

An RCT of Dating Matters: Effects on Teen Dating Violence and Relationship Behaviors

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research addresses the prevention of teen dating violence (TDV) which is physical, sexual or psychological/emotional abuse towards a current or previous dating partner. TDV can lead to several long-term health problems like depression, anxiety, poor academic performance, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse. As such, several researchers have explored possible prevention strategies. However, most TDV prevention programs were developed for mid- to late-adolescents (typically, grades 9-12). But, even early adolescents (i.e., grades 6-8) may experience dating violence, and it is also important to implement prevention programs before many adolescents begin dating, so they have the knowledge and skills they need when they start sexual and romantic relationships.

Therefore, this study examined a comprehensive TDV prevention program called Dating Matters (DM), as well as a standard of care intervention program called Safe Dates (SD), to determine if the DM program did a better job of inhibiting negative relationship behaviours and attitudes and encouraging positive relationship behaviours among middle school students.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

This study ran for four years with the participation of 46 middle schools in “high-risk” neighborhoods in four urban cities in the US. Half the schools randomly received the DM prevention program, and half randomly received the SD standard of care intervention. In order to participate in the study, students had to have started sixth grade in the fall of 2012 or 2013. Collectively, 2,349 students participated in the study. The researchers were specifically interested in the DM program which integrates classroom-delivered TDV prevention for 6th-8th graders, supports training for parents, builds TDV knowledge, encourages youth communication, and examines local health department activities that monitor TDV in regards to policy implications.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- This research suggests that DM may equip middle school youth with better strategies for reducing unhealthy behaviours when compared to a standard intervention program like SD.
- Further, this study included students who were originally in the 6th grade, and thus represents an important strategy for prevention work with early adolescents.



An RCT of Dating Matters: Effects on Teen Dating Violence and Relationship Behaviors

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers found that the DM comprehensive prevention model was more effective at reducing TDV than the SD intervention program. Specifically, the schools who implemented the DM program showed lower rates of TDV perpetration and victimization, and lower use of negative conflict resolution strategies among youth than schools that implemented the SD program. The majority of these findings were true for both males and females across outcomes. This is a strong study because it is compared to a current best-practice TDV prevention program (Safe Dates). It is important to note that schools in this study had to have implemented DM for at least two full academic years, and so results reflect fairly high-dosage implementation, and that only students who reported dating at each survey timeframe were asked the dating violence questions.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used by communities looking to implement comprehensive programs that address TDV in middle school. This work is also important for parents because the DM program provides specific training for caregivers. Lastly, this work is critical for researchers because more work is needed to understand whether the DM program is effective for the prevention of partner violence as adolescents enter adulthood.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS:

Phyllis Holditch Niolon, PhD,
Alana M. Vivolo-Kantor, PhD
Allison J. Tracy, PhD,
Natasha E. Latzman, PhD,
Todd D. Little, PhD,
Sarah DeGue, PhD,
Kyle M. Lang, PhD,
Lianne Fuino Estefan, PhD, MPH,
Sharon R. Ghazarian, PhD,

Wendy Li KamWa McIntosh, MPH,
Bruce Taylor, PhD, NORC,
Henrietta Kuoh, MPH,
Tessa Burton, MPH,
Beverly Fortson, PhD,
Elizabeth A. Mumford, PhD, NORC,
Shannon C. Nelson, MA, NORC,
Hannah Joseph, MA, NORC,
Linda Anne Valle, PhD,
Andra Teten Tharp, PhD

KEYWORDS

Teen dating violence, prevention program, adolescence, school-based intervention

FULL REFERENCE

Niolon P.H., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Tracy, A.J., Latzman, N.E., Little, T.D., DeGue, S., Lang, K.M., Estefan, L.F., Ghazarian, S.R., McIntosh, W.L.K., Taylor, B., Johnson, L.L., Kuoh, H., Burton, T., Fortson, B., Mumford, E.A., Nelson, S.C., Joseph, H., Valle, L.A., Tharp, A.T. (2019). An rct of Dating Matters: Effects on teen dating violence and relationship behaviours. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 57(1), 13-23.