



## Working with Young Men Who Batter: Current Strategies and New Directions

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In 1995, domestic violence was recognized as one of the foremost public health concerns in the U.S. by Congress. Since 1997, violence committed by adolescents has also received significant attention due, in part, to a number of high profile school shootings (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999). Teen dating violence, however, has received comparably little attention, despite its prevalence and the severity of its impact. Recognizing that this gap exists, researchers and practitioners have gradually begun to focus on adolescent males who perpetrate dating and family violence. As a result, juvenile batterer intervention programs have been developed in several jurisdictions across the United States. These programs attempt to hold young men who batter accountable for their violence and rehabilitate them whenever possible. No evaluations of these programs have been published, or to our knowledge conducted. Moreover, few efforts have been made to collect, summarize, evaluate and disseminate existing program methods or protocol.

This article offers an overview of the nascent juvenile batterer intervention programs. It identifies risk factors for teen dating violence perpetration as described by the literature and considers the utility of these findings, describes efforts to prevent re-offenses by juvenile perpetrators of domestic violence, discusses several shortcomings inherent in post-crisis intervention, and outlines current challenges within the field. In addition, the authors draw upon research from related fields to posit possible future directions for research and intervention efforts.

### Prevalence

A growing body of research indicates that dating and family violence is a leading cause of injury for women and girls. Lifetime prevalence of teen dating violence victimization among girls in the U.S. is estimated to be between 9 and 41% (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary & Cano, 1997; Silverman, Hathaway, Freedner, Aynalem & Tavares, 1999; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1986). Although research in the area of adolescent-to-parent violence is limited, several studies suggest that approximately 10% of adolescents aggress toward their parents each year (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Peek, Fischer & Kidwell, 1985; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). Adolescent male violence against female family members is a concern of many practitioners, and is reported by battered women as frequently coinciding with violence from adult partners (Bancroft & Silverman, in press). Many (e.g. Carlson, 1990; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986) theorize that men who abuse family members provide a powerful model for family violence to adolescent males.

Who are the boys most at risk for abusing and assaulting their dating partners? What can be done to prevent these adolescent batterers from becoming adult domestic violence offenders? While scientific inquiry into these topics is in its infancy, and intervention programs designed to address teen dating violence have yet to be established in most states, initial investigation and program development have taken place in select areas.

### Who are adolescent male perpetrators of dating violence?

The profile of the adolescent male perpetrator of dating violence suggested by the literature is similar to the profile of other juvenile offenders. In short, teen boys who abuse their dating partners are more likely to have experienced child abuse or neglect (McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998; Wolfe, Werkele, Reitzel-Jaffe & Lefebvre, 1998), witnessed domestic violence (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986), and to use alcohol or drugs (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher & Lloyd, 1982) than their non-abusive counterparts. In addition, several studies have established that adolescent males who abuse their dating partners are more likely to have sexist attitudes that support male domination over females (Follingstad, Rutledge, McNeil-Harlings & Polek, 1992; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd & Christopher, 1983; Himelein, 1995; Koss & Dinero, 1989; Koss, Leonard, Beezley & Oros, 1985; Malamuth, Heavey, Barnes & Acker, 1995; Tontodonato & Crew, 1992) and are more likely to associate with peers that support these attitudes (Lavoie, Robitaille & Hebert, 2000; Roscoe & Callahan, 1985).

It is important to note that most research conducted on juvenile perpetrators of domestic violence to date is based on non-representative samples; no studies have utilized samples that would enable generalization to all juvenile perpetrators of dating violence. Therefore, the studies reflect only the profile of those adolescents who come to the attention of researchers—i.e., boys who come into contact with the criminal justice system or who readily admit to perpetrating violence during interviews or surveys. It is possible that there are many adolescent males who perpetrate violence and abuse that don't fit the established profile and will remain undetected by research. Moreover, it is critical to bear in mind that no study has established that any of the risk factors listed above (such as witnessing domestic violence) actually *cause* youth to perpetrate violence. Risk factors only reveal which characteristics or life experiences juvenile perpetrators are likely to share in common. They don't provide us with answers to the question: "What is it that causes the boys to be violent?"

