

Effects of Dating Matters® on sexual violence and sexual harassment outcomes among middle school youth: A cluster-randomized controlled trial

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Teen dating violence (TDV) – which includes sexual dating violence and sexual harassment – is a significant public health concern facing teenagers. Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships is a multicomponent, comprehensive teen dating violence (TDV) prevention program developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). This program is designed for middle school youth (ages 11-14), the developmental stage in which sexual behavior patterns are just beginning to develop. This program addresses factors associated with TDV such as healthy communication skills, consent education, bullying, dating safely, relationship rights, and getting help. Additionally, Dating Matters is a multi-level intervention that incorporates classroom-delivered components, community-based programs for parents, TDV prevention training for school staff, a youth communications program, and community-level activities. The aim of the current research was to examine the effectiveness of the Dating Matters TDV prevention program relative to an existing TDV program (Safe Dates, an effective school-level program for 8th graders).

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

- Dating Matters is an evidence-based, multi-level TDV prevention strategy for middle school youth. Findings from the current study suggest that a comprehensive prevention model is more effective than a single-level program (Safe Dates) for preventing sexual violence and sexual harassment among middle school students.


WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers collected data from 4 middle schools in high-risk (above average rates of crime and poverty) urban areas in the USA. Schools were randomly assigned to receive either the Dating Matters intervention (22 schools, 1662 students) or the Safe Dates intervention (24 schools, 1639 students). Students in grades 6-8 were surveyed in the fall and spring of each school year from 2012-2016. They completed self-report measures of sexual violence victimization and perpetration and sexual harassment victimization and perpetration.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Overall, the researchers found that Dating Matters (the more comprehensive program) was more effective than Safe Dates in terms of reducing sexual violence and sexual harassment by the end of 8th grade. For example, by the end of 8th grade Dating Matters was associated with a 10% lower risk of sexual harassment perpetration and 13% lower risk of sexual violence perpetration compared to students who received Safe Dates.

Outcomes of Dating Matters varied by sex, such that reductions in sexual violence victimization were lower for females only. For example, by the end of 8th grade Dating Matters was associated with a 13% lower risk of sexual violence victimization for females. [continued...]



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While reductions in sexual harassment victimization were found for both males and females, these effects were also more consistent for females. Overall, these sex differences are consistent with previous research indicating that females are more likely to experience victimization (and thereby benefit more from prevention programming than do males).

Additionally, outcomes of Dating Matters also varied by student cohort. This suggests that some groups of students responded differently to the intervention than others. Future research is needed to understand these effects.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research adds to our understanding of evidence-based prevention programs for TDV. It highlights the importance of considering the multiple contexts in which adolescents develop (i.e., schools, peers, families, communities) and the benefits of incorporating these multiple contexts into TDV prevention programs. Program developers should consider the pros (e.g., more effective) and cons (e.g., costs) of such comprehensive programs.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Sarah DeGue, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Phyllis Holditch-Niolon, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Lianne Fuino Estefan, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Allison J. Tracy, 2M Research, Arlington TX USA

Vi D. Le, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Alana M. Vivolo-Kantor, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Todd D. Little, Institute for Measurement, Methodology, Analysis and Policy, Texas Tech University, TX USA

Natasha E. Latzman, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Andra Tharp, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Kyle M. Lang, Institute for Measurement, Methodology, Analysis and Policy, Texas Tech University, TX USA

Bruce Taylor, NORC at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

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