

Passing the Torch: Students Teaching Students about Dating Violence

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The Dating Violence Research Team is a multidisciplinary team that has been involved in conducting action-oriented research on dating violence for the past eight years. The Dating Violence Research Team consists of academics, government employees, professionals working in schools and in community-based agencies, and graduate students. In addition, the members of the Dating Violence Research Team who work directly with youth consult with students individually and in groups on specific aspects of our work. We came together out of a common concern about dating violence. For some of us, this concern was based on experiences working with youth. For others of us, it grew out of our involvement in conducting research on the topic of dating violence. Certainly, researchers have begun to document that psychological, physical, and sexual abuse are characteristic of many teenage heterosexual dating relationships (Gagné, Lavoie, and Hébert 1994; Mercer 1988; Pedersen and Thomas 1992; Poitras and Lavoie 1995; Simonelli and Ingram 1998.) For example, Lavoie and her colleagues surveyed high school students in Quebec about their experiences of dating violence and found that 16 per cent of the girls and 25 per cent of the boys reported that they had experienced some form of physical violence in a dating relationship; 54 per cent of girls and 13 per cent of boys reported having experienced sexual coercion (Gagné and Lavoie 1995; Poitras and Lavoie 1995). Similarly, Jaffe and colleagues (1992) found that 24 per cent of girls and 16 per cent of boys attending high school in Ontario reported that a dating partner had used 'verbal force' against them. A recent American study that used a representative sam-

ple of female high school students estimated that between 18 and 20 per cent had experienced physical and/or sexual dating violence (Silverman et al. 2001). Studies have shown that dating violence may begin as early as age thirteen (Mercer 1988; Smith and Williams 1992), and may continue through the teenage years and into adulthood (Marshall and Rose 1990; O'Leary, Malone, and Tyree 1994; Roscoe and Calahan 1985).

For a number of reasons, it is important to prevent dating violence among adolescents. First, the experience of physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse may have negative emotional and behavioural sequelae for the adolescents involved (Kasian and Painter 1992; Silverman et al. 2001; Simonelli and Ingram 1998; Werkele and Wolfe 1999). In addition, adolescence is the developmental period when most individuals begin to experiment and learn about intimate relationships. Thus, preventing abuse in adolescent relationships by replacing abusive behaviour with more adaptive ways of resolving conflict may prevent these maladaptive ways of relating from becoming entrenched (Rubin, Bukowski, and Parker 1998; Thornton 1990). Thus, from its inception, the Dating Violence Research Team's primary concern has been the prevention of dating violence in adolescent relationships. Our ultimate goal is to prevent all types of dating violence between teenagers – psychological abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. We aim to do this by making research-based programmatic recommendations as well as by helping implement and evaluate dating violence prevention strategies.

Early in our history we decided that in order to be successful at our goal of preventing dating violence, we first needed to determine the prevalence of, as well as attitudes toward, dating violence among New Brunswick adolescents. There were two main reasons for adopting this as the first step of our action-oriented research program. First, we believed we needed to have information about dating violence that was specific to New Brunswick and its rural context if we were to design truly effective prevention strategies. Second, we felt that this information would demonstrate the pervasiveness and seriousness of dating violence in New Brunswick to government and other potential partners in future prevention programs. Therefore, as a first step in our action-oriented research agenda, our team conducted two studies that examined dating violence in adolescents' heterosexual dating relationships.

In this chapter we show how the Dating Violence Research Team

used the results of these two studies to advance its action-oriented research agenda. Thus, this chapter is not written to articulate the complex ways in which societal and individual factors result in dating violence or to interpret the results of our research *per se*, even though the results of research and theory have informed all our work. Rather, this chapter focuses on how research results can be used to help prevent dating violence as well as on how adolescents themselves can be instrumental in the prevention effort. Specifically, in collaboration with four university students, we developed presentations based on our research results that were designed to raise student awareness of dating violence in New Brunswick and to contribute to our prevention efforts. We hoped that designing and delivering the presentations would also have an impact on the student presenters themselves.

In this chapter, we first briefly describe the results of the two studies conducted by the Dating Violence Research Team, as these results formed the basis of the presentations (see Price et al. 2000 for a more complete description of the methodology and results of our research). Next, we describe our rationale for using student presentations as part of our action-oriented research strategy. Following this, the student presenters describe, in their own words, their experiences in developing and delivering the presentations. They also describe the impact that delivering the presentations had on them personally. Finally, we reflect on how the student presentations contributed to our action-oriented research agenda by enhancing our understanding of the types of programs that are likely to be effective at preventing dating violence.