Therefore, developing "profiles" or "prediction tools" based upon existing research is premature and could unfairly label adolescents. Practitioners who attempt to predict which adolescents are most dangerous based on available information run the risk of overestimating dangerousness for certain individuals and failing to identify those who are in fact dangerous. Investigation of resiliency or protective factors, in addition to research on the *level of risk* of individual offenders, may provide practitioners, survivors and policy-makers with more useful information (E. Gondolf, personal communication, June, 2000).

Keeping in mind the limitations of "risk factor" research, we offer the following review of what is known about adolescent males who are violent towards dating partners, female family members and others.

**Parent-to-Child Violence.** Maltreatment of children by parents is a consistent predictor of young males' physically, sexually and verbally abusive behaviors (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998; Wolfe *et al.*, 1998; McCloskey *et al.*, 1995) and later criminal behavior (Viemerroe, 1996). This evidence notwithstanding, it is also recognized that children who are maltreated by parents are not guaranteed to become adolescent or adult offenders; a significant proportion of children from abusive families are non-abusive to intimate partners (Widom, 1989). Adolescent males who are referred to programs for domestic violence perpetration should be screened for parent-to-child maltreatment and provided with services as needed.

**Witnessing Inter-parental Abuse.** Many studies support the contention that young males who witness parental domestic violence are at increased risk for becoming abusive themselves in adult intimate relationships. Through a comprehensive review of family violence literature, Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) found that 88% of studies with adequate comparison groups revealed that witnessing parental violence was a significant predictor of adult violence against a female partner. Childhood observation of inter-parental abuse may also predict the development of attitudes that support violence against women (Silverman & Williamson, 1997; Stith & Farley, 1993). Practi-

tioners are cautioned against approaching all adolescent males who witness family violence as potential offenders. Similarly, the literature does not support an assumption that all adolescent males who perpetrate domestic violence have witnessed inter-parental abuse. Rather, all adolescent males who witness domestic violence must receive appropriate support services and education regarding healthy relationships. All identified juvenile perpetrators of domestic violence should be screened for witnessing inter-parental abuse.

**Substance Use.** Several studies have found that the perpetration of family and dating violence by adolescent males is strongly associated with alcohol consumption (Cate *et al.*, 1982; Foo & Margolin, 1995; Makepeace, 1987; Malik, Sorenson & Aneshensel, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997; Symons, Lin & Gordon, 1998). No research has been conducted that establishes the effect of substance abuse intervention on teen dating violence perpetration rates. Many advocates predict that treating a juvenile perpetrator of domestic violence for substance abuse problems alone will not produce significant change in the perpetration of abusive behavior. Substance use and violence perpetration are often viewed as related, yet distinct, health problems that each require specialized intervention (Bennett, 1997).

**Sexist Attitudes.** Several studies have found that adolescent males who possess attitudes legitimizing violence against female partners are more likely to report being physically violent toward dating partners (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Silverman & Williamson, 1997; Smith, 1990; Stithe & Farley, 1993). Thus, intervention programs that fail to address perpetrators' sexist attitudes may have a minimal effect. To date, there have been no evaluations of adolescent intervention programs that do or do not address sexism, nonetheless, advocates encourage practitioners to include education about sex-role stereotyping, and concepts of masculinity and femininity, in intervention programs on the basis of available research on adolescent attitudes.

**Peer Attitudes.** At least three studies have found that having peers who support violence against

women predicts one's own dating violence behavior (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1993; Silverman & Williamson, 1997). Based on this knowledge, some practitioners believe that encouraging juvenile perpetrators to form new peer relationships with non-violent and non-sexist males may reduce abuse perpetration.

### **Current Methods Of Intervention**

Juvenile batterer intervention programs have emerged in the U.S. over the last decade. Most have developed in relative isolation from one another, despite the fact they often share similar philosophies. They have been developed by courts, survivor advocacy agencies, batterer intervention programs and community-based agencies that serve youth. As a result, the programs differ with regard to structure and methodology. As alternatives or complements to incarceration, such programs offer possible methods to re-educate young men about their relationships and their use of violence. Most juvenile batterer intervention programs utilize a psycho-educational group format and meet weekly for 1-2 hours. Intervention group activities may include discussions of healthy and unhealthy relationships, sex-role stereotyping, coping with anger or rejection, and the effect of alcohol or drug use on one's behavior, among other topics. The atmosphere of groups is neither intimidating nor social; trained staff works to maintain a safe, encouraging, yet serious tone. Group cycles last from 12-52 weeks. Parents receive orientation information regarding the program and, in some communities, are involved in the intervention on an on-going basis. Intervention participants who re-offend may be expelled from the group or asked to re-start it, depending upon the program. In some communities, those who are expelled may face more severe penalties from a probation department or court.

