Youth in Foster Care as Victims and Perpetrators of

Teen Dating Violence

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Abstract

Youth who experience child abuse and family violence have a greater likelihood of being a victim or perpetrator of teen dating violence (Foshee et al., 2008; Wolfe et al., 2009). This article discusses the impact of dating violence on foster youth's behavior, academics, and social life. Currently, there are very few resources and evidence-based practices for school counselors who work with this population. Recommendations are provided for (a) implementing and improving district policies, and (b) developing and implementing programs to prevent, identify, and intervene in violent relationships (Wekerle et al., 2009).

Keywords: foster youth, dating violence, adolescence, foster care

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One of the most common experiences associated with the adolescent

development is beginning to experience and form romantic relationships (Reed,

Tolman, Ward, & Safyer, 2016). For many teenagers, this experience is healthy,

positive, and enriching to their lives, but for the teenagers who engage in violent,

abusive relationships, teenage dating can be traumatizing and may lead to lasting

negative outcomes. Teenagers who were raised by parents with an abusive relationship

may fall into similar patterns of a romantic relationship modeled for them as children

(Jonson-Reid, Scott Jr., McMillen, & Edmond, 2007; Wolfe et al., 2003). Youth in foster

care are at a higher risk of being involved in teen dating violence due to their adverse

childhood experiences which may have negatively modeled communication and

relationship behaviors (Foshee, 2008).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) defines teen dating

violence as "the physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional violence within a dating

relationship, including stalking" (What is teen dating violence? section, para. 1).

According to Loveisrespect.org (2015), teen dating violence is the most common form of

youth violence, and approximately 1.5 million teenagers in the United States are

involved in it every year.

Examining the rates of teen dating violence for youth in foster care is even more

challenging, due to the limited research on this population. In one study, Jonson-Reid et

al. (2007) suggest that while 10% of youth in the general population are involved in

dating violence as either a victim or perpetrator, approximately 18.3% of youth in foster

care are involved in dating violence. Jonson-Reid et al. (2007) found that the two most common experiences of teen violence reported by youth in foster care were as a victim of a coerced sexual act (17% of those surveyed), and of verbal abuse (10.3%). Youth in foster care also reported being perpetrators of different forms of dating violence; the two most common forms of dating violence perpetration were coercing sexual acts (8%), physical harm (8%), and verbal abuse (5.9%). Jonson-Reid et al. (2007) also found that 6% of youth in foster care who reported being involved in teen dating violence said they were both a victim and a perpetrator.

While these statistics do provide some information about the type of violence youth in foster care experience in abusive dating relationships, it is also important to consider that these statistics may be lower than the actual rates. The data were collected through self-report, and teenagers may be reluctant to admit or are unaware that they are involved in this type of behavior. School counselors must be aware of the statistics, both reported and underreported, and be aware of the signs that these youth exhibit.

Outcomes of Involvement in Teen Dating Violence

Being involved in a violent relationship as a teen can be intense and lead to long-term negative outcomes, regardless of whether the teenager is in foster care or not. Numerous studies have reported that experiencing dating violence increases an adolescent's risk for antisocial behavior, drug use, trauma symptoms, psychopathology, suicidality, health-related problems, eating disorders, and risky sexual behavior as a teenager (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Chronister, Marsiglio, Linville, & Lantrip, 2014; Jouriles, McDonald, Garrido, Rosenfield, & Brown, 2005; Kim-Godwin, Clements,

McCuiston, & Fox, 2009; Wekerle et al., 2009). As these teenagers transition into adulthood, they are at a greater risk for continuing to be involved in partner violence, diminished mental health, drug use, early pregnancy, chronic antisocial behavior, and poor vocational outcomes (Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003; Dishion, Nelson, & Kavanagh, 2003).

In addition to being at higher risk for these long-term negative outcomes, there are also immediate repercussions for teens involved in violent relationships (Chronister et al., 2014). A recent study examining the effects of teen dating violence on female victims found that the girls in violent relationships reported isolation from family and peers, their partner sabotaging school or employment success, humiliation, and shaming by the partner, loss of positive self-image, self-worth, and self-efficacy, restricted or increased food intake, changes in body image and weight, use of drugs and/or alcohol, decline in mental health, dramatic drops in academic performance, and changes in their hopefulness and plans for the future (Chronister et al., 2014). Youth in foster care are already at a significantly higher risk for these negative outcomes compared to the general youth population, and involvement in teen dating violence only further increases foster youth's level of risk (Jonson-Reid & Bevins, 1999).

