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# What is Love?: A Needs Assessment to Identify a Relevant Teen Dating Violence Education Curriculum for a High School

Nicole Pina

## Introduction

Adolescence is the time of life when significant romantic relationships are first beginning to develop. A recent survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>1</sup> found that 73.9% of high school students reported involvement in a romantic relationship in the preceding twelve months. One in three teenagers experience verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse from a dating partner and dating violence appears to be the most common form of youth violence.<sup>2</sup> There are many devastating short-term effects of dating violence that negatively impact the physical, psychological, emotional, behavioral, and social functioning of teen victims.

There is strong evidence that adolescents involved in dating violence are at a higher risk of further violence in future relationships and intimate partner violence escalates over time.<sup>3</sup> Attitudes and ideas concerning relationship behaviors and dating are being formed during an adolescent's first experiences with intimate relationships. Statewide statistics are consistent with nationwide numbers of teens experiencing violence in intimate partner relationships. Among California's 11th grade students, 8.2% reported being physically hit, slapped, or physically hit on purpose by their partner in the last twelve months.<sup>4</sup> Among high school students in Humboldt County, 5.9% reported as having experienced dating violence in the past year.<sup>5</sup> It can be speculated that these numbers are an underestimate of the actual numbers of teens who will experience violence from a partner due to lack of education about what behaviors can be considered abuse, fear of punishment from family, or social isolation from peers.

Schools provide an excellent venue for dating violence prevention programs since a large percentage of this age group can be reached in one location. Schools are also a place where many teens will meet and spend time with their friends and dating partners. Peer relationships take on a much greater importance during adolescence as they continue to separate themselves from parents and establish independence as developing adults. The social norms of a peer group can either encourage abusive relationships and violence (i.e. by the blind acceptance of rigid gender stereotypes) or they can encourage healthy relationships and peer support.<sup>6</sup>

This project is a needs assessment and recommendation of a peer education curriculum that helps to prevent teen dating violence through education and peer mentoring. Teenagers are far more likely to reach out to their peers for feedback and advice than to their parents, teachers, or other adults. For teen dating violence programs to be truly effective, they have to empower teenagers to become leaders and role models in their communities. Adolescents have to be provided the tools, education, and encouragement to take a stand against dating violence and assault and to provide positive peer support. High school students, particularly older ones, demonstrate a clear desire to step into adult roles and responsibilities and are often ready to embrace opportunities to become effective leaders in their community.

## Review of Literature

Many school-based programs aimed at preventing teen dating violence exist and show positive long-term impacts.<sup>7</sup> Many of the programs implemented for older youth focus on teaching individual students healthy dating relationship skills. Educational programs are crucial because of the prevalence and impacts of teen dating violence. Exact numbers are impossible to determine, but estimates of teen dating violence range anywhere between 21-45%.<sup>8</sup> Adolescents who experience intimate partner violence may run the highest risk of being abused or committing abuse later in life.

Mid-adolescence is a critical time to educate youth about healthy expectations and boundaries in intimate partner relationships.<sup>9</sup> Young people in this age range may not identify certain behaviors as dating violence, such as jealousy or controlling actions of a significant other. The norms, beliefs, and attitudes of a teen's peer group about dating have a huge influence on an adolescent when they have intimate relationships. Some forms of verbal and emotional abuse may be considered accepted by a teen's peer group. The peer group tends to set the social rules of dating among this age group and may be the most strategic inlet to spread information and give advice to youth.<sup>10</sup>

The *Expect Respect* program began when school counselors recognized the need for services for girls in abusive relationships.<sup>11</sup> The program had to be adapted from previous work with adult battered women to fit the unique needs of adolescents. A major consideration in the restructuring of the program was the impact of peer relationships on romantic relationships. The program addresses risk factors that may be associated with teen dating violence, such as unhealthy gender norms that promote male dominance, acceptance and justification of violence among peers, negative role models, trauma, and lack of social skills.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the program demonstrated an increase in healthy conflict resolution behaviors among participants over the course of the intervention.<sup>12</sup> The study of the *Expect Respect* program showed that among the support group participants, there is a subgroup that already experience or perpetrate violence in their relationships. The subgroup of teens that had already experienced a significant reported significantly less victimization and perpetration, suggesting that they received the most benefit from the ongoing emotional support and positive peer relationships.

