

Teen Center

Teen Dating Violence Technical Assistance Center



Issue Brief

NO. 6 • JULY 2009

The Myth of Mutuality

Studies suggest that as many as one out of ten young people will experience physical abuse in a dating relationship.¹ Teen dating violence is similar to adult dating or domestic violence in many ways – the underlying dynamic of power and control, for example – but it is also unique in critical ways. Among these differences is the perception that teen dating violence is less gendered and more mutual than adult dating violence. Often, however, what appears to be “mutual” violence or abuse is not mutual at all: one teen is the predominant aggressor whose actions are intended to exert power and control over a dating partner, whereas the other teen’s actions are more defensive. The roles within a particular relationship may not always be immediately clear and many teens themselves assign blame for physical violence to both partners without considering the dynamics underlying an abusive relationship. When service providers assume that the violence is mutual, they risk endangering the victim’s physical safety and emotional well-being. Identifying the predominant aggressor is therefore an important step for service providers in assessing a dating violence situation and offering the best help possible to all parties involved.

The Myth that Partners Share Fault in Mutually Violence Teen Relationships

A majority of male and female teens – as well as some service providers – continue to believe that dating violence is mutual, or they blame the victim. Studies have

found that while teens agree that abuse is unacceptable and can recognize abusive behavior, both boys and girls make exceptions for violence based on the context in which it occurs.² Perpetrators and victims frequently point to jealousy to explain why violence happened.³ Unfortunately, they also tend to blame the victim for inspiring feelings of jealousy in her partner, either by flirting with other guys or dressing inappropriately, or they believe that some guys are just violently jealous and cannot choose another way. Abusers and victims themselves blame the victim for violent dating behavior.⁴ They explain the violence by positing that the victim provoked the abuser, that the victim’s character invited violence, and that the victim was too needy. Teens also suggest that peers encourage violent dating behaviors and cite communication problems as another cause. Teenage girls responding to the Rihanna-Chris Brown situation blamed Rihanna for angering Brown, or said that Rihanna probably made up the story.⁵ Others interpreted Rihanna’s and Brown’s reunion as Rihanna’s way of admitting she was at fault.⁶

Observers seek to explain why teens feel the way they do about violence. One explanation is that teens condone violence at a much higher rate than one would expect with 77% of female and 67% of male high school students endorsing some form of sexual coercion.⁷ The scary part of that particular statistic is, of course, that a vast majority of high school girls condone sexual violence when it is girls who are more often the targets of sexual

Understanding the reasons underlying each teen's behavior in a situation of apparently mutual violence will enable you to better identify the predominant aggressor.



coercion. Youth culture experts also posit that today's teenage girls aim to maintain parity with boys and for some girls, that may mean engaging in violence against boys and taking responsibility for initiating or provoking violence.⁸ For some teens, their relative lack of relationship experience leads them to deal with frustrations and problems in the relationship by force rather than healthy communication.⁹

Identifying the Predominant Aggressor

While it may appear that teen dating violence is often mutual in a way that it is not for adults, it is important to understand that the dynamics of power and control are still present in teen's abusive relationships. The presence of these dynamics means that, although it may be more difficult to discern, there is almost always an abuser and a victim in the relationship. Even where both teens engage in physical, verbal, or other forms of abuse, they may have very different motives for doing so – for example, one teen is violent to threaten and intimidate his partner, while another teen is violent in an attempt to defend herself. Understanding and paying attention to the reasons underlying each teen's behavior in a situation of apparently mutual violence will enable you as a service provider to better determine which party is the predominant aggressor. Identifying the predominant aggressor and the victim is necessary to understand what happened in a given incident and in the history of the relationship and is also important in allowing you to provide the best possible resources to the teens.

Identifying the predominant aggressor is not always easy, and it will often require you to ask many questions about the situation, the teens involved, their reactions and feelings, the

history of the relationship, and more. Below are some key questions that can help you in making this determination.

