

# How Does Family Communication Relate to Adolescent Dating Violence and Externalizing Behaviors?

## The Role of Parent-adolescent Risk Communication and Attitudes toward Violence in a Nicaraguan Sample

### WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Families play a significant role in adolescents' overall development. Families' communication styles may influence adolescents' social behaviours and may play a role in promoting healthy relationships and preventing relationship violence. This study examined how family communication relates to adolescents' dating violence behaviours, as well as other risk behaviours.

Two specific components of communication were included: verbal hostility (e.g., yelling, violent outbursts) and expressiveness (i.e., open, civil communication).

The majority of research on dating violence comes from the United States. This study took place in Nicaragua, adding to our knowledge about adolescent dating violence around the world.

### WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

1,651 adolescents in Nicaragua, Central America, completed questionnaires as part of a larger study on reducing problematic drug and violence behaviours. The majority of participants were in 7th or 8th grade. Participants answered questions about their family environments, attitudes towards violence, experiences of perpetrating dating violence, and experiences of other risk behaviours, such as stealing and physical violence. The researchers analyzed the relationships between these different variables.

### WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

- Social cognitive theory suggests that youth learn how to interact with others by observing others in their environment.
- Healthy communication within the family, in the form of reduced hostility, may play a role in promoting healthy adolescent dating relationships.



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### **WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?**

The authors found a relationship between family communication and adolescent attitudes towards violence, which in turn was related to dating violence perpetration. In particular, youth who were exposed to greater verbal hostility in their families also reported higher levels of dating violence perpetration.

The authors suggest that, in line with social cognitive theory, youth who observe unhealthy communication behaviours (such as verbal hostility) in their families may be particularly at-risk for engaging in unhealthy behaviours in dating relationships.

### **HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?**

This research adds to the body of work that suggests that families play an important role in the development of young people's healthy relationships. This research can be used by program developers and decisionmakers to support the inclusion of families in comprehensive adolescent dating violence prevention efforts.

### **ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS**

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### **KEYWORDS**

dating violence; adolescence; social cognitive theory

### **FULL REFERENCE**

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