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Governance Brief

Promoting Healthy Relationships for Adolescents: Board Policy Considerations

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Adolescence is a significant time of rapid physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. It is also a time when students begin to develop a growing interest in and capacity for forming positive relationships, including relationships of a romantic or intimate nature. In one recent study, 75% of seventh grade students surveyed report having a boyfriend or girlfriend at some point.¹

While the social and emotional skills for safe and respectful relationships should be cultivated in an age-appropriate manner beginning in kindergarten, specific attention is needed in the middle and high school years to build students' skills in dating relationships. Healthy relationship skills developed during adolescence form the foundation for a lifetime of safe and respectful relationships.

Unfortunately, adolescent dating abuse is all too common among students and on school grounds. Governing boards play a critical role in ensuring that the schools in their community are safe and supportive learning environments where students are protected from dating abuse and its long-lasting effects on education and health outcomes.

This governance brief focuses on efforts to support healthy relationships, prevent adolescent dating abuse, and respond appropriately when dating abuse occurs. The goal is to promote healthy relationship skills and prevent dating abuse from occurring in the first place.

What is adolescent dating abuse?

Adolescent dating abuse, sometimes referred to as teen dating violence, adolescent relationship abuse, or relational violence, is verbal, physical, emotional, sexual or technological conduct by a person to harm, threaten, intimidate or control a dating partner, re-

gardless of whether that relationship is continuing or has concluded. The number of interactions between the individuals involved is insignificant.²

Examples include:

- » **Verbal:** threats to the partner or his/her family, put-downs, yelling or name-calling
- » **Physical:** hitting, hair-pulling, slapping, punching, pinching or shoving
- » **Emotional:** telling the partner how to dress, expressing a high degree of jealousy, stalking, calling or texting frequently to keep track of a partner
- » **Sexual:** forcing the partner to have unwanted sex, touching or kissing when the partner does not want to, not allowing the partner to use birth control
- » **Technological:** unwanted, repeated calls or text messages, non-consensual access to email, social networking accounts, texts or cell phone call logs, pressuring for or disseminating private or embarrassing pictures, videos or other personal information

The term dating partner refers to a person, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, who is involved in a relationship with another person, where the relationship is primarily characterized by social contact of a romantic or intimate nature, whether casual, serious, short term, long term, or as otherwise defined by either person.³

Extent and nature of the problem

Adolescent dating abuse affects significant numbers of female and male students. Reporting on their dating relationships during the 12 months prior to a recent

nationwide survey, a little more than 10% of those surveyed said they had been hit, slammed into something or injured with an object or weapon on purpose by someone they were dating or going out with one or more times. About the same amount reported they had been kissed, touched or physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to by someone they were dating or going out with one or more times.⁴ A respected body of research reveals that adolescent dating abuse is widespread, including that:

- » About one in three U.S. teens ages 14 to 20 have experienced dating abuse and about the same number say they have committed dating abuse themselves.⁵
- » Close to one in ten high school students report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the 12 months surveyed.⁶
- » One in four adolescents reports verbal, emotional, physical or sexual dating abuse each year.⁷
- » While dating abuse can affect any member of the school community, girls typically face disproportionate rates of abuse.⁸
- » Of those who have ever experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, in many cases the first incident occurred between 11 and 17 years of age.⁹
- » Nationwide, 12% of high school girls have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to.¹⁰
- » Across studies, 15-40% of youth report perpetrating some forms of violence toward a dating partner.¹¹
- » A 2009 study of sixth grade students found that 25% thought it was acceptable for boys to hit their girlfriends. More than one-fourth of the boys with girlfriends said they had been physically aggressive (punching, slapping) toward her.¹²
- » Perpetrating dating abuse in adolescence increases the risk of perpetrating violence toward a partner in adulthood.¹³

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens are at greater risk of dating abuse than their heterosexual peers. Transgender teens are especially vulnerable. In one study:

- » 43% of LGBT teens reported experiencing physical dating violence, compared to 29% of heterosexual youth
- » 59% of LGBT teens reported emotional abuse, compared to 46% of heterosexual youth
- » 37% reported digital abuse and harassment, compared to 26% of heterosexual youth
- » 23% reported sexual coercion, compared to 12% of heterosexual youth¹⁴

Technology plays an important role in dating relationships, shaping issues related to privacy and autonomy.¹⁵ In fact, one in four middle and high school students reports being abused or harassed online or through texts by his/her partner.¹⁶

How does adolescent dating abuse affect our schools?

