



Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

David A. Wolfe and Peter G. Jaffe

As public recognition of domestic violence (DV) and sexual assault (SA) has reached increasing heights, there has been an outcry for more effective prevention programs. This outcry is based on an understanding of the widespread nature of this problem and the incredible costs to victims and society as a whole. This document summarizes the development of prevention initiatives in these two related areas. However, we caution that DV and SA prevention initiatives and evaluation research on them are in their infancy. Therefore, this review points out trends and promising developments rather than definitive directions in the field. Although the research has many shortcomings it leads to important suggestions for prevention strategies.

Research in this burgeoning field needs to inform prevention. Many of the contributing risk factors for sexual and physical assault have been identified in childhood and adolescence, and these need to be incorporated into prevention goals. For example, peer attitudes (Reitzel-Jaffe & Wolfe, 2001), past experiences of child maltreatment (Wolfe et al., 2001), and substance abuse in adolescence (Wekerle & Wall, 2002) have all been linked to greater risk of dating violence, domestic violence, and sexual assault. Changing the norms and climate about relationships and providing students and teachers with the skills needed to foster healthy relationships is the only viable way to shift from a crisis orientation to one of prevention in response to these related forms of violence.

In preparing this document we took the perspective that DV and SA are gender-linked crimes based in cultural and societal values affecting gender inequality and abuse of power and control.

In conjunction with this perspective, DV and SA researchers and practitioners have drawn from a variety of related theoretical perspectives in their prevention efforts, ranging from feminist and sociological views of broad societal influences to individually-focused cognitive and behavioral skill deficits, which are reflected herein.

Prevention Strategies

Prevention efforts are generally considered in terms of primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention involves efforts to reduce the incidence of a problem among a population before it occurs. The goal of secondary prevention is to target services to select (at-risk) individuals, in an effort to decrease the incidence of a problem by reducing known or suspected risk factors. Tertiary prevention involves attempts to minimize the course of a problem once it is already clearly evident and causing harm, which in the current instance involves the identification of domestic violence and sexual assault perpetrators and victims, control of the behavior and its effect, punishment and/or treatment for the perpetrators, and support for the victims. Because tertiary efforts are intended more as intervention aimed at current needs as well as prevention of future harm, this document reviews only primary and secondary prevention strategies and their current research status.

In terms of DV and SA, primary prevention strategies introduce new values, thinking processes, and relationship skills to particular population groups that are incompatible with violence and that promote healthy, non-violent relationships. For example,

resources can be used to focus on respect, trust, and supportive growth in relationships. A clear advantage is that these efforts can be targeted universally, at broad population groups, such as school-age children or members of a particular community. Secondary prevention efforts are directed toward identified individuals who have exhibited particular behaviors (e.g., dating violence) or possess certain risk factors (e.g., male; prior exposure to violence) that are associated with domestic violence and sexual assault. As described below, examples of sexual assault secondary prevention include programs for first year college students who have a history of victimization or problems with substance abuse, which are associated with dating violence and sexual assault (e.g., Lonsway & Kothari, 2002).

Primary and Secondary Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

Developmental and Gender Considerations

A starting point for prevention programs is deciding on the target age and the best venue for delivering the program. For example, most adolescent programs are designed for a high school (classroom) venue, whereas adult prevention efforts utilize the mass media and workplace to challenge attitudes and behaviors that support violence towards women. There are also considerations regarding variation in program delivery according to the gender of the target audience. Programs on dating violence, for example may create backlash among boys if they identify the program as an attack on males in general (e.g., Hilton, Harris, Rice, Krans, & Lavigne, 1998), and unique strategies may be needed for different ages and both sexes. In our experience girls are often more interested in discussing these sensitive issues and willing to role-play social situations relevant to prevention of DV and SA, whereas boys are more resistance and reluctant to do so. Unique strategies for male participation may include involvement of popular male peer and teacher role models, and more graduated approaches to introducing the underlying social issues and factors contributing to DV and SA.

A further consideration in the development of prevention programs in both areas is the identification of the crucial prevention targets. With adolescents and adults, one can explicitly name the problem of domestic violence and sexual assault. However, with younger children prevention efforts are more often tied to the early factors associated with domestic violence and/or sexual assault later in life (e.g., being exposed to domestic violence while growing up; Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001).

In general, prevention programs are intended to clarify inappropriate attitudes and behaviors and offer positive alternatives. In essence, most prevention efforts are psychoeducational strategies, rather than treatment services, aimed at a broad sector of the population. Several illustrative programs are described below that reflect the current state of prevention research in domestic violence and sexual assault, followed by a critical analysis and implications of the literature.