Even with these negative effects and potential adverse outcomes, teens, particularly youth in foster care, remain in these violent relationships. Jonson-Reid et al. (2007) found that foster care youth were four times more likely to remain in a relationship with violence than youth reported from a study of dating violence in the general high school. Foster youth who remain in violent relationships are at risk for a significant number of negative outcomes both in the short-term and in the long-term,

including continuing these unhealthy relationship patterns into adulthood (Chronister et al., 2014).

Theoretical Considerations

Some developmental theories can provide potential explanations for the higher rates of teen dating violence among the foster youth population. According to social learning theory, observational learning plays an important role in how children learn interactional skills (Bandura, 1977). When children have violence modeled as common communication in their home environment, they are more likely to demonstrate this behavior in interactions and relationships outside of the home (Wekerle et al., 2009). For youth in foster care who have witnessed violence, this theory posits that they have learned unhealthy interactions through observing their parent(s), and in turn use these unhealthy skills in their teenage dating relationships.

Attachment theory suggests that when children are young, the attachment they form with their primary adult caregiver(s) is used to develop an internal working model of themselves in future relationships (Bowlby, 1982). A history of childhood maltreatment is more likely to result in avoidant or ambivalent attachment styles; both considered insecure attachments (Weiss, MacMullin, Waechter, Wekerle, & The MAP Research Team, 2011). Adolescent's attachment styles have been found to be correlated with the quality of their dating relationships, and insecure attachment was found to be related to negative (but not necessarily violent) dating experiences (Lee, Reese-Weber, & Kahn, 2014; Steinberg, Davila, & Fincham, 2006).

Research supports the notion that experiencing abuse as a child is associated with a greater likelihood of experiencing violence in a romantic relationship. Family

violence is one of the most consistent predictors of being a perpetrator of teen dating violence (Foshee et al., 2008; Wolfe et al., 2003; Jouriles, McDonald, Mueller, & Grych, 2012). Teen dating violence also has been found to be significantly associated with family economic disadvantage, a common characteristic of households with child maltreatment (Foshee et al., 2008). Also, children who are raised in abusive households suffer chronic exposure to trauma. This chronic exposure has been found to interfere with one's effective problem-solving skills, to decrease their emotional control, and can result in unpredictable and impulsive behavior (Lustig, 2015).

Current Practices Addressing Teen Dating Violence

Research suggests that 42-87% of dating violence occurs on school grounds, including within school buildings. Consequently, schools are the ideal place to address teen dating violence (Chronister et al., 2014). In response to a highly publicized dating violence incident that occurred in 2007, Texas was the first state to pass legislation that required school districts to adopt and implement a dating violence policy (Jackson, Bouffard, & Fox, 2014). As of July 2014, 22 states have implemented laws regarding teen dating violence.

School districts implement prevention programs as another way to address teen dating violence in schools. Two evidence-based, school-wide programs are Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 2012) and Fourth R (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Safe Dates helps teens develop decision making and positive relationship skills. Primary prevention efforts of the program attempt to change the norms associated with dating violence, such as gender stereotyping and conflict management skills. Secondary prevention efforts of the program help teens who have already experienced

teen dating violence. In addition, these efforts seek to increase awareness about community resources and to promote help-seeking behaviors (Foshee et al., 2008). Safe Dates effectively provides a foundation to prevent teen dating violence, as well as decrease the acceptance of teen dating violence (Foshee et al., 2012). Future research should determine the effectiveness of a "family-based" curriculum like Safe Dates with the foster youth population, who typically do not have family involvement in the curriculum. For Safe Dates to be implemented with youth in foster care, either modifications to the caregiver portion of the curriculum are needed, or involvement of foster parents or other alternative caregivers needs to be encouraged.

Fourth R (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011) is a school-based curriculum for 8th and 9th grade students designed to promote healthy and safe behaviors regarding substance use, bullying, dating, and sexuality. This curriculum focuses on building students' relationships with their peers and their dating partners. The curriculum is designed to be taught in middle and high school classrooms by teachers, school counselors, or other school staff. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of involving all adolescents in education about safety and risk, rather than just targeting those who are exhibiting risk factors for dating violence, to build resiliency for all students to face future difficulties. The curriculum covers the topics of violence and bullying, unsafe sexual behavior, and substance use.

Fourth R launched in schools in 2004 and is currently used in more than 1,200 schools nationwide. A study by Wolfe et al. (2009) found that up to 2.5 years after implementing Fourth R at test schools, rates of physical dating violence were about 2.5 times less than those at control schools. In addition, another study found that when the

Fourth R program was implemented at schools with high populations of maltreated youth, Fourth R decreased the youth's likelihood of engaging in all forms of violent delinquency (Crooks, Scott, Ellis, & Wolfe, 2011). Because of Fourth R's effectiveness in decreasing violent behavior specifically for youth with a history of maltreatment, Fourth R is a program that is ready to use without modifications for the foster youth population. School counselors can spearhead the implementation of Fourth R and Safe Dates programs and monitor and track data to assess the programs' effectiveness.