Was one party bigger and stronger than the other?

Looking at the physical sizes of the parties involved may help you to determine which teen is the predominant aggressor. Logically, it makes sense that the partner who is larger and stronger is more likely to have an intimidating presence or more capable of causing physical harm to the other teen. Size, however, may have little to do with the ability of a teen to emotionally abuse her partner. Therefore, while considering the sizes of both teens can be very useful, this alone is not enough.

When asking this question – as well as all of the others below - it is important for providers to remember that the predominant aggressor is not always determined by gender. While it is true that domestic violence is traditionally viewed as a crime perpetrated against women by men – and that significantly more women than men report that they have been raped, physically assaulted, or stalked by an intimate partner – men are also victims of dating violence and females are perpetrators, in both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships.¹⁰ In fact, research suggests less of a gender bias when determining the predominant aggressor in adolescent intimate partner violence.¹¹ A compilation of studies reported that adolescent females perpetrated violence against their partners at rates ranging from 4% to 79%.¹² The researchers hypothesized that the perpetration rates ranged so greatly because the individual studies used different methodologies.¹³ These studies, however, only counted acts of violent behavior and did not examine the reasons why these girls were

violent in their relationships; consequently, the studies overlooked the possibility that many girls acted violently in self-defense (and therefore as a victim, not as the predominant aggressor). What is clear from these statistics, however, is that while gender is a factor, providers must not make immediate assumptions about who is the predominant aggressor in a given relationship based solely on gender.

Was one teen in fear of the other?

Because of the dynamics of power and control that exist in a dating violence relationship, the victim is likely very fearful of his partner. He may appear shy, nervous, or visibly agitated when his partner is present or when discussing his experiences. In talking to the parties, it is important for you as a service provider to try and determine, in an apparently mutual situation, which partner seems afraid and which seem to assert more control.

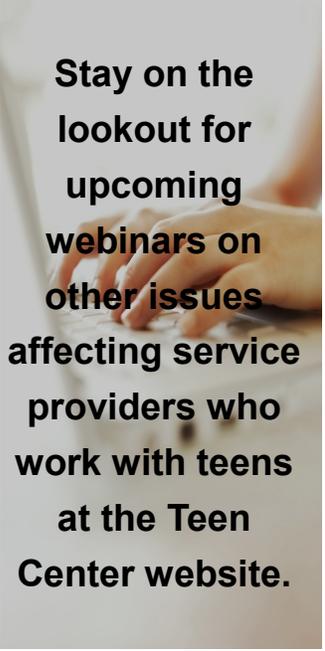
Some studies suggest that emotional responses to and understandings of dating violence may vary by gender. For example, female victims tend to believe that their boyfriends use violence to intimidate and control them while male victims regard their girlfriends' use of violence as provocation. One study found that among a sample of boys who had experienced physical dating violence, over 50% of them laughed it off.¹⁴ Girls, by contrast, experience fear, hurt, and the need to seek protection when faced with physical violence.¹⁵ They also report more psychological stress from being victimized.¹⁶ Providers, however, should also be aware that this may not always be the case, and that boys who experience physical violence from their partners can react similarly. Furthermore,

psychological abuse is common in teen dating violence, and some studies indicate that girls are most often the perpetrators of psychological abuse.¹⁷ The effects of such abuse on boys have not been studied at length, and psychological abuse may not frighten victims in the same way that physical violence frightens and causes physical injuries. It is certainly possible, though, that boys experience feelings of powerlessness, a need to escape, and serious emotional problems similar to those that girls experience from physical abuse. More research is needed in this area, but providers should understand that boys may also have reason to fear their partners.

Did one party escalate the level of violence (for example, respond to a shove by reaching for a weapon)?

