

Perceived Barriers, Relationship Quality, and Informal Mentors: Adolescents' Preference for Disclosing about Dating Violence

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Adolescent dating violence is associated with several negative outcomes, including mental health concerns and violence in future adult relationships. However, many adolescents identify barriers that prevent them from seeking help when they experience dating violence. Adolescents prefer to seek help from individuals with whom they share a high quality, supportive relationship. Adolescents are more likely to ask friends for help than their parents, but less research has examined how likely they are to disclose dating violence to other adults that they are close to, such as family friends or relatives. This study aimed to determine how likely adolescents are to disclose dating violence to informal adult mentors compared to parents and friends and explore how relationship quality and perceived barriers to disclosure impact adolescents' willingness to seek help.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers asked 152 adolescents (74% girls, average age 15.6 years) at a public high school in the southern United States to fill out an online survey about adolescent dating violence. The survey assessed whether participants had experienced any form of dating violence in the past year, then used the Natural Mentor Questionnaire to determine whether they had an informal mentor. Participants then rated how likely they would be to seek help from that mentor, their parents, or a friend if they were experiencing dating violence. Adolescents also answered questions about the quality of their relationship with their informal mentor, parents, and friends, and identified barriers to seeking help from each source. Only the responses of the 95 participants who indicated that they had an informal mentor were considered in the results.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

- Adolescents may view informal adult mentors such as family friends or relatives as a middle ground between friends and parents. They are most likely to disclose dating violence to friends, followed by mentors, and finally parents.
- Barriers to help-seeking and relationship quality are both important predictors of whether youth who are experiencing dating violence will seek help.
- Informal mentors may be a valuable resource for adolescents experiencing dating violence because adolescents report high relationship quality with mentors and few barriers to seeking help from them.



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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Like previous research, adolescents in this study were most willing to disclose dating violence to friends, followed by informal mentors and finally parents. These results suggest that youth may view mentors as a middle ground between parents and friends. However, it is important to note that the participants in this study were mostly white, heterosexual females and their experiences may be different than the experiences of other groups.

Informal mentors appear to be a helpful resource for adolescents who are experiencing dating violence. Adolescents identified the least number of barriers to seeking help from mentors, and the highest number of barriers to seeking help from a parent. Similarly, adolescents' relationship quality with mentors was significantly higher than their relationship quality with their parents.

The researchers also found that barriers to help-seeking and relationship quality predicted adolescents' willingness to seek help. Adolescents who identified more barriers to disclosing dating violence to parents or friends were less willing to seek help from those sources. Some common barriers to help-seeking included feeling that dating violence is an uncomfortable topic, feeling embarrassed, or worrying they would tell someone. On the other hand, adolescents who reported higher relationship quality with friends, parents, and mentors were more likely to seek help.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This work can be used by researchers to inform them of next steps for studying adolescent dating violence. The results of this study suggest that informal mentors may be valuable supports for adolescents experiencing dating violence, but more research is needed to examine the nature of adolescents' relationships with mentors and determine barriers that may prevent disclosure among more diverse groups of youth. This work can also be used by those designing and implementing dating violence prevention programs because it suggests that interventions should focus on helping adolescents find supports in their own lives that they can go to when they need help.

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