According to Weisz and Black<sup>13</sup>, agency directors and staff who have implemented peer education for teen dating violence prevention have witnessed distinct advantages to having peer role models. Young people can convey information and communicate the message using the language of their peers. Youth are far more likely to turn to peers for advice and help when experiencing dating violence. Peer educators are far more accessible than professional presenters and increase the number of students that can be reached. Peer education and leadership programs also empower students by teaching better communication and relationship skills.

The *Youth Advisory Committee* is a school-based youth-driven teen dating violence prevention project in rural Wisconsin.<sup>14</sup> The primary objectives are to offer students an opportunity to plan educational presentations and activities, develop awareness of unhealthy gender norms that promote violence, identify positive coping skills, and promote healthy relationships in their environment. Another goal of the *Youth Advisory Committee* class is to increase appropriate responses when someone is speaking in a sexist or violent way.<sup>15</sup> Teaching teens to respond when a friend confides that they are experiencing intimate partner abuse is also critical since teens mostly turn to other teens for help.<sup>16</sup> Common barriers to seeking help from adults were fears of punishment from their parents or involvement with school authorities or law enforcement. Programs need to provide adequate training and assistance to adolescents who

are put into these situations.<sup>17</sup>

Although putting youth in leadership positions is empowering, respects their capabilities and talents, and makes the program more relevant to its intended audience, there are formidable challenges involved in running youth-driven teen dating violence prevention projects.<sup>18</sup> Although teens may offer tremendous enthusiasm and energy to the project, they may also bring their own troubling issues that require a great deal of support from adults. Many of the peer educators in the evaluated programs had experienced violence themselves and had difficulties presenting the sensitive subject material.<sup>19</sup> According to Weisz & Black<sup>20</sup>, programs seemed to address this concern by adequately screening the peer educators beforehand and providing very close supervision. Training of peer leaders has to be sufficient and closely monitored. Inadequate training of peer leaders results in peer educators who feel incompetent or who run the risk of providing limited, or even harmful, knowledge to their peers.

Cultural norms and beliefs that accept violence in intimate relationships and model relationships based on power and control are a major risk factor that increases teens' vulnerability to dating violence.<sup>21</sup> Risk factors permeate all levels of a youth's social environment and come from their home, community, school, and peer group. Prevention efforts must be addressed from an ecological perspective to address all levels that influence youth dating attitudes and behaviors. The goals of the Expect Respect program and youth-driven school-based teen dating violence prevention programs are to change the social norms about dating relationships on all environmental levels, develop teen leadership, create a positive and respectful school environment, provide support for at-risk students, and teach skills for healthy relationships. Another benefit to encouraging youth participation and leadership in these programs is youth can provide meaning relevant to their own ethnicity and culture. This includes not just ethnic culture, but also the influence of popular youth culture.

Peer education programs are considered a cutting edge component of school-based teen dating violence prevention programs and an effective way to keep program content fresh and relevant to diverse communities of youth.<sup>22</sup> The programs that demonstrated the highest success in meeting their goals provided curriculum across multiple sessions. Despite the challenge of providing sufficient resources to conduct peer education and offering adequate training and support for peer educators, most teen dating violence prevention programs are likely to include peer education components in the future. Peer education and leadership has been shown to be empowering, respectful of youth as agents of change, and a way to keep information relevant to its intended audience.

## **Methods**

### *Overview*

The purpose of this project is to conduct a needs assessment and recommend a curriculum for teen dating violence awareness and education that is informed by scholarly literature, input from professionals working directly with youth, and perspectives from the age group being targeted. This section is organized to describe the population served, information and materials needed to create the curriculum, project methods, relational accountability. This section ends with a description of the limitations of the project and ethical considerations.