Increasing the level of violence can be a strong indicator as to who is the predominant aggressor because it signals a desire to maintain control over the situation. A teen victim who is physically violent with her partner may be resorting to violence as a means of self-defense, yet a teen who takes the violence further likely does so to harm, threaten, or intimidate his partner.

Certain studies that focus exclusively on serious violence indicate that, in this context, victims are far more likely to be female while perpetrators are much more likely to be male.¹⁸ Girls are also significantly more likely to suffer injuries from interpersonal violence.¹⁹ On the other hand, female perpetrators of abuse are more likely to yell, threaten to hurt themselves, pinch, slap, scratch, or kick their partners.²⁰ Again, while this research provides useful information, it is important to remember that these gender-based differences do not always



Stay on the lookout for upcoming webinars on other issues affecting service providers who work with teens at the Teen Center website.

Identifying the predominant aggressor and the victim is important in allowing you to provide the best possible resources to teens.

hold true. It is therefore essential that service providers take the time to discuss the situation thoroughly with both parties. In addition to trying to understand what happened in a particular incident, it is also very important that providers ask about the history of abuse in the relationship. The parties' history of violence – both prior incidences of abuse within the relationship, as well as the parties' history of violence with other people, if applicable – are critical to understanding the dynamics of a given relationship.

Which teen appears to be in greater danger of suffering adverse physical or emotional consequences?

In order to help you determine an answer to this question, you must ask questions of both parties as well as assess the circumstances of the situation that may offer insight into the potential consequences to the parties. For example, consider the threats made by each party against the other, and which party would be worse off if those threats were carried out. Also consider the injuries that each party sustained and which party appears to have a greater capacity to injure the other, as well as the emotional states of the parties and their potential mental health needs.

As service providers intervening in or responding to a dating violence situation, one of your most important roles is to help ensure the safety of the parties involved. In order to best accomplish this, it is important that you take steps to assess the immediate needs of the teens. If it is apparent that one (or even both) of the teen's physical safety is threatened, help him relocate to a place where he will not be in danger and can get any necessary medical care. Also, understand that many teen victims of dating violence consequently suffer from emotional, psychological, and behavioral issues that should be addressed.

Strategies for Responding

Given that many teens incorrectly believe that dating violence is mutual even when there is a clear aggressor for resolution, evaluate the options, and come to an

and the victim sustains serious injuries – as is the case with Brown and Rihanna – prevention strategies can focus on teaching teens to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner.²¹ Teens sometimes feel that they can't control themselves when they're very angry. Others view physical fights as the only way to resolve a conflict without losing face. Experts recommend certain steps toward conflict resolution including the following: agree to resolve the issue non-violently, ask each party to listen to the other's side of the story and then share his or her own perspective, identify common interests, brainstorm options for resolution, and come to an agreement. While training and peer mediation programs exist, teens can practice these methods of resolving conflict on their own. Teens should also understand that the goal of conflict-resolution is not merely to avoid using violence. Rather, the goal is to utilize mutual respect through listening and open communication forms the foundation for this kind of conflict-resolution. Teaching teens to conduct healthy relationship practices early on can help to foment future healthy relationships.²²

It is, however, essential to understand and to communicate to teens that both partners are not mutually responsible for the violence or abuse in a dating violence relationship, but rather that such relationships at their core are about one partner exerting power and control over the other. When responding to a dating violence incident, determining the predominant aggressor is essential to communicating to the teens involved that abusive behavior will not be tolerated, that perpetrators must be held accountable, and that victims are not at fault or deserving of the abuse. Responding to victims requires an open ear and an ability to refrain from judging either the victim or the abuser. Criticizing the abuser can make the victim feel embarrassed for maintaining a relationship with an abusive person and can also inspire feelings of defensiveness since the victim probably retains good feelings toward the abusive partner. Instead of focusing on the abuser's character, the provider should stress that violent behavior is not normal or acceptable. It's important to reassure the victim that reporting abuse is a good thing and to make sure he or she is comfortable doing so. Males and females should recog-

nize that physical, psychological, and emotional abuse are serious issues and that it is okay to report the abuse and to get help. On the other hand, if you suspect that someone might be an abuser, confronting the teen about his or her behavior is appropriate. Before doing so however, you should have specific examples of inappropriate behavior in mind. Listen, but do not let the abuser make excuses for the abusive behavior. Let them know that you care, but that the behavior is harmful.

