



COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE :  
ADDRESSING YOUTH DATING VIOLENCE

# Asking Youth About Teen Dating Violence in Research: Ethical Considerations

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Researchers asking about teen dating violence (TDV) should be aware of potential ethical issues associated with asking youth to share their TDV experiences. Studies suggest that the majority of youth do not experience significant distress as a result of participating in research on sensitive topics; however, researchers still need to make efforts to minimize the risk of harm to participants. Researchers need to consider how to protect participants' confidentiality, while also balancing mandatory reporting requirements and efforts to support youth welfare.

### Ensuring Informed Consent

- In addition to obtaining consent from parents/guardians/caregivers where required, researchers should recognize teens' autonomy by providing sufficient information to allow them to make an informed choice about whether or not to participate in the research study. Thus, researchers are advised to obtain adolescent consent or assent to participate. This information should be provided in clear, developmentally appropriate language.
- During the informed and assent consent process, researchers should ensure all potential participants understand the purpose of the research, the expected duration of the study, risks, and benefits. Potential participants should be aware that the study will address TDV and any other sensitive topics.
- As part of the informed consent and assent process, researchers should inform parents and youth about the resources that will be made available to participants to manage any distress and support their safety and wellbeing.
- Researchers should make it clear that participation in research is voluntary and that there is no penalty for not participating. Researchers should also ensure that participants are aware that they are not required to answer questions or disclose personal experiences that make them uncomfortable. Because of this, it is important that questions included in your survey are NOT set to require answers.
- Researchers should inform participants that they are free to discontinue the research at any point and can even ask up to a pre-specified point in time to have their data destroyed. The point in time should be clearly listed in the consent and assent forms.

## Managing Confidentiality and Privacy

- Researchers must make every effort to maximize the confidentiality and privacy of participants. This is also a requirement under the federal ethics framework (TCPS2). Some specific considerations include:
  - Clearly explaining what confidentiality means in the context of research (e.g., that parents, teachers, peers, etc., will not have access to their responses);
  - Clearly indicating when confidentiality cannot be maintained (i.e., if researchers are concerned about imminent harm to the youth or others);
  - Assuring participants that identifying information (e.g., their names, their emails, their schools, their neighbourhoods) will not be connected with their responses in data sets and published reports;
  - Maximizing participants' privacy while participating in the study (e.g., for questionnaires, ensuring that participants have enough space between them so that their responses are not visible to others; for individual interviews, ensuring that responses are not overheard by passersby);
  - Ensuring that in group settings (e.g., focus groups), all participants understand the importance of keeping information shared within the group confidential. In some cases it may be important in the consent form to explicitly state: Please do not repeat what is said in the group. Nonetheless, as part of the informed consent process, participants should be made aware however, that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in such settings.
- Every Canadian province and territory has mandatory reporting laws that are designed to protect youth from abuse and neglect by an adult. Mandatory reporting laws generally do not cover abuse by a same-aged dating partner. Researchers should be aware of these mandatory reporting laws (even when their studies do not explicitly address child abuse, as a disclosure may still occur) and participants should be made aware of these exceptions to confidentiality as part of the informed consent/assent process. Researchers should have a detailed process in place to act in a timely manner to disclosures that require a report.
- Mandatory reporting aside, as part of TDV research, researchers will inevitably learn that some participants have been and/or are currently experiencing harm in a dating relationship. Researchers should be aware that there is a range of opinions on the ethical obligations of researchers to intervene in cases of youth maltreatment, with different ideas of how to balance the protection of participants' confidentiality and the promotion of youth welfare. Researchers should have discussions within their teams to develop their own protocol (see Finkelhor et al., 2016, for more information about this complex topic) that are in keeping with provincial and/or federal law, and ethical board approvals.
- Most youth violence researchers agree that the protection of participants' confidentiality is of the utmost importance, and that they should only intervene when they learn youth are at imminent risk of being harmed or of harming others (though the exact threshold may vary between teams). The type of intervention may also range from providing optional resources for the youth to access on their own (without violating confidentiality), to following up and imposing an intervention (and potentially violating confidentiality to do so). During study development, research teams should go through an ethical decision-making process to evaluate the risks and benefits of different approaches.

