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Preventing Teen Dating Violence and Promoting Healthy Dating Relationships Among Adolescents Ages 12-18: An Evidence-Based Practice Guide for School Social Workers

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PREVENTING TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AND PROMOTING HEALTHY DATING RELATIONSHIPS
AMONG ADOLESCENTS AGES 12-18

AN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE GUIDE FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

WRITTEN BY

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UtahState University
SOCIAL WORK

Introduction

Intimate partner violence is serious problem in the United States, with more than one in three women and nearly one third of men having experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime (NISVS, 2017). Children and teenagers might also be victims of family violence or witness intimate partner violence when one or more parent/caregiver is violent towards the other (Clark, 1999). This can lead to the intergenerational transmission of violence where these children continue the cycle of violence by becoming involved in teen dating violence (Temple, 2013). Children and adolescents are also consuming media through music, movies, television and videogames that portray violence against women and promote negative gender roles (Federal Trade Commission, 2009).

Teenage dating relationships can have elements of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, patterned after adult relationships they have witnessed in the home or as portrayed in media involving elements of control and violence that they have adopted as the norm. Adolescents between the ages of 12-18 are forming partner relationships as they begin to date and these youth need to know what a healthy relationship looks like, especially if they only have unhealthy relationships as examples. This evidence-based practice guide involves preventing teen dating violence and promoting healthy dating relationships among adolescents ages 12-18. As a school social worker, you can be involved in teaching adolescents in middle school and high school (ages 12-18) what dating violence looks like in order to prevent it, while learning skills to create healthy relationships that can be utilized into adulthood.

Recommendation 1

PREVENT DATING VIOLENCE BY DEFINING IT

Help teens identify healthy and unhealthy attributes of dating relationships.

One in eleven high school students report being physically hurt by a significant other (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011). Teen dating violence can come in the form of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. A healthy relationship is one where both partners are communicating, respectful, trusting, honest, equal, and engaging in personal time away from each other (loveisrespect.org). Defining caring relationships as well as dating abuse are components of the Safe Dates curriculum. Education programs like Safe Dates that teach students about dating violence can significantly decrease perpetration and victimization of physically, sexual and psychological dating violence (Foshee, 2004). Increasing knowledge and awareness of teen dating violence through the use of programs like Safe Dates, teens are more able to avoid becoming perpetrators and victims of this form of violence.

Psychological abuse might include name shouting, calling, public humiliation, degrading comments about appearance, invoking fear, or isolating a partner from other friends and family members by making them believe no one else cares about them. Physical abuse can be in the form of hitting, slapping, choking, pushing or pulling violently, or being hit with an object. Sexual violence can include forced sex, calling sexual names, threats to have sex with someone else, and forcing someone to do sex acts they do not want to do (Levy, 2006). To help teens identify if psychological or physical abuse is a part of their relationship, school social workers can use the Safe Dates Psychological Abuse Victimization tool (Foshee et al., 1998) and the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus and Douglas, 2004).

Recommendation 2

PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Help teens understand that in a relationships, partners should have equal power.

Teens may have been influenced by intimate partner violence in the home or in the media and have established gender norms that promote teen dating violence. Learning how to have a relationship where each partner has equal power is important in preventing perpetration and victimization of teen dating violence based on inequality. Traditional gender norms often teach youth that men should be active and controlling and women should be passive and vulnerable, and pornography also impacts how teens view gender roles and expectations (Martellozzo, 2016). In a mixed methods study, young women ages 15-18, had views of their role in a relationship based on gender norms (Davies, 2019). Some prevalent themes of the study showed that these young women felt they were more emotional, expected to be more sexual, but not too sexual, and compliant to their male partner's desires.

Males were expected to be more dominant and could control the couple's agenda based on "his mood." These insights show that young women can feel limited in their power in a relationship based on a necessity to satisfy their boyfriend's needs, feeling lucky to have a boyfriend and willing to do anything to keep their status as a girlfriend. Gender norms need to be addressed in order to promote equality in teen dating relationships, challenging the views that one partner needs to dominate over the other. Using an evidence-based curriculum such as Safe Dates as a guide will help school social workers discuss common gender stereotypes with teens, and how stereotypes affect dating relationships.

Recommendation 3

PROMOTE CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND ANGER MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Teaching teens conflict resolution skills can help them avoid violence in their dating relationships.

All couples have disagreements, but not all couples employ violence to end disagreements. Teens who have witnessed IPV may lack conflict resolution skills, learning from parental interactions and societal forces that violence is a necessary element to end conflicts (Clarey et al., 2010). This unhealthy method to approaching disagreements leaves psychological and physical damage. It is also important to learn strategies to remove oneself from a situation before resorting to aggression in response to disagreements. Conflict resolution styles can predict acts of teen dating violence. Teens should avoid criticizing, attacking, and losing self- control and withdrawal, which includes becoming silent, refusing to discuss the topic, and avoiding the problem (Bonache, 2017). To help teens learn what type of conflict resolutions styles they use, school social workers can use the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (Kurdek, 1994). Littlefield provides some strategies for conflict resolution including developing expectations for win-win solutions, identifying interests, brainstorming creative options, and combining options into win-win solutions, as well as methods for managing emotions (Littlefield, 1993).

Recommendation 4

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

For healthier dating relationships, teach teens the need for boundaries with

Modern technology allows for more interactions between teens, creating new challenges and opportunities in teen relationships. One challenge is the increase in cyber dating violence. Research shows that online abuse can lead to offline abuse and a deeper invasion of personal freedom, enabling an abuser to constantly access their victim (Stonard, 2020). Another challenge involving technology and dating is the pressure teens might feel to participate in sexting or other sexual acts via technology. Technology can also provide an opportunity to dissolve relationships and a text breakup can be an option for teens in exiting unhealthy relationships (Baker and Carreño, 2016). As a school social worker, you can help teens set boundaries in their digital world so that they are at less risk for cyber dating violence, helping to prevent technology from becoming a tool used by an abuser for stalking and control. Talking with teens about not sharing their passwords with others, even a boyfriend or girlfriend, and turning the phone off at night are a good way to maintain personal boundaries and autonomy in a relationship regarding technology.

Recommendation 5

BYSTANDER SUPPORT IN PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Help community members learn to identify dating violence and how to effectively intervene.

Teens need to be able to identify the school social worker as an ally and a safe person to go to for help. School social workers should be ready to share resources with teens dealing with dating violence as they play a role in prevention and intervention. A 2017 study showed that school personnel identified two barriers to intervening in dating violence — not having the time or ability to help and worrying about the negative impact of intervening (Edwards, 2017). School social workers can lead the way in training and educating other school personnel, as well as parents, the student body, and other community members, in how to identify dating violence and how to effectively intervene. This is especially important since nearly half of all dating violence happens in the presence of other people (Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

Adolescent bystanders who know the victim are most likely to intervene in teen dating violence through direct verbal confrontation, direct physical confrontation, distraction, and indirect intervention (Debnam & Mauer, 2019). Teen dating violence affects teens, and teens can be the leaders in addressing it; especially through sensitive and effective verbal communication and reaching out to adults as needed. Learning how to do so safely is key, since some interventions lead to a victim's withdrawal from a friend group or increased violence by the perpetrator. Creating a community of bystanders, led by teens, is an intervention worth cultivating, especially in instances of emotional and physical abuse.

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