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Teenage Dating Violence

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Abstract

Three studies were undertaken with high school students, unified by the goal of informing prevention programmes in high schools. The first study used a questionnaire to gather information from 373 students about their experiences of emotional, physical and/or sexual violence across heterosexual dating, peer and family relationships. Although girls and boys reported similar rates of all types of violence, the emotional consequences for girls were more adverse, girls were more likely to talk to someone about it and more likely to terminate the relationship. There was a correlation between violence victimisation in dating relationships and in the family. Experiences of peer violence were similar for boys and girls, although girls reported significantly more sexual harassment and boys significantly more physical violence.

The two remaining studies in the research used a discourse analytic approach to examine the talk of students. One study used 12 group interviews in which 101 students were invited to talk about their perceptions of dating relationships and the violence that occurred within them. The key strand in the analysis of this talk was the social construction of masculine and feminine identities. Boys commonly drew on the discourses of naturalness, the sexually driven male and the patriarchal discourse. For girls, the prevailing discourses were the discourse of the body, the discourse of ‘emphasised femininity’ (traditional femininity) and, as with the boys, the patriarchal discourse. The other study involved analysis of 24 individual interviews with girls, who had themselves been in relationships with boyfriends that involved violence. Their stories were commonly threaded with the romantic narrative, but although girls at times positioned themselves within the passivity of romantic discourse and ‘emphasised femininity’, they also positioned themselves in the contradictory discourse of feminism.

The high levels of reported violence in the questionnaire study supported a need for dating violence prevention programmes in schools as well as suggesting specific areas to target within programmes. The group interview study strongly indicated the need to foster alternative constructions of masculinity and femininity and the individual interview study pointed to the need to alert teenagers to the fusion of love and violence through exposing the trappings of romantic discourse.
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