



Who, When, How, and Why Bystanders Intervene in Physical and Psychological Teen Dating Violence

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Peers may play an important role in adolescent dating violence prevention. Past research shows that adolescent dating violence often happens in the presence of others, and that adolescents are most likely to turn to their friends for support related to this issue. There are a number of violence prevention programs that focus on bystander intervention, by instilling youth with the skills and confidence to effectively intervene in dating violence and sexual violence.

This article reviews the research on adolescents' bystander behaviours in the context of teen dating violence, summarizing findings from 17 studies.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The study authors identified 17 research studies (published in English, up to mid-2017) that examined bystander behaviours in the context of teen dating violence. The authors summarized findings from these studies to identify characteristics of youth who intervene; when, how, and why they intervene; and barriers to intervening.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- Adolescents may be more likely to intervene in dating violence when they are confident that the act is abusive and that their intervention is going to be helpful.
- Methods of bystander intervention include verbal and physical confrontation, distraction, and help-seeking.
- Barriers to bystander intervention include concerns about making the situation worse for the victim or bystander, skepticism of the long-term effectiveness of intervening, and not wanting to intrude on private matters.



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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Adolescents are more likely to intervene in dating violence when they feel a sense of responsibility and confidence to intervene, or when they know the individuals involved. Strategies to intervene include confronting the abuser verbally or physically, distracting the abuser, and seeking support from an adult. Adolescents report being motivated to intervene when they believe that it is the right thing to do and that they can be effective.

Barriers to bystander intervention include being uncertain about whether abuse is occurring, worrying that intervention could increase risk for the victim or bystander, not believing in the effectiveness of intervention, and not wanting to intrude. School-related barriers include thinking that school staff are better equipped to intervene or that schools do not take the dating violence seriously. Youth identified factors that prevent them from reporting abuse to school staff, including potential social repercussions, lack of comfort discussing sensitive topics with teachers, and thinking that teachers are not concerned about dating violence among students.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

In identifying barriers to intervention, this article highlights a number of possible targets for practitioners and researchers. For example, adolescents may benefit from being better able to identify dating violence; the authors suggest teaching adolescents using contemporary examples that are relevant to their experiences. Bystander intervention programs should build adolescents' confidence about intervening and explore their identified barriers to actually intervening.

In addition to building individual students' capacity to help, the school climate may play an important role. Establishing school norms of intervening and building staff members' credibility as effective helpers could increase adolescents' likelihood to intervene.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS:

Katrina J. Debnam, School of Nursing, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia
Victoria Mauer, Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia

KEYWORDS

Teen dating violence, Bystander intervention, Violence prevention, Adolescence

FULL REFERENCE

Debnam, K. J., & Mauer, V. (2021). Who, when, how, and why bystanders intervene in physical and psychological teen dating violence. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 22(1), 54-67.