Research Findings

The Research Team has conducted both quantitative and qualitative research on dating violence among middle school and high school students. These studies aimed to determine New Brunswick adolescents' experiences with and attitudes toward all three types of dating violence – psychological, physical, and sexual. We also wanted to determine adolescents' understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of dating violence.

A Quantitative Study (Study 1)

Our first study (Study 1) was a quantitative study in which almost 1,700 anglophone and francophone students in grades seven, nine,

and eleven in New Brunswick schools completed questionnaires assessing their experiences with and attitudes toward dating violence. Most of the participants (86 per cent) lived in small towns or rural communities. We used a revised version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus 1979) to assess adolescents' experiences of psychological abuse (e.g., insults, threats, controlling behaviour) and physical abuse (e.g., slapping, pushing, hitting). We also asked participants, after they had completed the items on the Conflict Tactics Scale, to think about their worst psychological or physical abusive experience and to indicate, on a 7-point scale, how upsetting the experience had been for them. Based in part on the results of our qualitative work, we combined the data for experiences of psychological and physical abuse into a single category (psychological and/or physical abuse), and only categorized participants as having experienced psychological and/or physical abuse if they rated their worst experience as upsetting (i.e., a rating of 5, 6, or 7). We used the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987) to assess adolescents' experiences of sexual coercion. Again, we only categorized participants as having experienced sexual abuse if they rated their worst experience as upsetting to them.

The results of Study 1 showed that dating violence is a serious problem among New Brunswick teenagers. For example, of the students who had begun dating, 22 per cent of girls and 12 per cent of boys reported having had an upsetting psychologically and/or physically abusive experience. Upsetting sexually coercive experiences were reported by 19 per cent of girls and 4 per cent of boys. Overall, 29 per cent of the girls and 13 per cent of the boys had experienced some form of dating violence (i.e., psychological, physical and/or sexual) that was upsetting to them.

We developed and used the Attitudes Towards Dating Violence Scales to assess acceptance of psychological, physical, and sexual violence in dating relationships (Price et al. 1999). These scales measure both attitudes toward violence perpetrated by boys and attitudes toward violence perpetrated by girls. The results indicated that the majority of girls (between 87 and 98 per cent) and boys (between 75 and 91 per cent) were not accepting of psychological, physical, or sexual dating violence perpetrated by boys or by girls in that students generally did not agree with statements that were supportive of the use of violence. Nonetheless, as is apparent from the data, some students were accepting of dating violence, and these students were more

likely to be boys than girls. In addition, both the boys and the girls were more accepting of female use than of male use of violence against a dating partner. Furthermore, many students agreed that some of the specific abusive behaviours included on the scales used to measure attitudes toward dating violence (e.g., slapping, use of threats) are appropriate in dating relationships. These results suggest that neither attempts to raise awareness of family violence in the media nor dating violence presentations in the schools have been entirely successful at changing attitudes. The findings are even more significant when one considers that at least some students likely understated their actual acceptance of dating violence because of their awareness that these attitudes are no longer socially acceptable.

A Qualitative Study (Study 2)

Because Study 1 was based on researcher-generated definitions of dating violence, we could not be sure that our questionnaires captured students' experiences with and understanding of violence in their relationships. Therefore, for Study 2, we returned to the schools to ask students about their own definitions of dating violence. In keeping with our action-oriented research philosophy, we also wanted students to help us interpret the results of Study 1. Students attending some of the English and French schools we sampled in Study 1 and some other schools were recruited to participate in this study. Sixteen focus groups (eight with girls and eight with boys) were conducted to discuss adolescents' ideas about psychological abuse in dating relationships; an additional ten focus groups (five with girls and five with boys) were conducted to discuss adolescents' ideas about physical abuse. As few girls reported using sexual coercion in dating relationships, we did not conduct focus groups on sexual coercion. We asked students in a focus group format about their definitions of dating violence in general and psychological and physical violence in particular. We also asked them about differences in boys' and girls' experience of and use of violence, and about their understanding of the causes and consequences of dating violence. Finally, we asked them for suggestions for preventing dating violence.

The four themes that emerged from the focus groups in Study 2 complemented the findings of Study 1. First (Theme 1), we found that students were able to list behaviours that they thought were physically abusive, but had more difficulty in identifying psychological abuse.