Programs for Elementary-Aged Children

Schools are an ideal place in which to introduce primary prevention programs to a wide range of children. Much of children's social learning takes place in schools, and influences the development of behaviors and attitudes supportive of interpersonal violence in its many forms. Prevention programs capitalize on these factors by introducing discussion of personal safety and injury prevention in the classroom, and by integrating such discussion within the context of trusting relationships. The material is introduced at a general level of understanding for younger age groups (Jaffe, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Baker, in press); sexual and physical violence, personal responsibility, and alternatives to violence are more directly approached in high school and college programs (see below).

Community programs have sometimes collaborated with schools in an effort to raise awareness and prevent future violence (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1998). One of the key values inherent in these primary prevention programs is the belief that every student needs to be aware of DV and SA. Even if students never become victims or perpetrators, they may have

opportunities in the future, as community members, to help others in preventing or stopping these assaults. These model programs sometimes include involvement of parents and other members of the broader community, in an effort to affect broader change.

One of the first programs to document efforts to prevent domestic violence by working with children in the schools was implemented by the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women (Gamache & Snapp, 1995), and recently updated around the themes that “hands are not for hitting” and students’ “choice” for alternatives to violence (Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, 2000). This excellent program is one of the few that explicitly addresses the root causes of violence, such as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, etc. Preliminary evaluations of this and related programs are promising and indicate that key elements of successful school-based programs include: identifying relationship violence as a form of societal violence; acknowledging that DV and SA are abuse of power and control; creating a high enough level of trust that children can disclose exposure to domestic violence and teachers can make appropriate referrals; teaching safety skills about what to do when domestic violence occurs; and encouraging social skills development like conflict resolution as alternatives to violence (e.g., Sudermann, Jaffe, & Schieck, 1996).

Adolescents and Young Adults

Early- and mid-adolescence offers a unique window of opportunity for prevention efforts to make teens more aware of how violence in relationships can occur and to teach healthy ways of forming intimate relationships. Late adolescence and the early adult years are also critical periods of transition. In fact, college students are seen as so high-risk for partner violence and sexual assault that some researchers argue institutions should provide universal programs to address the magnitude of these issues (Koss & Harvey, 1991). When offered opportunities to explore the richness and rewards of relationships, teens and young adults often show a greater interest in learning about choices and responsibilities. Clear messages about personal

responsibility and boundaries, delivered in a blame-free manner, are generally acceptable to this age group, whereas lectures and warnings are less helpful (Dryfoos, 1991).

DV and SA prevention among this critical age group has focused on dating violence that often includes, by definition, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. Although the literature approaches dating violence and sexual assault prevention as separate topics, they overlap considerably, especially from a prevention standpoint. Programs on rape prevention focus on violence committed by strangers, acquaintances, work colleagues, and intimate partners, which overlap with dating violence initiatives in terms of lessons about inappropriate attitudes and behaviors. More recently programs have incorporated content on the influence of drugs and alcohol and, in particular, “date-rape” drugs that allow perpetrators to incapacitate potential victims. Recognizing the overlap between DV and SA is important, without allowing drugs and alcohol to become an excuse for the perpetrator or an opportunity to blame the victim.

Primary prevention programs delivered universally through high schools often involve activities aimed at increasing awareness and dispelling myths about relationship violence and sexual assault. Such activities include school auditorium presentations involving videotapes, plays, professional theatre groups, or a speech from a DV or SA survivor; classroom discussions facilitated by teachers or service providers; programs and curricula that encourage students to examine attitudes and behaviors that promote or tolerate violence; or peer support groups. Some school-based programs have resulted in youth-initiated prevention activities such as theatrical presentations to younger children and marches and other social protests against violence (Sudermann et al., 1996).

A recent controlled evaluation of universal sexual assault prevention involved a coeducational program for teens on preventing sexual coercion in dating situations (Pacifi, Stoolmiller, & Nelson, 2001). The program involved challenging existing attitudes about coercive sexual behavior, and learning ways to deal with unwanted sexual ad-

vances through clear communication. The program was innovative in its use of video and an interactive “virtual date.” Results indicate that students with more negative attitudes about sexual assault benefited the most from the program, which supports the use of educational strategies to reduce risk factors among this age group. Similar initiatives have been undertaken with college-aged populations (Foubert, 2000; Gidycz et al., 2001; Lonsway & Kothari, 2002).

