



## Helping Adolescents Develop Healthy Dating Relationships

### An Evidence Summary

Existing research indicates that dating violence is experienced by many adolescents, that it begins early in dating relationships, and that it is associated with many negative outcomes that can last into adulthood. Therefore, there is a need for effective programming focused on helping adolescents learn how to develop healthy dating relationships.

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### Adolescents and Dating

Canadian data suggests that approximately 71% of adolescents report being in a dating relationship by the age of 15. These relationships have the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. Positive outcomes include beneficial effects on academic performance, interpersonal skills (e.g., communication, negotiation, and

empathy), support of future goals, and resilience. Negative outcomes include dating violence, depression, unplanned pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). These outcomes can have long-term impacts, highlighting the importance of education related to establishing healthy relationship skills and patterns in adolescence.

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### Adolescent Dating Violence

Available Canadian statistics suggest that adolescent dating violence is a serious issue. In 2011, 17,436 females between the ages of 15 and 24 years reported an episode of dating violence to police (rate of 898 per 100,000), with another 2,858 males reporting dating violence in the same year (rate of 130 per 100,000). It is important to note that these numbers are underestimates because they only include incidents that are reported to police. Many forms of dating violence are underreported, and others may not be reported at all. American research suggests that approximately one-third of adolescents may experience and/or perpetrate dating violence, including physical and psychological abuse.

Negative outcomes associated with dating violence include physical injuries, mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety), STIs, and unplanned pregnancies. Victims are also more likely to use substances, withdraw from school and other relationships, engage in harmful eating behaviours (e.g., binge eating, vomiting, fasting), and attempt suicide. Experiencing dating violence in adolescent relationships is also associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing violence in future relationships.



**Dating violence** is defined as any intentional physical, sexual, and/or psychological assault on a person by a dating partner. Dating relationships include long-term relationships, one-time events, casual sexual encounters, and ongoing sexual encounters. It is important to note that dating violence can happen to anyone, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or location of residence.

## Risk and Protective Factors for Adolescent Dating Violence

**Risk factors** for adolescent dating violence perpetration and victimization include mental health problems, aggressive thoughts, general violence, alcohol and substance use, risky sexual behaviours, poor relationship and friend quality, poor family quality, demographics (*e.g., biological sex and race*), and the use of aggressive media. Additional risk factors for adolescent dating violence perpetration include poor communication and social skills, poor anger management skills, belief in traditional gender roles, having friends who perpetrate dating violence, being a witness to family violence, and acceptance of the use of violence.

**Protective factors** for dating violence perpetration include strong relationships with parents, cognitive dissonance about dating violence (*i.e., those that committed dating violence realized it was wrong*), empathy, high grade-point average, verbal intelligence (*i.e., the ability to analyze information and solve problems using language-based reasoning*), and feeling connected to school.

## Healthy Dating Relationships Education

Research indicates that enabling adolescents to develop and maintain healthy dating relationships is important for the prevention of abuse and for their short- and long-term well-being. Adolescents need to learn the characteristics of healthy dating relationships, how to develop positive relationship skills, how to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy relationships, and how to find help if they are in an unhealthy relationship. When adolescents understand what the elements of healthy dating relationships are, they are less likely to tolerate unhealthy and potentially abusive relationships.

This education needs to go beyond traditional adolescent dating violence prevention programs that focus on individuals' protection of their own physical and emotional health. It is important that prevention programs focus on educating adolescents about healthy dating relationships, including the following relational skills:

- trying to understand and respect the other person's feelings and needs
- using calm, nonviolent ways to deal with disagreements
- respecting the other person's boundaries
- communicating own feelings and needs clearly and respectfully
- making decisions that are good for oneself in relationships

## Effectiveness of Education Programs

Positive outcomes have been associated with education programs focused on healthy adolescent dating relationships. These outcomes include:

- positive effects on adolescents' attitudes and knowledge related to dating violence (*e.g., less acceptance of dating violence, increases in relationship knowledge*)
- improved skills for conflict resolution
- improved relational skills
- increased awareness of support services
- reduction in violent behaviours

## Characteristics of Effective Programs

Effective prevention efforts tend to focus on teaching adolescents problem-solving, negotiation, and conflict management skills to help them develop healthy relationships. Skill-building components are important, as programs that use role-play, modeling, and rehearsal increase the likelihood of behaviour change. Other characteristics of effective programs include:

- elements that change attitudes toward dating violence
- providing information to combat myths associated with dating violence (*e.g., violence is a sign of love and commitment, the victim is partly or fully responsible for the violence*)
- educating youth about how to balance one's own feelings and rights with the feelings and rights of others
- exploring negative consequences of gender stereotypes
- incorporating peer education, which recognizes the importance of peers in shaping adolescent attitudes
- incorporating male facilitators, particularly when working with male adolescents
- considering factors like developmental level, culture, sexual orientation, and prior dating experience in the program design
- including caregivers in education and prevention strategies as they also influence adolescents' behaviours and attitudes towards dating violence

Social marketing and mass media efforts may help with reinforcing and repeating the messages shared through education programs. Bringing healthy dating relationships education into existing programs can reduce barriers to retention, particularly for high-risk adolescents, and can increase the reach of the education messages. Many of the risk factors for dating violence perpetration are also relevant to other adolescent risk behaviours (*e.g., general violence, substance use, self-harm*).

## Importance of Early Education

In order to be effective in terms of primary prevention, early education and programming are needed before young adolescents begin to date or before the progression of behaviours to more severe forms of violence. Research indicates that the time before dating begins is crucial for moulding healthy attitudes and behaviours, and for building the necessary skills related to dating relationships (*i.e., to make healthy choices before, during, and following a dating relationship*). Due to their increased interest in dating, young adolescents are particularly receptive to messages about relationships, sexuality, and gender. It is important that their motivation to acquire knowledge and skills related to healthy relationships is not decreased by a persistent focus on negative prevention messages (*e.g., the dangers of dating relationships*). For those who are already engaged in dating relationships, such education can better equip them to recognize healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns and to deal with unhealthy relationships.

## Healthy Relationships Education is Important for All Adolescents

Including all adolescents is important, not only for their own education and development, but for that of their peers. Adolescents are more likely to turn to each other for advice and support related to dating violence than to adults, but many adolescents are not prepared for how to offer appropriate advice or support. Including all adolescents in prevention and education programs provides them with the skills they need to intervene in their own relationships and to assist others who may be involved in unhealthy relationships. An additional benefit of this type of education is that it can be carried over to all significant interpersonal relationships (*e.g., family, friends*).

## Conclusion

Adolescent dating violence is a serious issue with the potential for long-lasting consequences. Teaching adolescents how to form healthy relationships, dating and otherwise, provides them with valuable skills that can promote their overall health while helping them to avoid the negative outcomes associated with adolescent dating violence.



## More Information is Available

For more information, including a list of references, please refer to [“Developing Healthy Adolescent Dating Relationships: A Literature Review”](#) (Search 7-535 on [www.skprevention.ca](http://www.skprevention.ca)).

Information about existing online Canadian resources related to this topic can be found in the environmental scan titled [“An Environmental Scan of Canadian Resources Designed to Foster Healthy Adolescent Dating Relationships”](#) (Search 7-532 on [www.skprevention.ca](http://www.skprevention.ca)).

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our goal is **healthy** children

1319 Colony Street, Saskatoon, SK S7N 2Z1  
Bus. 306-651-4300 Fax. 306-651-4301  
[www.skprevention.ca](http://www.skprevention.ca)

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