### **Juvenile Batterer Intervention Programs: Challenges and Dilemmas**

Programs for adolescents who batter currently face a number of challenges and dilemmas, as do all new interventions. These challenges include public

**Table 1: Features of Some Juvenile Batterer Intervention Programs**

	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Youth Served Per Year</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>Intervention Component</b>	<b>Program Duration (in weeks)</b>	<b>Referring Entity</b>
Expect Respect Austin, TX	School Based	60	6-12 grade	School groups Individual and Family Available on-site	24	Middle and High Schools
MOVE Youth Program SF, CA	Agency Based	30	12-21	Individual Group Family Siblings	52 minimum	Juvenile Courts
Mass DPH 10 Programs	Mixed	150	13-17	Group	12	Juvenile Courts, Schools and DYS
STEPUP Seattle, WA	Community Centers	30-40		Individual Group Family	24 minimum	Juvenile Courts, CBO's

recognition of teen domestic violence as a phenomenon distinct from generalized violence; a dearth of culturally appropriate interventions and research; and partnering with a juvenile justice system perceived by many to suffer from pervasive racial and class biases.

Recognizing teen batterers: Between 1997-1999, seven incidents of teen-perpetrated domestic violence received national attention in the U.S.—perhaps the most widely-publicized of these events being the shooting in Jonesboro, AK. In the wake of these tragedies, media posed questions about the cause of “youth violence” or “school violence,” but failed to emphasize that in all cases the shooters were male and the intended victims female (Sousa, 1999). In fact, the incidents might have been more appropriately and specifically classified as “violence against women or girls.” An inability to perceive violence perpetrated by adolescent males as similar to domestic violence perpetrated by adults may limit our capacity to alter their behavior.

For many, it may be difficult to acknowledge that boys as young as eight or nine years old participate in “dating” relationships. As a result, in some cases abusive behavior may be dismissed or handled as though it were acceptable rough-housing. (For example, girls and boys may be told that if someone kicks or insults them, it is a sign of affection.) In order to offer victims of abuse consistent and comprehensive protection, and in order to provide young perpetrators with the services and intervention that they need, adults may be required to alter their own definitions of “dating.” Similarly, any incidents involving violence between adolescents should be assessed to determine if, and to what extent, dating or sexism was a motivational factor.

**Culturally appropriate intervention and research.** Although men of color are over-represented in batterer intervention programs, there are few culturally specific intervention strategies and insufficient research on violence in communities of color (Richie, 1998; Williams, 1997). While research does not demonstrate conclusively that culturally specific programs have improved outcomes for adult batterers (Gondolf, 2000), some researchers have found that men of color have higher completion rates when working with staff

of similar ethnic backgrounds (O. Williams, personal communication, September, 2000). It is possible that these results would hold true for adolescent offenders in culturally-specific intervention programs as well. Despite the fact that very few outcome studies of culturally specific batterer intervention programs have been conducted, practitioners have expressed a need for the development, implementation and evaluation of culturally specific models (Carillo & Tello, 1998; Williams, 1997).

**Partnering with the juvenile justice system.** The juvenile justice system has an important role to play in securing safety for victims and holding juvenile batterers accountable. In a number of jurisdictions, law enforcement agencies, probation departments and juvenile courts work with juvenile batterer intervention programs to monitor program compliance, enhance victim safety and to hold juvenile batterers accountable. Much work is still needed across the nation to establish a consistent juvenile justice response to teen dating violence.

There are, however, considerable drawbacks to relying on the juvenile justice system as the primary agency of response to teen dating violence. By nature, the juvenile justice system provides a response only once violence has occurred. Other than the deterrent effect of holding batterers accountable for their violence after the fact, it does not seek to prevent dating violence. There are also significant risks associated with youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. According to Amnesty International, “use of incarceration in the United States Juvenile Justice System is a matter of grave concern because of its inherent risks to the physical and mental integrity of children, and its potential for negative influence rather than rehabilitation.” (Amnesty International, 1998). In addition, recent research demonstrates that the juvenile justice system continues to suffer from pervasive racial bias (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2000). Efforts to respond to teen dating violence in communities of color will be hindered by the perception that the domestic violence movement relies uncritically on what is perceived as a racially biased system.