Future Research and Practices That Address Teen Dating Violence

Youth in foster care represent a high-risk population that would benefit from targeted programs and interventions designed to prevent and reduce teen dating violence. However, there do not seem to be any programs in place now that are serving this particular population. School counselors can implement prevention and intervention programs in the educational setting to address dating violence.

School counselors can increase awareness and develop programs for their entire school, as well as develop programs for the targeted at-risk population of youth in foster care. Programs like Fourth R and Safe Dates are excellent programs to implement at a school-wide level. School counselors can also use ideas from these programs to develop small-group interventions for the students in foster care and their unique family situations and needs.

Although states require school districts to develop and implement policies about how to address teen dating violence, many of these policies do not fully utilize the potential of the school counseling position to help provide support (Jackson et al., 2014). In a study of the policies of all the school districts in Texas, the first state to

require all schools to have a policy about dating violence in place, only two-thirds of the districts' policies indicated that students involved in dating violence had access to counseling services and that the victims could report dating violence to a school official (Jackson et al., 2014). Policies need to be written or revised to include school counselors as a highly accessible resource for all students to report to and receive support to address dating violence, particularly for those students who may not have a parent or other trusted adult in their life.

For school counselors involved in addressing teen dating violence with the foster youth population, it is important to remember that most youth will not typically seek help from professionals (Wekerle et al., 2009). However, in a survey given to youth in foster care by Jonson-Reid and Bivens (1999), approximately 70% of youth expressed a desire for more information about teen dating violence, and 68% were willing to participate in a program or class about preventing dating violence. Therefore, while youth in foster care may not be explicitly reporting dating violence or actively requesting assistance from professionals, they have expressed a desire for the professionals' support.

Efforts to increase awareness and knowledge about teen dating violence in schools can help students provide support to each other. Youth in foster care are most likely to tell a friend about their experience with dating violence (Jonson-Reid & Bivens, 1999). Therefore, by educating all students about teen dating violence and how to help a peer involved in relationship violence, youth in foster care can potentially receive support from a peer they trust, as well as be encouraged to seek support from school counselors (Weisz, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Black, 2007). Unfortunately, teen

dating violence awareness information is found to be either nonexistent or difficult to find in many schools (Jackson et al., 2014). School counselors can implement school-wide programs and implement awareness months, such as Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month to increase the knowledge of the entire student body, so all students have the potential to be a support to any student in need.

A meta-analysis of 53 articles by Vagi et al. (2013) identified six protective factors for youth at-risk of being a perpetrator of teen dating violence. These six protective factors are high cognitive dissonance about perpetrating dating violence (realizing what they were doing was wrong), high empathy, higher grade-point-average, higher verbal IQ, having a positive relationship with one's mother, and feeling a sense of attachment to your school.

Cognitive dissonance about perpetrating dating violence and empathy can be developed through educating students about the negative impacts and outcomes of teen dating violence through school-wide curriculum. This topic can also be further explored through small-group or individual counseling with a school counselor. Higher grade-point-averages and higher verbal IQ scores can be supported by teachers, school counselors, and other school professionals by teaching students the academic skills proven to foster success. School counselors can also encourage youth who are at-risk of being in a violent relationship to join clubs, play sports, befriend peers, create support groups or mentoring partnerships, and/or develop relationships with adults in the school to foster their connection to the school and encourage them to build healthy attachments to others who can be positive supports in their lives.

At the school district level, policies and procedures addressing teen dating violence need to be implemented and improved. While many states now require districts to have a policy addressing dating violence, all states should have this same requirement. For districts that are developing policies or currently have policies in place, the effectiveness of these policies should be evaluated on a regular basis to determine possible improvements to help reduce rates of violence. For example, in Texas where policies have been in place in districts since 2007, none of the districts in the state have safety provisions in place for teen dating violence victims, such as allowing the victim to request a transfer to another classroom or campus for their protection (Jackson et al., 2014).

Finally, more research is needed regarding the patterns and rates of dating violence among adolescents, particularly those in foster care. While there is significant data indicating youth in foster care are a particularly vulnerable population, little is known about the actual impact of dating violence on this group and their unique needs regarding this issue. With more research and awareness about dating violence in the foster youth population, evidence-based prevention programs and interventions can be developed. This research could help to inform school counselors what works and how to effectively implement programs to support this unique population of students.

If there are collaboration efforts at school, district, community, state, and national levels, one of the most vulnerable populations to teen dating violence, youth in foster care, can be provided with effective prevention and intervention strategies necessary to keep them from perpetuating the cycle of unhealthy lifestyles leading to more children in foster care.

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