Although DV and SA cross all races and social classes, some sexual assault prevention programs are aimed at high-risk groups, such as males from abusive family backgrounds, in an attempt to reduce sexual assault by targeting rape myths and coercive behaviors. For example, Schewe and O’ Donohue (1996) evaluated cognitive-behavioral approaches that address beliefs that promote or condone coercive sexual behavior, as well as increasing empathy for the plight of sexual assault victims. A strength of this study was its involvement of participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, which were randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. Using self-report, this investigation determined that cognitive-behavioral intervention was effective primarily at changing rape-supporting attitudes and beliefs in a high-risk sample. Other researchers have approached high-risk groups, such as fraternities, which may support inappropriate male attitudes that condone sexual assault. A promising approach in this regard involves young men’s groups that engender empathy for sexual assault survivors, which found a significant reduction in rape myth acceptance over a seven-month period (Foubert, 2000).

Recent school-based dating violence prevention programs have also shown favorable outcomes in terms of reducing reports of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse towards and by dating partners (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Primary prevention programs have approached this topic through school-based curricula that address specific skills and knowledge opposing abusive behavior toward romantic partners. These curricula have primarily used didactic approaches to orient students to the different ways in which abuse and violence may be

expressed, and examining their own attitudes and gender role stereotypes (Avery-Leaf et al., 1997; Lavoie, Vezina, Piche, & Boivin, 1995). Foshee et al. (1996; 2000), for example, examined the effects of a dating violence prevention program (“Safe Dates”) on psychological, physical, and sexual abuse in young adolescents. Over 1500 grade 8 and 9 students participated in 10 classroom sessions and related activities, such as a poster contest. This is one of the few studies that included a follow-up to explore long-term prevention effects. Although some of the positive behavioral changes had disappeared at a one-year follow-up, some of the critical changes in variables that mediate dating violence (e.g., dating violence norms, conflict management skills, and awareness of community services for dating violence) were maintained.

In addition to school-based programs for adolescents, community-based programs with secondary prevention goals have been developed to target youth at-risk of dating violence. The Youth Relationships Project was developed to assist adults in empowering youth to end violence in relationships (their own and that of their peers) through education, skill development, and social competence (Wolfe et al., in press). The program material takes teens from high-risk (i.e., abusive) backgrounds through a process of learning about the issue, about themselves, and then expands their efforts to affect change within their peer groups, the teen culture and the broader community. It reflects an incremental strategy aimed at self-awareness and social change (i.e., examining oneself first, and moving on to one’s peers, school environment, social institutions, and cultural influences), which is delivered through an 18-session program in community settings. Two-year follow-up results involving random assignment to the intervention or control condition support this approach in reducing threatening behavior toward dating partners, as well as physical and emotional abuse perpetration.

Adults

Public awareness campaigns such as public service announcements and advertisements are common approaches to primary prevention of DV

and SA with adults. These campaigns typically provide information regarding the warnings signs of violence and community resources for victims and perpetrators. Over the past quarter century sexual assault centers and shelters for abused women have played a leadership role in these public awareness strategies. A comprehensive public education campaign developed by the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF) in collaboration with the Advertising Council included television advertisements delivering the message that there is no excuse for domestic violence and making referrals to local domestic violence services (Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Chez, 1997). Telephone surveys conducted over two years showed decreases in the number of people who said they did not know what to do about domestic violence, did not believe it was necessary to report it, felt it was no one else's business, and believed that the problem of domestic violence was exaggerated by the media. However, the results also showed that men were more likely than women to believe women provoke men into physically abusing them, and to feel that the media exaggerated the prevalence and harms of domestic violence.

Research Critique

Prevention initiatives in domestic violence and sexual assault have grown considerably over the last decade, and many have shown encouraging pre-post changes in terms of knowledge and attitudes. However, there are several outstanding research and evaluation issues that make these findings preliminary, such as limitations in experimental design, measurement, follow-up, and variations in program content and delivery.

Design and Measurement

Prevention efforts in both domestic violence and sexual assault have been criticized for a lack of clear evidence of prevention of the *target behaviors*. Most programs have used proxy measures, such as changes in attitudes and knowledge, to conclude that risk has been decreased. Behavioral indices, al-

though more valid, are plagued by ethical, practical, and even definitional concerns (see, for example, Yeater & O'Donohue, 1999; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Unfortunately, there are often few reasonable alternatives for obtaining information about private relationships other than self-report, which usually involves some estimation of victimization and perpetration. For example, boys may interpret "hit" as involving a closed-fisted punch, whereas girls may see this more broadly (i.e., an open-handed slap). Similarly, boys tend to describe force as psychological pressure, whereas girls describe it as physical force (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001). Finally, very few prevention programs target couples, which may be more appropriate both for intervention and evaluation.

Researchers urge caution, therefore, on overextending these results subject to further evaluation. Sexual assault prevention programs (for example) have shown mostly short-term reductions in rape-supportive attitudes, with insufficient evidence to conclude that such programs are effective in reducing the incidence of sexual assault (Breitenbecher, 2000; Foubert, 2000). Furthermore, most of the impact (especially in brief, knowledge-based programs) disappears or diminishes over time.