### **Juvenile Batterer Intervention Programs: New Directions**

As the field of teen dating and family violence intervention becomes more sophisticated, stakeholders are increasingly exploring new strategies, identifying needs and attempting to build on lessons learned in related fields. Examples of these new developments include partnering with schools, drawing on the strengths of ecological approaches to violence, and promoting efforts that attempt to link post-crisis intervention with primary prevention.

**Partnering with school administrators and educators.** While intervention with individual perpetrators of dating or family violence is essential, it is just as critical that social norms that support violence change. Educators have an enormous potential to affect the social environments in their classrooms and in their school-communities. School administrators have the power to design, promote and implement policies and curricular approaches that can significantly affect students' attitudes and behavior. It is important that school personnel receive training on the topic of gender-based violence and are supported when they link existing literature or social studies themes to social norms regarding violence and gender (B. Rosenbluth, personal communication, November, 2000).

**Research.** Creating policy or awarding funding to intervention programs in the absence of evaluation research potentially places victims at continued risk for abuse and may waste resources. It is imperative that long-term follow-up evaluation studies of juvenile intervention programs are conducted and that the results be widely disseminated. Moreover, those who develop programs should base the design of curricula and intervention components on data collected from program participants; optimal interventions will be created if the service population is more fully understood.

**Learning from related research.** The last two decades have seen a proliferation in research and evaluation on violence prevention and intervention. While the bulk of the literature focuses specifically on

youth violence, findings may be applied to dating and domestic violence intervention and prevention. In 1999, the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence evaluated several violence prevention and intervention initiatives. Those that utilize ecological approaches were shown to have high success rates with violent juvenile offenders (Center for Prevention and Study of Violence, 2000). The factors associated with the success of ecological approaches are potentially instructive for the nascent efforts to rehabilitate and hold accountable young men who batter.

Ecological approaches recognize that individuals often reflect the values of their families, communities, and societies, and that "effecting sustained change requires addressing the multiple problems of youth wherever they arise; in the family, the community, the health care and school systems" (Currie, 1998, p.105). Ecological approaches also recognize that treating offenders in isolation of their social environment is a "prescription for failure" (Currie, 1998, p.105). The evidence in favor of ecological approaches is supported by other studies that have found that involvement of the family seems necessary to effect sustained change (Henggeler, Melton, Smith, Hanley & Hutchinson, 1993; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Huesmann & Zelli, 1997), and that community based efforts are more effective than institutional efforts (Tolan *et al.*, 1997).

**Ecological Approaches.** Some adult and youth batterer intervention programs have attempted to integrate ecological principles into batterer intervention programs. Common to some of these approaches is the recognition that each participant serves as an important point of access to the family, community members, including peers, and institutions such as the faith community, schools, other community based agencies, the juvenile and family courts and to youth employment agencies. This access makes it possible to enlist family, community members and institutions in holding perpetrators accountable and ensuring victim safety. In some cases, however, it is acknowledged that involving family members is not always appropriate—the safety of the young men who batter may be jeopardized if abusive parents are included in the approach. Unlike many intervention strategies that work to affect behavior change by focusing on perceived

deficits, ecological approaches emphasize individual and community strengths and build on emerging understandings of individual resiliency and community assets.

In Atlanta, the Men Stopping Violence (MSV) program attempts to affect the social ecology of adult program participants by involving their friends, and on occasions their sons, and by advocating for change across the broad range of institutions with which participants interact (S. Nuriddin, personal communication, April, 2000). Similarly, some juvenile batterer intervention programs have developed models that involve a wide range of stakeholders including city agencies, community based organizations and community members themselves. For instance, the MOVE Youth Program, a juvenile batterer intervention program based in San Francisco, CA, is implementing a model that involves family and community members in teen dating violence prevention (A. Silva, personal communication, May, 2000). In this way, ecological approaches such as those used by MSV and MOVE also serve as important opportunities for engaging in prevention, and in this way connect intervention and prevention efforts.

