, what would they do if they knew that a friend was in an abusive relationship). The main objective should be to start a nonjudgmental conversation (that doesn’t blame or judge the victim) that acknowledges victims sometimes have difficulty recognizing when they are in an abusive relationship and encourages teens to talk with an adult when they are not sure whether they or a friend may be in a dangerous relationship.

Thus, the challenge is not necessarily that adults need to build rapport with the adolescents in their lives, as much as they need to lay the groundwork to help adolescents recognize when a relationship is abusive.

**WCSAP: What are some ways advocates can talk with teens about sexual violence in a way that honors the larger societal and cultural analysis?**

HHK: In our article, my co-author and I argue that the best approach exhibited in some teen magazine articles was to create a balance between emphasizing individual victims’ stories and analyzing cultural contributions to IPV. We argue that this approach may be optimal for making IPV “real” and relevant while also letting teens and potential victims know they are not alone and the problem is much larger than they are. To achieve this, discussions with teens should validate personal experience by letting victims tell their stories (or hear the stories of other teens) in their own voice, while also letting them know they are not alone. Along this note, teens who are victims of IPV may benefit from referrals to counseling services. Additionally, it may be helpful to direct teens to resources where they can find statistics on the prevalence and causes of IPV to let them know that they are not alone and IPV is a broad social problem. Both the problem and solution are bigger than they are. Teens may make this connection by getting involved with advocacy groups designed to combat violence.

**WCSAP: Any last thoughts or recommendations?**

HHK: The sample of teen magazines in this study ranged from 1990 to 2007. A lot has changed during this time frame in terms of adolescents’ access to media. While teen magazines still have the potential to influence adolescents, their circulation has diminished somewhat with the emergence of new media outlets. In addition to accessing this genre, teens can now access information on relationships and sexuality from teen magazines’ companion websites, blogs, and even websites specifically designed by nonprofit groups to educate adolescents on sexuality and relationships. This provides teens with multiple places to go for guidance. Realistically, teens will likely continue to seek information from these resources before approaching adults, and this is not necessarily bad. That is, it may provide particularly shy adolescents with a place

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to seek sensitive information. At the same time, this highlights the need for promoting media literacy that encourages teens to exercise critical thinking skills when accessing such information in the media. ■

# Research Reviews

## Teen Magazines as Educational Texts on Dating Violence: The \$2.99 Approach

KETTREY, H., & EMERY, B. (2010). TEEN MAGAZINES AS EDUCATIONAL TEXTS: THE \$2.99 APPROACH. *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*, 16(11), 1270-1294.

As Kettrey and Emery state, a number of teens look to teen magazines as a resource for education and advice on dating relationships, particularly adolescent females. This study analyzed a collection of articles written between the years 1990-2007. The articles chosen for review addressed either physical or sexual violence in romantic relationships involving a male perpetrator and a female victim, including assault by an ex-boyfriend or an acquaintance.

The content of the magazine articles was analyzed as to whether it addressed teen dating violence as an individual issue, a societal issue, or both – and in what contexts. The researchers found that teen magazines were more likely to use an individual framework to address the issue. While this can be helpful in offering teens a story to which they can relate, it leaves out critical conversations about societal factors that contribute to dating violence. It can also leave victims feeling responsible for the abuse happening and for making it stop.

The researchers also pair this analysis with other messages young women may be internalizing. For example, the study states “research has revealed that teen magazines suggest to their readers that there is nothing more important than male-female relationships and that achieving girlfriend status is the single method of acquiring meaning, importance, and power in one’s life” (p. 1273). This statement highlights how important it is to look not only at the content of the individual article, but at the medium of teen magazines as a whole.

Having an understanding of how teen magazines address this issue is helpful for advocates; this “insight may provide a foundation from which to initiate conversations on this topic as well as highlight areas in which teens may need to be reeducated” (p. 1273).

Having an understanding of how teen magazines address this issue is helpful for advocates; this “insight may provide a foundation from which to initiate conversations on this topic as well as highlight areas in which teens may need to be reeducated” (p. 1273). The researchers also indicate the importance of having these critical conversations with both young males and females. ■

## Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY. (2008). SEX AND TECH: RESULTS FROM A SURVEY OF TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS. RETRIEVED FEBRUARY 1ST, 2011 FROM: <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/>

In 2008, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com surveyed 1,280 teens (ages 13-19) and young adults (ages 19-26) in an effort to gain a better understanding of the ways teens and young adults use technology to share and post sexually suggestive material via text, email, or instant message. The results from the survey offer a unique insight into this current trend.