### *Population Served*

The population served by this project consists of an average of 1,200 students who attend a local high school. The curriculum will be targeted towards 9th grade students attending health class, but may also include older students outside of class. The staff who are intended to use the curriculum will be teachers, school counselors, or interns who are interested in educating teens about healthy intimate

relationships and will continue to develop a relationship with the students throughout the school year. Several teachers and school staff have expressed an interest in implementing the project in their direct work with high school students and creating a safe space to open dialogue about relationships and dating violence

### *Overview of Information and Materials Needed*

This section describes the information and materials used to develop the project. The curriculum recommended aims to educate high school youth about intimate partner abuse, the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and how to support peers who may be experiencing dating abuse.

The recommended curriculum was informed by the interview process, data from the youth focus group, scholarly literature, and my experience working with high school age youth, and experts in the field. The interview process and the data from the focus group directly informed what was to be the focus for the content based on desired outcomes.

### *Project Methods, Relational Accountability*

Data were gathered from professionals (n=6) in the community who have worked with clients and systems serving youth and survivors of intimate partner violence through interviews. Data was also gathered from teens (n=22) that participated in a focus group. I was relationally accountable to the community by using the results to provide recommendations for resources and a curriculum for use in the high school health class and by incorporating client (high school age youth) feedback into the development of the curriculum.

Professional interviewees were selected for interviews via expert sampling. Interview questions I designed were based on open-ended questions regarding education about the topic to youth and young adults. Interview length averaged thirty minutes. The professional interviewees were allowed to share answers in an unstructured format to create an opportunity to give feedback based on their personal and professional backgrounds. The focus group youth were recruited from a high school psychology class. The focus group had a nearly equal balance of males and females. The youth were asked a series of open-ended questions based on the topic. The interviews and the focus group were recorded by hand and all information was later transcribed to an electronic format.

Analysis of the interview and focus group data results employed a general inductive approach (GIA)<sup>23</sup> to analyzing qualitative data.<sup>24</sup> I read through the interview and focus group question data and identified major themes that emerged in the answers. I created a chart with major themes and placed shorter descriptive answers from each interview or the focus group underneath the topic. I looked for overall patterns, but also took note of differences between the professional interviews and the teen focus group answers. During this process, I also identified key quotes that could be helpful in the curriculum development.

### *Ethical Considerations*

An ethical consideration to take into account was working with a vulnerable population. Since I held a focus group with minors, I had to receive parental consent forms for participation. I also had to provide safeguards in the case that the minors might experience distress with the subject matter. All participants were advised that the focus group was voluntary at all times and they could debrief with a school counselor if they needed. The professional interview questions were not of a personal nature, and did not cause any distress for the interviewees.

The benefits of this project will be the recommendation of a healthy relationships and teen dat-

ing violence prevention curriculum that will be implemented in a local school. The potential risks were that youth participants might have been distressed by subject matter involved in the focus group and potentially breach confidentiality of personal information. I was unable to guarantee confidentiality for students who participate in the focus group because their peers will be present and I am unable to control what is said outside of the focus group.

For the purposes of this project, I knew the identity of the professional participants, but nobody else did. The participants of the focus group knew each other beforehand, but no identifying information was used in recording the data. The data made publicly available via this report are included in a summarized format without any identifying information. Data from the interviews and the focus group were maintained until the project was completed. Data were recorded via written notes during interviews and stored in a locked cabinet within a locked room. The data were then transcribed into a computer, at which point the written form was destroyed. After the project was completed, the electronic data were deleted from the computer storage.

### *Results*

Six professionals (n=6) who work or have previously worked with educating youth about intimate partner violence and dating were interviewed for their insight and perspectives regarding effective education, awareness, and prevention of teen dating violence. All of the professional interviewees were asked the same questions initially, but were prompted to provide more information based on their specific experience and background. The focus group at the high school consisted of 22 (n=22) youth between the ages of 15 and 18. The questions asked in the focus group differed from the questions asked of the professionals. The questions in the focus group were geared towards the adolescent participants' personal experiences and attitudes towards intimate partner relationships. All participants stayed from beginning to end of group and interviews.