Adolescent dating abuse can have a serious impact on schools. Dating abuse incidents threaten the safety of students and staff, distract students from learning and compromise the school climate. Nearly half of students who experience dating violence have reported that some of the abuse took place on school grounds.¹⁷ Even students that are not victims of abuse are affected, as witnessing dating abuse has been associated with decreased school attendance and academic performance.¹⁸ The connection to academics is dramatic with 20% of students with mostly D and F grades having engaged in dating violence in the last year, while only 6% of students with mostly A's have engaged in dating violence.¹⁹

Teens who have experienced physical dating violence are also more likely than their non-abused peers to smoke, use drugs, engage in unhealthy dieting (e.g., taking diet pills or laxatives, vomiting to lose weight), engage in risky sexual behaviors and attempt or consider suicide.²⁰ Although everyone who experiences dating abuse is affected negatively, females often experience more severe and longer-lasting consequences than do males.^{21 22} Students who experience dating abuse in high school are at higher risk for experiencing abuse again during college.²³

Commonalities and distinctions between dating abuse, harassment and bullying

Dating abuse, harassment and bullying share many of the same risk factors and dynamics.²⁴ However, there are some very significant distinctions. Dating abuse occurs between two people who are or were involved in a romantic or intimate relationship. This sets this form of abuse apart from harassment and bullying where the parties involved do not have a shared romantic or intimate history. The distinctive aspects of dating abuse make it one of the least understood and most overlooked forms of violence.

Some behaviors like teasing and name-calling between students occur in both peer friendships as well as dating relationships. Students and adults may see these behaviors as normal or expected parts of school life during the teen years. These behaviors can develop into more serious forms of abuse, harassment and bullying, with distinct dynamics depending on the nature of the relationship between the students.²⁵

Due to lack of experience and misinformation, students and adults may not recognize abuse in the context of dating relationships, or even confuse controlling behaviors (such as attempts to restrict with whom a dating partner can be friends, talk, or spend time) as a sign of a dating partner's depth of care. Without intervention, abuse in dating relationships typically increases in frequency and severity over time. However, people experiencing abuse will often protect their abusive partners, blame themselves for the abuse and convince themselves that they can stop the abuse by becoming more compliant. In addition, there is heightened risk for physical violence, or more severe physical violence, during and after a break up.²⁶ Many students are afraid to tell friends and family about experiences of dating abuse, especially if the abuse includes sexual violence.²⁷ When students do seek help, friends and adults often minimize the harm and offer uninformed advice.

What can schools do?

A safe school environment—where students are not distracted by fear or disengaged from learning because of verbal, physical, emotional, sexual or technological abuse—is essential for student achievement and a positive school climate. Middle school and high school are an ideal time to promote healthy relationships and prevent patterns of dating abuse that can last into adulthood. Yet relatively few districts have written guidance governing the prevention and intervention of

dating abuse or trained staff to deal with the issue. In one study:

- » The majority of school counselors (61%) reported that they had assisted a survivor of dating abuse in the past two years.
- » Yet the majority of school counselors (81.3%) reported that they did not have a protocol in their schools to respond to an incident of dating violence.
- » About 90% of school counselors reported that in the past two years, there had been no staff training to assist survivors of dating violence and their school did not have a committee to address health and safety issues including dating violence.²⁸

Research shows that schools can make a difference in preventing adolescent dating abuse.²⁹ Strengthening students' social and emotional skills, developing educator capacity to engage students and families and implementing multi-tiered behavioral supports are all important means by which to create safe school environments. In addition, schools should implement specific prevention efforts that take into account the unique dynamics and challenges of dating abuse.^{30 31} Some effective school-based programs change norms, improve problem-solving and address dating abuse in addition to other youth risk behaviors, such as substance abuse and sexual risk behaviors.^{32 33} Other programs prevent dating abuse through changes to the school environment or training influential adults like parents, caregivers and coaches to work with students to prevent dating abuse.^{34 35 36}

Promotion of healthy relationships and prevention of dating abuse require a multi-component approach that extends beyond the one-time health class or school assembly.^{37 38 39 40} It is important to not view dating abuse prevention as an add-on or extra program. Rather, dating abuse prevention should be addressed within the overall context of promoting a safe and healthy community to maximize learning and should be integrated into existing policies addressing student health, safety and discipline.

Recommended measures include:

- » Clearly communicating that the school community stands for healthy relationships and does not tolerate violence of any kind – including abuse in a dating relationship.