This data can be used to validate the need to offer this population education and support on the intersections of healthy relationships, healthy sexuality, and technology safety.

While this survey does not specifically address the use of this technology in an abusive manner, the findings will be useful to advocates. The results offer up-to-date information that shows a significant number of teens are engaging in these activities. The results indicate that 39% of teens and 59% of young adults send or post sexually suggestive messages and that 48% of teens and 64% of young adults have received sexually suggestive messages.

This data can be used to validate the need to offer this population education and support on the intersections of healthy relationships, healthy sexuality, and technology safety.

The survey also provides information that may be surprising to some. The results highlight that 75% of teens and 71% of young adults understand there are potentially negative consequences to sending out sexually explicit content, yet 39% of teens and 59% of young adults choose to do so. The results also show that 44% of teens and young adults say it is common for sexually suggestive text messages to get shared with people other than the intended recipient.

In addition to statistics, this report offers practical safety tips advocates can share with teens and tips for parents on how to talk with their children about sex and technology. Overall, the data is current, user friendly, and can be used by advocates to facilitate meaningful, honest dialogue with teens and young adults. ■

## Telling It Like It Is: Teen Perspectives on Romantic Relationships

GUZMAN, L., IKRAMULLAH, E., MANLOVE, J., PETERSON, K., & SCARUPA, H. (2009). *TELLING IT LIKE IT IS: TEEN PERSPECTIVES ON ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS* (PUBLICATION NO. 2009-44). RETRIEVED FROM CHILD TRENDS WEBSITE:  
[http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends-2009\\_11\\_05\\_RB\\_TeenRelation.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2009_11_05_RB_TeenRelation.pdf)

The information in this research brief was gathered via focus groups conducted with 52 African American and Latino teens in Washington, DC. While this is a very specific population sample, the information teens shared about their perspectives on relationships offers many useful insights.

One of the most impactful points this study makes is the fact that the participating teens clearly understood what a healthy relationship is; however, very few believed they will have one. As the researchers state, “teens knew what a healthy teen relationship should look like; that is, it should be marked by respect, honesty, fidelity, good communication, and the absence of violence. Yet, at the same time, many of the teens expressed pessimism about their chances of experiencing that type of relationship themselves. Nor did they know many adults whose romantic relationships were worthy of emulation” (p. 1).

One of the most impactful points this study makes is the fact that the participating teens clearly understand what a healthy relationship is; however, very few believe they will have one.

When asked directly about violence in teen relationships, the teens stated that physical violence was not common but “play-fighting” was fairly normal. The participants saw “play-fighting” as harmless but did acknowledge that it could lead to “real” fighting. Teen girls were more likely to acknowledge verbal abuse as a form of violence. Per these findings, researchers stated programs “aimed at promoting healthy teen romantic relationships should address the issue of violence and such efforts should be aimed at both sexes” (p. 6).

Additionally, the brief shares the spectrum of language used by teens to label their relationships, which often varies according to the seriousness of the relationship. A less serious relationship may be labeled by girls as “flirtatious” or “crushing” and by boys as “friends with benefits” or “virtual date.” A serious relationship may be labeled by girls as “official” or “stamped” while it may be labeled by boys as “love” or a “life partnership.” While these labels vary by gender, and will also vary by region, advocates may find the spectrum to be a useful tool. The diversity of the relationship labels is a helpful reminder to ask teens about the meaning of the terms they use to describe their relationships, so advocates and teens can understand each other.

The researchers recommend a focus on helping teens to understand not only why healthy relationships are important, but also how to attain them. They also recommend that conversations about healthy relationships begin in early adolescence, and they emphasize the importance of connecting teens to positive role models. ■

## Dating Conflicts: Rethinking Dating Violence and Youth Conflict

ADELMAN, M., & KIL, S. (2007). DATING CONFLICTS: RETHINKING DATING VIOLENCE AND YOUTH CONFLICT. *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*, 13(12), 1296-1318.

This article explores the interesting concept of teen dating conflicts, which is defined as conflicts or violence associated with a teen dating relationship. An example of such a conflict would be two teen girls ending a friendship because one starts to date a boy the other liked. The research was conducted from 1997-2000 at an urban high school. Information was gathered from written narratives submitted by the students; the article focuses on 92 of the 426 narratives written.

As the categories suggest, dating conflicts can be potentially healthy or unhealthy, depending on whether they challenge or support unhealthy relationship dynamics.