- Researchers Sharkey, Reed, and Felix (2016) provide an example of how their team navigated the ethical decision-making process in their school-based survey study of youth dating and sexual violence. After considering different options, their final protocol met legal requirements and ethical principles, and included the following:
  - All participants were provided with a list of resources and the contact information at the end of the survey (and because it was an online survey, they were also able to provide this list immediately after a participant reported experiencing sexual violence in their dating relationship).
  - Participants who reported sexual violence were asked to check off a box indicating if they would like to receive additional support from a mental health practitioner (associated with the research team).
  - Researchers matched only those participant IDs who selected “yes” to their student IDs, in order to identify them. The practitioner then provided services or referrals to these individuals.
  - Survey results otherwise remained confidential, and the list linking participant IDs to student IDs was deleted after data collection was completed, in order to completely anonymize the data.
  - This protocol maximizes participant confidentiality, while also providing accessible support to those who have experienced violence.
- Anonymous surveys can take a similar approach by having participants leave their contact information on a separate page, only if they would like to be contacted for additional support.
- During interviews or other non-anonymous studies, researchers can remind participants at the beginning of the interview that they will intervene only in cases of imminent harm (to them or someone else). They can also remind participants that if they start to say something that suggests imminent harm, they will potentially have to break confidentiality.

## Responding to Distress

- Researchers should provide all study participants, regardless of whether they show distress during the study, with a resource sheet that lists sources of support, such as youth support hotlines, local mental health agencies, and emergency services. The resource sheet can also include links to organizations that offer helpful information, such as Kids Help Phone. At least one of these resources should be available 24/7.
- Research personnel should receive adequate training and support in identifying and responding to participants’ distress. To this end, standardized distress protocols are strongly recommended. (Researchers should note that there is a difference between experiencing minor discomfort, which is normative when being asked about sensitive topics, and significant psychological distress). Participants might express their distress in a number of ways; for example, some youth may shut down and disengage, while others may act out and become disruptive to others. With the participants’ consent, research personnel can support youth in using available coping strategies, such as taking a break, discontinuing entirely, or speaking to a trusted adult.
- When conducting research in schools, researchers can ensure that there will be designated adults available to support students while the research is being conducted and to provide follow-up as needed (e.g., the principal or guidance counsellor). These supports should be highlighted to study participants prior to participation and during the debrief.

- In communities where there are limited mental health resources, researchers should make efforts to incorporate counselling supports into the research project's budget or consider ways to support youth with resources outside their community (e.g., national hotlines or online resources), so that participants can access these if needed.
- Researchers can provide participants with a discreet way of requesting additional support from an adult during or following study participation. For example, at the end of a questionnaire, study participants can be provided with a slip of paper to indicate their name and to check off a box indicating whether they would like to speak with a supportive adult (about the research content or anything else). These can be collected and sorted through promptly after the end of the study; prompt arrangements can be made for these participants to be connected to a support (whether it is the researcher, a counsellor, or another resource).
- Depending on researchers' skills and background, they may be able to provide ongoing consultative support to school staff on ways to respond to disclosures of TDV or research-related distress.

## Additional Considerations

- Prior to beginning a study, researchers should engage stakeholders (e.g., school administrators, parents, youth) to understand their potential concerns about TDV research. Researchers can provide outreach by, for example, conducting presentations on the goals of the research for parents and school staff and provide opportunities to ask questions.
- Research personnel do not need to be mental health professionals, but should have sufficient training in order to provide a psychologically safe environment for study participants. They should be able to introduce the study clearly and to answer questions. For interview studies, interviewers should have skills in building rapport, providing nonjudgmental and non-victim-blaming responses, and providing space for participants to decline answering certain questions.
- Research personnel should have access to a supervisor (e.g., the primary investigator or research coordinator) during data collection so that they can troubleshoot issues as they arise.
- Researchers can help participants understand that their input is valuable, as it contributes to knowledge that can benefit young people. Consequently, it is important to communicate how valuable their input is and how it will be used.
- Researchers should compensate youth for their participation to be respectful of their time and efforts. If payment this is not allowed per school policy, researchers should work with youth to figure out another way to compensate them for their time.
- Researchers should consider ways to communicate study results to participants in an accessible manner, as well as to engage youth and other community members (e.g., parents, schools, organizations) in reflecting on results and providing feedback.

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