Understanding the myth of mutuality and the importance of determining the predominant aggressor will help you to provide better and more effective services to teens in abusive relationships – from making appropriate referrals, to safety planning with victims, to communicating to all teens that you take seriously their relationships and their experiences of dating violence.

Teen Center
202.824.0707
teencenter@breakthecycle.org
www.breakthecycle.org

This project was supported by Grant No. 2007-TA-AX-K024 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this program are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

Notes

¹ Carrie Mulford and Peggy Girodano, "Teen Dating Violence: A Closer Look at Adolescent Romantic Relationships," *National Institute of Justice* No. 261, available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/261/teen-dating-violence.htm>.

² Colleen Gallopin and Laila Leigh, "Teen Perceptions of Domestic Violence, Help-Seeking, and the Rule of Schools," *The Prevention Researcher*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Feb. 2009.

³ Francine Lavoie, Line Robitaille, and Martine Hebert, "Teen Dating Relationships and Aggression," Universite Laval, *Violence Against Women*, Sage Publ., Vol. 6, No. 1, Jan. 2000, 6-36.

⁴ "Teen Dating Violence Prevention & Recommendations," American Bar Association & U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2006, available at <http://www.abanet.org/publiced/teendating.shtml>.

⁵ Jan Hoffman, "Teenage Girls Stand by Their Man," *New York Times*, March 18, 2009.

⁶ Id.

⁷ "Teen Dating Violence Prevention & Recommendations," citing M. Jackson, F. Cram, *Journal of Family Violence* (2000).

⁸ Hoffman, "Teenage Girls Stand by Their Man."

⁹ Mulford and Giordano, "Teen Dating Violence: A Closer Look at Adolescent Romantic Relationships."

¹⁰ Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, "Prevalence and Consequences of Male-to-female and Female-to-male Intimate Partner Violence As Measured by the National Violence Against Women Survey," *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 142-161 (2000).

¹¹ Mulford and Giordano, "Teen Dating Violence: A Closer Look at Adolescent Romantic Relationships."

¹² Jessica R. Williams, Reem M. Ghandour, and Joan E. Kub, "Female Perpetration of Violence in Heterosexual Intimate Relationships: Adolescence Through Adulthood," *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 9, 277 (2008).

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Lavoie, Robitaille, and Hebert, "Teen Dating Relationships and Aggression."

¹⁵ Ernest N. Jouriles, Cora Platt, and Renee McDonald, "Violence in Adolescent Dating Relationships," *The Prevention Researcher*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Feb. 2009.

¹⁶ Id.

¹⁷ Williams, Ghandour, and Kub, "Female Perpetration of Violence in Heterosexual Intimate Relationships: Adolescence Through Adulthood."

¹⁸ Heather A. Sears et al., "If It Hurts You, Then It Is Not a Joke: Adolescents' Ideas About Girls' and Boys' Use and Experience of Abusive Behavior in Dating Relationships," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Sage Pub. 21, 1191 (2006).

¹⁹ Antoinette Davis, "Interpersonal and Physical Dating Violence among Teens," *Focus*, National Council on Crime and Delinquency, Sept. 2008, citing Tjaden and Thoennes.

²⁰ "Teen Dating Violence Prevention & Recommendations."

²¹ "How Health Care Practitioners Can Help Prevent Dating Violence," National Youth Violence Prevention Center, available at <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/faq/prosprevdate.asp>.

²² "Understanding Teen Dating Abuse: Fact Sheet," Center for Disease Control, 2006.