Furthermore, it was not always clear to them when specific behaviours (e.g., yelling, use of control) were acceptable and when they 'crossed the line' and were abusive. For example, one male student commented: 'Obviously if you hit somebody then that is considered abuse, but there are so many shades of gray in emotional abuse that is kind of hard to tell what exactly is acceptable and what is not.' To complicate this uncertainty, boys tended to consider behaviours to be abusive if the *intention* was hurtful, whereas girls tended to define behaviours as abusive when the *impact* was hurtful. The difference in perceptions between boys and girls may in part explain boys' abusive behaviour. That is, if boys do not believe that the consequences of their behaviour are hurtful unless the intention was hurtful, they may have little reason to stop their actions.

A second theme (Theme 2) was that adolescents saw physical and psychological abuse as integrally connected rather than distinct, with psychological abuse leading to physical abuse. They also identified jealousy and the desire to control the partner as important factors prompting use of physical abuse. For example, one female student commented: 'It probably starts, like the controlling and jealous stuff and controlling who you hang around with or where you go ... and then like the hitting ...' As a result of these observations by students, the Dating Violence Research Team merged the Study 1 data on experiences of psychological and physical abuse into a single category instead of persisting with the initial formulation that psychological and physical abuse are distinct phenomena for adolescents.

Third (Theme 3), the adolescents stated that both boys and girls use physical violence and psychological violence in dating relationships, although not necessarily with equal frequency. However, they also believe that there is a 'double standard' regarding the use of physical violence whereby girls' use of physical violence is seen as more acceptable by peers and society than boys' use of physical violence. For example, one boy commented: 'It is more common that the male will beat up the girl, but like nobody really wants to talk about or admit that the girl is beating up the guy.' They also noted that social norms prohibit boys from talking about their feelings or problems. Thus, boys tend to keep their emotions contained until they build up and explode into physical or psychological violence.

Finally (Theme 4), students expressed their concern about the issue of dating violence, and questioned whether existing approaches that focus on what *not* to do in dating relationships are successful at pre-

venting such violence. They specifically asked for help in developing skills for maintaining healthy relationships.

Using the Research Findings

After completing these two studies, and in keeping with our action research philosophy, the Dating Violence Research Team identified our next step: to take our findings back to the students so as to involve them and others in finding solutions to the problem of dating violence. In May and June 2000, supported by grants from the Canadian Women's Foundation, the New Brunswick Department of Education, and the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research, we hired a team of four university students to conduct dating violence prevention workshops in anglophone middle and high schools in New Brunswick.² We wanted to hire presenters with very specific characteristics – that is, characteristics that we believed would help them be effective presenters. We wanted presenters who were young and from the Maritime provinces so that students could relate well to them. We wanted presenters who had some past knowledge of dating violence and some previous experience with making presentations of this nature to young people. Finally, we wanted to hire two males and two females so that presentations could be done in male-female presentation teams. The students we hired fit these criteria.

The students were charged with two tasks. First, they needed to prepare a dating violence presentation that would be engaging and interesting to students from a wide range of age groups, from grade six students to grade twelve students. As recent high school students themselves, they would be better able than would the members of the Dating Violence Research Team to know how best to package the dating violence prevention message in a way that would keep students, especially male students, involved rather than disengaged. The presentation would need to be based on current understandings of the causes and consequences of dating violence in the scholarly literature, while also incorporating the major results of our two studies. The second task of the student presenters was to deliver the presentation to anglophone students throughout the province.

Based on the results of our research, the Dating Violence Research Team identified four essential components to the presentation. First, we specified that the presentations needed to disseminate the quantitative data found in Study 1. Specifically, we wanted to inform New

Brunswick students about the prevalence of dating violence in their province by providing them with a breakdown of the percentage of students who had experienced psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence by age, gender, and grade level. We also wanted to inform them about New Brunswick students' attitudes toward dating violence.

The other components we wanted included in the presentation stemmed directly from the results of the focus group study, Study 2. In keeping with Theme 1 from this study, we wanted the presentation to educate students about dating violence in general so that they would be clear on what behaviours constitute physical, psychological, and sexual violence according to the definitions outlined by Health Canada (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence 1990). We also wanted them – especially the young men – to understand that these behaviours are abusive if the impact is hurtful even if the intention is not hurtful. In keeping with Theme 4 from Study 2, we wanted the presentations to promote and educate students about healthy relationships. Thus, we wanted to describe positive, prosocial behaviour and problem-solving skills as an alternative to abusive behaviour. Included in this, and in keeping with Theme 3, would be a discussion of how social norms and the socialization of males and females interfere with engaging in healthy relationship behaviours. Fourth, in keeping with our action-oriented research philosophy and Theme 4, we wanted to involve middle and high school students in our efforts to prevent dating violence. We did this by asking them for ideas about how to prevent dating violence in their schools and communities and for feedback on the effectiveness of the presentations.