The data collected from both the professional interviews and the focus group varied in perspective, but some common themes were identified in the analysis of both the focus group answers and the answers from the professional interviews. Common themes included strong attachment and loyalty to peer groups, the need for multilevel approaches to dating violence awareness with teens, the normalization of unhealthy gender role stereotypes and unhealthy relationship dynamics as portrayed in the media, heavy significance of social media behavior in teen relationships, and learned relationship behaviors from family.

### *Peer Loyalty*

Adolescents are extremely loyal to friend groups and the peer-to-peer model is most effective when utilizing the friend group. Results from the focus group and the professional interviews emphasized a strong loyalty to friends during adolescence and the need for a genuine relationship to already exist for a teen to trust someone for support when experiencing intimate partner abuse. Peers are more accessible, more relatable, and more easily accessed through social media and everyday life than most adults in an adolescent's life. One teen expressed during the focus group that "my responsibility as their friend is to let them know I can help." Peer check programs that teach adolescents skills to support friends have demonstrated success with this age group.

### *Multilevel Approaches*

Three of the professionals interviewed stressed that one time trainings are not as effective as building trusting relationships with teens and teaching teens support methods that they can use with their peers. Trainings were not effective unless the concepts were applied and the students were engaged with

ongoing dialogue and receive messages from multiple sources. Role playing, art, group discussions, peer mentoring, and social media can all be used to educate high schools students about dating violence. One professional interviewed stated that teens and adults needed to “keep the conversation going.

### *Media Portrayal*

Unhealthy relationship behaviors and gender role stereotypes are often normalized in the media. Media shows examples of relationships that frequently depict dominant men and submissive women roles, normalize cheating and distrust for an intimate partner, and glorify sex as the most important component of a relationship. “Everyone cheats and you can’t trust your partner,” one high school student described most representations of relationships in movies and television. Some of the teens in the focus group expressed that media often shows unrealistic examples of relationships, which are often polarized as really good or really bad.

### *Digital Technology*

Digital technology plays a significant role in dating abuse among teens. Social media outlets are a new venue widely used by teens that can also be used in verbal and psychological abuse or as a source of intimidation. Two professionals interviewed strongly suggested teaching teens about safety tips surrounding social media. “Sexting”, the use of “snap chat” to send photos that disappear in 30 seconds, and social networking sites were all mentioned in the teen focus group. One teen mentioned that their friends may not be aware that calling or texting an intimate partner constantly, breaking into their email or Facebook account, or using nude photos on social media as blackmail could be considered abuse.

### *Influence of Family*

Family role models impact an adolescent’s experience of intimate partner violence and views on intimate relationships. The professionals interviewed and the teens in the focus group agreed that an adolescent’s modeling of intimate relationships from family members shapes their opinions, but had slightly different views on the matter. The professionals interviewed felt that teens often mimicked the relationship behaviors of their family members, particularly parents, and were also deeply impacted by cultural backgrounds. When asked about the role of family in shaping their views regarding intimate relationships, some of the teens participating in the focus group expressed those teens may mimic their parents’ relationship dynamics or be influenced to be different than their family. A few of the teens expressed how their family’s experience and views might not be helpful if their own relationships are unhealthy “We can be positively and negatively influenced by that,” said one teen.

### *Discussion*

The results from the adolescent focus group and the professional interviews supported findings from peer reviewed research that teen dating violence education has to engage youth on multiple levels in order to be effective and peers are the most accessible forms of support in instances of dating abuse.<sup>25</sup> Given my current and previous work experience with adolescents, I was not surprised by the data results that strongly emphasized building relationships with teens and using their existing social network as a support system for preventing and intervening in adolescent intimate partner abuse.

I was unable to find peer reviewed research that spoke extensively about the use of digital technology in teen dating abuse, but believe this will be a topic that continues to gain more attention as the popularity of social networking sites continues to grow. I had a difficult time finding peer reviewed literature on peer mentoring for teen victims of intimate partner violence and only one of the professionals I interviewed had experience training young adults to support their friends who may be experience dating abuse.