- » Developing locally tailored goals, policies and practices on school safety, bullying, harassment and/or character education that address the full continuum of prevention, early intervention, corrective guidance and a protocol for active intervention that may address the distinct dynamics of dating abuse. Such strategies may be communicated through the Local Control and Accountability Plan, comprehensive safety plans, student handbooks and/or other district and school documents to establish the prevention of dating abuse as a priority.^{41 42 43 44 45}
- » Educating the school community about healthy relationships and dating abuse prevention, identification and response. Such efforts can be integrated into the school’s various education and communication channels as part of broader efforts to create a positive school climate and support positive student behavior.⁴⁶
- » Incorporating curriculum on dating abuse into the health education program and other appropriate courses. The district should review and align its program with related health content standards adopted by the State Board of Education (e.g., Standard 1.2.S: Recognize potentially harmful or abusive relationships, including dangerous dating situations; Standard 5.1.S: Use a decision-making process to examine risky social and dating situations; Standard 7.5.M: Demonstrate skills to avoid or escape from potentially violent situations, including dating).
- » Fostering a school culture of “upstanders” instead of bystanders – a community of people who look out for and stand up for each other to ensure safety and respect in all relationships.^{47 48}
- » Ensuring that parents, guardians, teachers and staff understand the important role they play as role models and influencers in promoting healthy relationships and preventing dating abuse. Influencers can communicate clear behavioral expectations, model healthy and respectful ways of relating, teach key behaviors and skills, reinforce positive behaviors and intervene to correct problem behaviors early.⁴⁹
- » Providing support and appropriate referrals for students who have experienced abuse, and support and appropriate discipline and referrals for students who have perpetrated abuse.

- » Implementing school-wide efforts for all students and targeted programs for high-risk students to promote healthy relationships and prevent dating abuse. (A list of programs can be found on the California Department of Education’s website at www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/vp/teendatingvioprogram.asp.)

Schools should know that dating abuse sometimes falls into the legal category of prohibited sexual harassment. For example, if a student sexually harasses or sexually assaults a current or former dating partner who is another student, the conduct is considered to create a hostile environment if it is sufficiently serious such that it interferes with or limits the targeted student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the school’s program – and may fall under the legal requirements of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.⁵⁰ In such cases, districts must investigate and resolve complaints in accordance with law (see CSBA sample board policies and administrative regulations BP/AR 5145.7 - Sexual Harassment and AR 1312.3 - Uniform Complaint Procedures). Districts can be held liable if found to be “deliberately indifferent” in responding to sexual harassment

Questions for boards to consider

As the governance team discusses and determines how it will promote healthy relationships and prevent and respond to adolescent dating abuse, it might consider the following questions:

- » What policy direction can the board provide to ensure that middle schools and high schools engage in age- and developmentally-appropriate efforts to support safe and respectful relationships?
- » What curriculum is currently in place related to dating abuse, and in what courses and grade levels? Should student education on dating abuse be expanded to other courses or grade levels?
- » How will the governance team ensure that there is a response to all forms of abuse, harassment and bullying that addresses both the commonalities and distinctions in such behaviors depending on the nature of the relationships between the students?
- » Is professional development needed to ensure that teachers and staff know how to detect signs of potential dating abuse and respond and refer appropriately?

Resources

California Adolescent Health Collaborative. (2009). *Teen Dating Violence: Keeping California Adolescents Safe in Their Relationships*. Oakland, CA: Author.

California Attorney General's Office. (2008). *A Guide to Addressing Teen Dating and Sexual Violence in a School Setting*. Sacramento, CA: Author.

California Department of Education. Teen Dating Abuse Prevention Key Terms. <http://bit.ly/1olX7Hd>.

California Partnership to End Domestic Violence. (2012). *Safe At Schools: Comprehensive Strategies to Promote Healthy Relationships and Prevent Teen Dating Abuse*. Sacramento, CA: Author.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Break the Silence: Stop the Violence*—a video in which parents talk with teens about developing healthy, respectful relationships before they start dating: <http://1.usa.gov/1pZOAWI>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Dating Matters*—a free, online course to help educators identify the risk factors and warning signs of dating violence (continuing education units available): www.vetoviolence.cdc.gov/datingmatters

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Understanding Teen Dating Violence: Fact Sheet*. Atlanta, GA: Author.

Futures Without Violence. (2014). *School and District Policies to Increase Student Safety and Improve School Climate: Promoting Healthy Relationships and Preventing Teen Dating Violence*. San Francisco, CA: Author.

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. *Get Smart, Get Help, Get Safe* – a free train-the-trainer module designed to help school counselors and school psychologists prevent teen dating violence in schools (<http://1.usa.gov/1r3jSOf>)

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline and Love is Respect—offers real-time, one-on-one support 24/7 via phone, text and chat services from peer advocates. Advocates are trained to offer support, information and advocacy to those involved in dating abuse rela-

tionships as well as concerned friends, parents, teachers, clergy, law enforcement and service providers. www.loveisrespect.org

U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Protecting Students from Teen Dating Violence and Sexual Assault: Creating Safe Learning Environments and Improving School Responses* – a recording of a 2014 Department of Education policy briefing. (<http://1.usa.gov/1vi8Zi6>)

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Endnotes

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