**The Case for Prevention.** Studies indicate that “punitive, legalistic approaches” are unlikely to have much effect on youth violence unless they are integrated into policies that focus funding and efforts on prevention (Tolan, 2000). Domestic violence prevention campaigns have been pursued in health care settings, in schools and through the media, and show promise in changing attitudes towards the use of violence (Edleson, 2000). Important lessons can be drawn from related fields that have been effective in changing adolescent behaviors and attitudes, for example regarding teen pregnancy prevention and child abuse awareness (Daro & Cohn Donnelly, 2000). Prevention efforts may be enhanced through collaboration with related fields, such as child welfare and youth violence, and by developing connections with a range of agencies that serve youth. These partnerships could include linkages with mentoring programs, employment training sites, arts and recreation programs, rites of passage programs, and literacy and media literacy projects (National Advisory Council on Violence Against Women, 1999).

Since lower education, lower-status jobs, and under-employment are all identified as probable risk factors for the perpetration of violence, effective prevention plans will need to address each of these, and the relationship between these potential risk factors and domestic violence should be further clarified by continuing research (Edleson, 2000; Kaufman Kantor & Jasinski, 1998). Prevention activities should also address peer behaviors and attitudes since these have been shown to affect boys’ choices about whether to use violence (Heise, 1998). Given the contemporary predisposition in favor of intervention and incapacitation, committing resources to prevention will require a shift in policy priorities (Tolan, 2000). Nevertheless, the returns on rigorously designed and well-implemented prevention may be significant in terms of money saved and lives enhanced.

### Conclusion

The paper presented here offers a brief overview of the emerging field of working with adolescent perpetrators of domestic violence. The fact that there exists such a field, embryonic as it may be, is evidence of the increasing attention being paid to the devastating impact that intimate partner and family violence have on the lives of children and youth. While significant challenges remain, work being done to detect, deter and rehabilitate adolescent perpetrators represents an important step towards interrupting intergenerational cycles of violence and enhancing safety for victims.

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## ***In Brief: Working with Young Men Who Batter: Current Strategies and New Directions***

It is widely acknowledged that teen dating violence is a significant public health problem. Prevention campaigns, victim support groups and other victim-oriented programs for teenagers have been developed and evaluated. More recently, researchers and practitioners have gradually begun to focus on adolescent males who perpetrate dating and family violence. As a result, juvenile batterer intervention programs have been developed in several jurisdictions in the United States.

The profile of the adolescent male perpetrator of dating violence suggested by the literature is similar to the profile of other juvenile offenders. In short, teen boys who abuse their dating partners are more likely to have experienced child abuse or neglect (McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998; Wolfe, Werkele, Reitzel-Jaffe & Lefebvre, 1998), witnessed domestic violence (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986), and to use alcohol or drugs (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher & Lloyd, 1982) than their non-abusive counterparts. In addition, several studies have established that adolescent males who abuse their dating partners are more likely to have sexist attitudes that support male domination over females (Follingstad, Rutledge, McNeil-Harlings & Polek, 1992; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd & Christopher, 1983; Himelein, 1995; Koss & Dinero, 1989, Koss, Leonard, Beezley & Oros, 1985; Malamuth, Heavey, Barnes & Acker, 1995; Tontodonato & Crew, 1992) and are more likely to associate with peers that support these attitudes (Lavoie, Robitaille & Hebert, 2000; Roscoe & Callahan, 1985).

Juvenile batterer intervention programs offer an alternative or complement to incarceration, and offer possible methods to re-educate young men about their use of violence. Most juvenile batterer intervention programs utilize a psycho-educational group format and meet weekly for 1-2 hours. Intervention group activities may include discussions of healthy and unhealthy relationships, sex-role stereotyping, coping with anger or rejection, and the effect of alcohol or drug use on one's behavior, among other topics. To our knowledge, no juvenile batterer intervention program has been formally evaluated.

Programs for adolescents who batter currently face a number of challenges and dilemmas, as do all new interventions. These challenges include public recognition of teen domestic violence as a phenomenon distinct from generalized violence; a dearth of culturally appropriate interventions and research; and partnering with a juvenile justice system perceived by many to suffer from pervasive racial and class biases.

Some juvenile batterer intervention programs have attempted to integrate ecological principles into batterer intervention programs. Common to some of these approaches is the recognition that each participant serves as an important point of access to the family, community members, including peers, and institutions such as the faith community, schools, other community based agencies, the juvenile and family courts and to youth employment agencies.

While significant challenges remain, work being done to detect, deter and rehabilitate adolescent perpetrators represents an important step towards interrupting intergenerational cycles of violence and enhancing safety for battered women and girls.