

Early Childhood Maltreatment and Adolescent Dating Violence

Full Reference

Wolfe, D. A., Wekerle, C., Scott, K., Straatman, A., & Grasley, C. (2004). Predicting abuse in adolescent dating relationships over 1 year: The role of child maltreatment and trauma. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 113*, 406-415.

Keywords

Relationships, abuse, adolescents, trauma, child maltreatment, mediators, dating violence

Main Question

If we take into account a child's trauma symptoms, attitudes that justify dating violence, and empathy and self-efficacy in dating relationships, can we explain the connection between early childhood maltreatment and the emergence of dating violence in mid-adolescence?

Background

Dating violence includes a wide range of behaviours that aim to control, dominate, or harm the partner physically, sexually, or psychologically. Common behaviours include insults, threats, and intimidation, whereas more severe behaviours include physical and sexual assaults.

Youths with histories of maltreatment are especially at risk for experiencing difficulties in their relationships. When children are exposed to maltreatment, their development is often affected and this can interfere or change their ability to form healthy relationships. Maltreated children have been noted to express higher rates of anger and aggression in their interpersonal relationships. This aggression can carry on into adolescence and these youth are more likely use aggression in their social and romantic relationships.

Maltreated children tend to be in a chronic state of stress and thus react inappropriately or simply overreact to situations similar to their experiences of trauma. This heightened arousal can pose difficulties in romantic relationships because the stress response takes over in this new, safe situation just as it did during earlier experiences of maltreatment.

The ability to perspective-take and cope with new experiences may help adolescents with a history of maltreatment to engage in a more adaptive way. If these adolescents struggle with perspective-taking, they may encounter difficulties when interacting with their romantic partner.

Who Was Involved

One thousand, three hundred and seventeen students in grades 9-11 filled out two identical surveys, one year apart from each other. Boys and girls were equally represented in the study. The majority of the students (79%) were Caucasian. The students answered questions about their history of maltreatment, trauma symptoms, attitudes justifying dating violence, empathy and self-efficacy with dating partners, and current dating violence.

What We Found

Overall, only trauma symptoms predicted changes in dating violence over the one-year period. Attitudes about the use of dating violence and empathy and self-efficacy were related to dating violence at each time; however, they did not predict *changes* in dating violence over time. Attitudes, empathy, and self-efficacy may be more accurately understood as characteristics that change and differ in a similar manner to the way dating violence changes and differs rather than as processes that *cause* dating violence to develop and change over time.

The details of these relationships were different for boys and girls. For boys, trauma symptoms are helpful in understanding adolescent boys' emotionally abusive behaviour toward their partners. In particular, verbal abuse was a key marker of physical aggression. Interestingly, verbal abuse was linked with trauma symptoms for boys, but anger was not, as it was in the case of girls. For girls, anger-specific trauma symptoms predicted changes in dating violence over time. When girls show high levels of trauma-related anger, they are more likely to use increasing levels of dating violence over time.

Implications

It is important to note that while this research demonstrates the increased risk of maltreated children to engage in dating violence, it does not mean that a history of child maltreatment entirely accounts for future violence in relationships. In fact, the majority of youth from maltreated families do not abuse their partners.

This research suggests that experiences of trauma and maltreatment may result in lasting changes in children's ability to regulate emotions and cope with stressful events. Many school-based prevention programs for dating violence and related issues have been derived from cognitive-behavioural models that tend to focus on altering adolescents' knowledge and attitudes about dating violence. While these programs can help to change norms, a broader scope is likely needed. In particular, the association between emotional states (especially anger) suggests that efforts to address dating violence might successfully target co-occurring risk behaviours that share an underlying emotional component, such as delinquency, substance abuse, and unsafe sexual

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behaviour. Adolescence is an important transitional period in this regard because it offers opportunities to strengthen healthy choices and replace negative patterns carried forward from previous relationships with more adaptive ones.