Program Delivery

The proper "timing" of prevention efforts remains unknown, and may have considerable importance in terms of "readiness to learn." For example, risk of abusive behavior and opportunities for change in early adolescence (when mixed sex groupings are more typical) may differ from those of mid- to late adolescence, when dyads are more common. These studies often reveal that teens were already reporting considerable amounts of abusive behavior at the initiation of the prevention effort. Similarly, debate continues regarding the optimal locale for dating violence prevention efforts. Community-based, rather than school-based, programming permits youth with common needs and strengths to become involved in their own communi-

ties, and to feel safer in participating in unfamiliar activities without fear of peer interference. However, school-based programs have the advantage of greater access to youth, space, time, and personnel. Even more fundamental is the elimination of any targeting or labelling of persons receiving the program by offering the program universally. School-based prevention concerning dating violence and sexual assault, however, must be equally sensitive to special needs (e.g., disclosures of past or current abuse in the classroom), and the importance of providing a safe place to discuss personal beliefs and attitudes.

Other programmatic considerations that merit brief mention include avoiding a “one size fits all” approach that ignores culturally relevant information and differences (Heppner, Neville, Smith, Kivlighan, & Gershuny, 1999); determining the best “dosage” of information and training (i.e., some programs are one shot, while others are extended over 10-20 lesson plans over several months); the possible role of “booster sessions,” familiar to most other forms of prevention (e.g., delivering the curriculum over multiple sessions, with follow-up and new age-appropriate information); and the possible interference of “backlash,” which has been noted following education in sexual and physical assault prevention (i.e., boys sometimes *get worse* in their attitudes after learning more about these issues; Hilton et al., 1998). Backlash has also occurred due to some programs’ failure to recognize “mutual violence” common among younger adolescent dating couples (i.e., while domestic violence is more often unilateral between adults, in mid-adolescence both girls and boys may engage in these behaviors; Chase, Treboux, & O’Leary, 2002), suggesting that violence and abuse have not as yet become an adult-like pattern. Program lessons that do not reflect this “reality,” or fail to tailor the materials to the level and motivation of the intended audience, may fail to meet their expectations (Jaffe et al., in press).

Practical Implications

We are currently at a crossroads regarding the role of school- and community-based programming

in preventing domestic violence and sexual assault. There has never been greater awareness of the issue of violence, but at the same time society has never been more polarized in deciding how to respond: reactively or proactively. There is a clear need for these two fields to become more integrated in their approach to prevention. Historically, there have been separate movements to address sexual assault and domestic violence, which have led to different services such as rape crisis centers and shelters for battered women. Underlying these social problems are similar risk factors at the individual, family, community, and societal levels. Recognizing these similarities should lead to a common purpose in prevention efforts and greater collaboration among local, state, and federal government initiatives, social agencies, and community mobilization efforts. It is now necessary to move beyond small local programs scattered across various communities to comprehensive evaluations and research that will support broader prevention efforts (Wolfe & Jaffe, 1999).

As the field of DV and SA prevention develops, there will be a remaining challenge to ensure programs are implemented on a comprehensive and consistent basis. The best program in the world is futile if it gathers dust on a resistant principal’s bookshelf, surrounded by the silence of other educators, parents, and students. An open, collaborative process based on respect, trust, flexibility, and communication is needed to advance evaluation efforts with community- and school-based programs (Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001). Despite significant challenges, prevention efforts remain a very promising approach to reducing domestic violence and sexual assault.

Authors of this document:

Peter G. Jaffe, Ph.D
Professor, Faculty of Education
Academic Director, Centre for Research on
Violence Against Women & Children
The University of Western Ontario
pjaffe@uwo.ca

David A. Wolfe, Ph.D.
RBC Chair in Children's Mental Health
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Professor, University of Toronto
David_Wolfe@CAMH.net

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Public awareness campaigns such as public service announcements and advertisements are common approaches to primary prevention of DV and SA with adults. These campaigns typically provide information regarding the warnings signs of violence and community resources for victims and perpetrators.

We are currently at a crossroads regarding the role of school- and community-based programming in preventing domestic violence and sexual assault. There has never been greater awareness of the issue of violence, but at the same time society has never been more polarized in deciding how to respond: reactively or proactively. There is a clear need for these two fields to become more integrated in their approach to prevention.

As the field of DV and SA prevention develops, there will be a remaining challenge to ensure programs are implemented on a comprehensive basis and are founded on good outcome research that documents what programs are most effective for their target populations. Despite significant challenges, prevention efforts remain a very promising approach to reducing domestic violence and sexual assault.