Dating conflicts are divided into two categories. Conservative dating conflicts are those that “reinforce the primacy of dating or romantic relationships over other types of social friendships” (p. 1302). Questioning dating conflicts are those that “critique or resist the prioritization of dating over friendship and the use of violence or intimidation to enforce dating norms” (p. 1303). As the categories suggest, dating conflicts can be potentially healthy or unhealthy, depending on whether they challenge or support unhealthy relationship dynamics.

How is this related to teen dating violence? The information provided offers a unique analysis of how and why high school peers engage in conflict with each other over a third party dating scenario. The researchers identify numerous connections between the root causes of dating conflict and the root causes of dating violence. They found that the conflicts are often the result of either a subscription to or a critique of “the objectification of dating partners, a boy-centered heterosexual dating culture, competition amongst girls, ridicule of cross-gender friendships, and the use of force to intimidate or control peers” (p. 1314), all potential root causes for teen dating violence.

Program considerations offered by the researchers include adding conversations about teen dating conflict in curricula addressing teen dating violence and facilitating conversations that empower students to recognize that their involvement in dating conflicts reflects larger social issues, norms, and values of which they may be unaware. ■

## Prevalence of Partner Violence in Same-Sex Romantic and Sexual Relationships in a National Sample of Adolescents

HALPERN, C., YOUNG, M., WALLER, M., MARTIN, S., & KUPPER, L. (2004). PREVALENCE OF PARTNER VIOLENCE IN SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN A NATIONAL SAMPLE OF ADOLESCENTS. *JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH*, 35(2), 124-131. DOI:10.1016/J.JADOHEALTH.2003.09.003

This study, which states that it is the first national prevalence study on same-sex teen dating violence, was conducted via interviews with 117 adolescents, ages 12-21, who identified as being exclusively in a same-sex romantic or sexual relationship in the 18 months prior to the interview. Despite the relatively small sample size, this research is valuable because most of the information available on the prevalence of teen dating violence focuses on heterosexual relationships. In addition, it is important to note that the adolescents were interviewed about emotional and physical violence, but not sexual violence.

The results of this study indicate that intimate partner violence is most likely just as prevalent in teen same-sex relationships as teen opposite-sex relationships. It was found that almost 25% of the respondents reported experiencing some kind of physical or emotional violence from a partner.

The research states that the levels of violence reported by females in this study mirror the rates found in opposite-sex relationships. Males, on the other hand, reported about half as many incidents in same-sex relationships as those reported in opposite-sex relationships. Based on this information, researchers state that “homosexual and heterosexual women are at similar risk of victimization... Whether homosexual males are at reduced risk, relative to heterosexual males, is unclear, particularly in terms of more severe forms of violence” (p. 129). Based on this comment from the researchers, this is an area that may need more study.

The researchers state that a “better understanding of the developmental processes leading to partner violence will assist in the development of more effective prevention and intervention efforts” (p.130). The information shared in this report is a good starting point. More research and analysis on the many different issues relating to same-sex teen dating violence is needed. ■

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## Resources

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### Trainings:

Adolescent Sexuality Conference | Healthy Relationships Matter  
April 4th – 5th  
Seaside, OR  
<http://www.oregon-asc.org/index.html>

Sexual Assault and Coercion in Teen Relationships  
Recorded Webinar  
<http://www.wcsap.org/events/CoercionTeenRelationship.html>

### Online Resources:

A Thin Line  
<http://www.athinline.org/>

Love is Respect  
<http://www.loveisrespect.org/>

That's Not Cool  
<http://www.thatnotcool.com/>

Youth Experiencing SA, DV, and/or Stalking  
<https://sites.google.com/a/staff.resource-sharing-project.org/youth-experiencing-sa-dv-and-or-stalking/>

### In The WCSAP Library:

The Dangers of Sexting: What Teens Need to Know by Human Relations Media  
<http://data.wcsap.org:800?details=6305>

Family Life And Sexual Health Curriculum: Grades 9-10 by Seattle-King County  
Department of Public Health Family Planning Program  
<http://data.wcsap.org:800?details=6346>

Family Life And Sexual Health Curriculum: Grades 11-12 by Seattle-King County  
Department of Public Health Family Planning Program  
<http://data.wcsap.org:800?details=6344>

Programs to Reduce Teen Dating Violence and Sexual Assault by Arlene N. Weisz and  
Beverly M. Black  
<http://data.wcsap.org:800?details=6241>



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