A significant limitation I identified with this project was the relatively small sample size of students who participated in the focus group. The students were older high school age, primarily Caucasian descent, may have already had experience speaking about topics such as relationships in the psychology class and may not have accurately represented opinions of the majority of the high school population. It is impossible to know if the students may have shared more personal information or opinions regarding intimate partner relationships and dating violence in private or anonymously. In the future, I may consider anonymous surveys to allow a more private means to communicate answers to similar sensitive topics and to gather data from a larger number of participants.

Another limitation was the professionals' lack of direct experience working with the particular population of high school students for this project. Some of the professionals who agreed to be interviewed worked primarily with adolescents from different economic and/or ethnic backgrounds than the high school chosen for this project, which may inform their perspective differently than professionals working closely with a community similar to the population of the needs assessment. I may choose to only interview adults who work directly with the population served by the research in the future.

The curriculum itself is limited by what it can address, as it is an attempt to share a large amount of information on a broad topic in only two to three sessions. This topic would benefit from further discussion and rapport building with adults so high school students have a safe venue to share about their relationship experiences and how to support peers. A teacher or counselor who will be a consistent adult throughout the duration of their stay at the high school should facilitate the curriculum. The curriculum will also provide youth with other resources for more information and help.

Any curriculum would have to adapt to diverse cultures and backgrounds if used in a different school with a different population. The recommended curriculum may be used in a health class and its use will be at the discretion of the teacher. Parental permission may also be required for students to participate.

The data was analyzed using the general inductive approach (GIA) and which was used to inform the recommendation for an appropriate teen dating violence curriculum for use at the high school.<sup>26</sup> The curriculum I chose to recommend for the high school is a program called *Love is Not Abuse: A Teen Dating Violence and Abuse Prevention Curriculum High School Edition*.<sup>27</sup> The results from the needs assessment showed a need for multilevel approaches to actively engage teens in the educational material. I chose this curriculum since it provides role plays and other interactive lessons to teach high school students about teen dating violence.

Peer loyalty is a strength among this age group and a tool to prevent teen dating violence. The recommended curriculum teaches youth how a bystander can help in situations where they are a witness to dating abuse. There are tools for the educator to help establish a peer educator group in the school. Interactive lessons encourage group discussions and critical thinking about how media and family influence young people's attitudes towards intimate partner relationships. There is also a section dedicated to the use of digital technology, such as social media and text messaging, in abusive relationships. This section also teaches safety tips for social media and digital technology in adolescent relationships.

A similar needs assessment for awareness, education, and prevention of teen dating violence can be done with any high school. From my experience doing a needs assessment with the adolescents in this particular high school, the culture of the school and the demographics of the students have a strong impact on their experience of intimate relationships and dating abuse. Even using a curriculum already developed must be adapted based on the culture of the students, particularly when discussing the influence of family on attitudes towards relationships.

The community partner, school crisis counselor, and school health teacher were particularly interested in this project to directly benefit the students of the high school since a curriculum for teen dating violence education was not currently being used and there was a noticeable need. I am very hopeful that the health teacher, crisis counselor, and/or a future social work intern at the school will use the recommended curriculum next year. The recommended curriculum is very comprehensive and the teacher, counselor, and/or intern will likely have to choose the most beneficial activities and modules to fit time constraints of teaching in the classroom.

Group dynamics and the way that the group is facilitated, will play a large role in how the curriculum is implemented. This consideration was addressed by forming relationships with those staff that are likely to promote the use of the curriculum in the future. These staff members are aware of the value of intimate partner abuse education for high school youth, and they had expressed a desire to implement the curriculum in a respectful and impactful way.

#### About the Author

*One of Nicole's strongest motivations is to serve and advocate for people whose voice, needs, and goals need support. She has a strong calling to work with youth and collaborating with them to participate in community building programs and activities that help their own social and physical environments flourish. She has consistently maintained a dedication to helping the people she meets reach their potential and have greater faith in their own strengths and unique gifts, despite the obstacles each individual has survived. She would like to thank Jennifer Maguire, MSW, PhD., Marissa O'Neill, MSW, PhD., Jack Bareilles, Eileen Klima for their help on this project. Nicole can be contacted about her research at morningglory8282@gmail.com.*

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