

Adolescent and Parent Perspectives on Confidentiality After Adolescent Relationship Abuse Disclosure

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Adolescent relationship abuse (ARA) can include a wide range of unhealthy behaviours, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence, that can significantly impact young people's wellbeing. Healthcare best practice guidelines suggest screening for relationship abuse as part of routine adolescent care. If a young person does disclose that they are experiencing relationship abuse, the healthcare professional must decide how to best support the youth, which may include involving a parent. Thus, mandatory reporting requirements aside (which typically only cover sexual and physical abuse), the healthcare professional must weigh the importance of preserving the patient's confidentiality and autonomy, with the potential benefit of notifying a parent who can provide appropriate supports.

This research examined adolescents' and parents' perspectives on whether a healthcare professional should notify parents following an adolescent's disclosure of relationship abuse.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

- In this study, most adolescents and parents found it acceptable to notify parents following a hypothetical disclosure of adolescent relationship abuse.
- Both adolescents and parents were most likely to find it acceptable to notify parents following a disclosure of physical relationship abuse.
- Some youth were less likely to find notification acceptable, including youth with previous sexual activity or experiences of relationship abuse, and those currently in a dating relationship.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

Staff collected data from the emergency departments of two hospitals in the American Midwest. English-speaking adolescents (ages 14 to 18) and their parents who presented to the emergency departments were eligible to participate; they were excluded from participation if their chief complaint was a sexual assault, psychiatric issues, or significant impairment that would impede their participation (e.g., severe illness). 245 youth were approached for the study and 203 agreed to participate. 150 participated along with their parent and 53 participated without a parent.

Adolescents and parents completed a survey. Adolescents completed questions about demographic factors, current dating status, history of ARA, and prior sexual activity. Parents completed questions about demographic factors and their own history of domestic violence.

Both adolescents and parents completed seven items assessing the acceptability of parent notification after a hypothetical ARA disclosure. For adolescents, the question stem read: "If I tell my doctor that my dating partner (like a boyfriend or girlfriend) ever [dating behaviour], is it okay for the doctor to tell my parents?" (The wording was revised as needed for the parent survey.) The items included descriptions of physical, sexual, psychological, and cyber abuse, as well as controlling behaviour, reproductive coercion (e.g., pressuring not to use a condom), and making one feel unsafe.



Adolescent and Parent Perspectives on Confidentiality After Adolescent Relationship Abuse Disclosure

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

For all types of ARA, the majority of adolescents and parents found parent notification to be acceptable following a disclosure to the healthcare professional. The proportion of adolescents who agreed it was acceptable ranged from 63% (for psychological ARA) to 80% (for physical ARA). For all types of ARA, a greater proportion of parents agreed that it was acceptable to notify parents, ranging from 85-89%; as with adolescents, the highest agreement was for physical ARA.

The proportion of adolescents who found parent notification acceptable after ARA disclosure was lower among adolescents who reported previous sexual activity, those with prior ARA victimization, and those currently in a dating relationship.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Healthcare organizations, as well as other organizations that work with youth, can use this research to inform guidelines for supporting youth following disclosures of relationship abuse. Involving a parent may be an effective and acceptable way to ensure that such youth get the support they need. However, some youth may find this prospect uncomfortable or unhelpful for a wide variety of reasons. Healthcare professionals should be able to communicate clearly with youth about how best to involve parents, and equip parents with the resources they need to effectively and nonjudgmentally support their youth.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Jennifer N. Wiebelhaus, M.D., Department of Pediatrics, Children's Mercy, Kansas City, Missouri
Melissa K. Miller, M.D., Division of Emergency Medicine, Children's Mercy, Kansas City, Missouri
Ashley K. Sherman, M.A., Health Service and Outcomes Research, Children's Mercy, Kansas City, Missouri
Michelle L. Pickett, M.D., M.S., Department of Pediatrics, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Jami Jackson, D.O., M.P.H., Division of Emergency Medicine, Children's Mercy, Kansas City, Missouri
Kimberly A. Randell, M.D., M.Sc., Division of Emergency Medicine, Children's Mercy, Kansas City, Missouri

KEYWORDS

adolescent dating violence; parent-child relationships

FULL REFERENCE

Wiebelhaus, J. N., Miller, M. K., Sherman, A. K., Pickett, M. L., Jackson, J., & Randell, K. A. (2021). Adolescent and parent perspectives on confidentiality after adolescent relationship abuse disclosure. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 69*(2), 242-247.