Our team of four university student presenters designed and delivered an hour-long presentation about dating violence to more than fifty classrooms of middle and high school students around New Brunswick. They made their presentations to more than two thousand students. Every anglophone school district in New Brunswick was contacted by the New Brunswick Department of Education in order to make them aware that these dating violence presentations were available. The directors who wished their school districts to participate then contacted individual middle and high schools in their district. In turn, interested school principals contacted the coordinator of the Dating Violence Research Team. In some cases, the coordinator contacted schools directly instead of waiting for the school to contact her. Schools were booked on a first come first serve basis. In total, sixteen schools as

well as one group home were visited, and only one interested school was turned away, for logistical reasons. The four student presenters worked as two male-female presentation teams. The presentation teams usually visited one school per day, and each team delivered the presentation to three different classes in that school. They made presentations to students in every grade from grade six to grade twelve; however, often schools simply wanted them to speak to students in one or two specific grades.

The following section is written in the voices of our student presenters. As such, it delineates the content of the presentation they developed. It also describes the process they went through in designing and delivering this action phase of our research agenda.

The Presentations

When we, the student presenters, began our work, the Dating Violence Research Team clearly outlined for us the information we should convey to our middle school and high school audiences. As individuals knowledgeable about this group of students, our role was to shape this information into a format that would be understandable to the students and effective in disseminating the information and, hopefully, in preventing dating violence.

We decided that our presentations ought to be highly interactive. We also decided to use humour to help ensure that students would not lose interest as a result of either the terminology or the seriousness of the topic. We designed the presentation to be delivered by one male and one female.

We began the presentations by introducing ourselves and our mission. We then involved the students in an ice-breaking activity. First, we had them define dating by asking them to brainstorm about the terms 'going out' and 'dating.' Not surprisingly, the students knew quite well what these terms meant. Interestingly, students' ideas of their meaning seemed to vary depending on the school and the age group. For example, whereas students going to school in an urban area would often say that going to the movies was part of dating, students going to school in rural areas mentioned this less often, presumably because they have less access to movie theatres.

Next, we asked the students to define dating violence and helped them come up with a full and accurate definition consistent with the definition outlined by Health Canada (National Clearinghouse on

Family Violence 1990). After this, we facilitated an activity that had the students place words or phrases such as *slapping*, *insulting*, and *disagreement* into one of four categories: psychological dating violence, physical dating violence, sexual dating violence, and not dating violence. Categorizing examples of dating violence into physical, psychological, and sexual dating violence, and even separating dating violence from non-dating violence, was sometimes difficult for the students. First, many of the classes struggled with the term 'psychological dating violence.' They had a hard time saying the word 'psychological' and would often confuse it with the term 'physiological.' Sometimes they would simply refer to psychological dating violence as emotional or verbal violence, which suggests that they already had some previous knowledge about violence and types of violence. Although most of the students were able to identify examples of physical dating violence, they consistently miscategorized some of the examples of psychological dating violence. For example, many students thought that *bugging them to kiss you* and *destroying property* were not dating violence because they did not involve physical injury.

Some students had a hard time distinguishing between a behaviour that a person does not like and one that constitutes dating violence. For example, students would misidentify items such as *disagreement* and *not liking the other person's friends* as dating violence because they might upset a person. Also, there was a lot of disagreement about whether certain activities constituted dating violence. One of these was *grabbing their butt*. Many students explained that because butt-grabbing happens all the time, they believe it is acceptable behaviour. Usually, by the end of the discussion, the class agreed that butt-grabbing is only acceptable if it is by mutual consent.

Categorizing various examples of dating violence served as a precursor to the Surprise Scenarios Activity, which many students found to be the most amusing part of the presentation. At unspecified times during the presentation, the two presenters role-played an example of dating violence, incorporating this violence into their presentation. For example, one partner would yell at the other about mistakes they allegedly made in presenting the material, become jealous of the other, or give the other partner a 'friendly' slap on the butt. The students in the class were instructed to raise their hands as soon as they saw an example of dating violence to indicate that they recognized the violence. This led to a discussion of what happened in the scenario and what made it an example of dating violence. The discussion demonstrated

students' difficulty in applying general definitions of dating violence to specific incidents and events – a problem identified in Study 2.

The bulk of the presentation was an explanation of graphs depicting the results of Study 1. These graphs showed the percentages of grade seven, nine, and eleven students whose attitudes were accepting of dating violence. They also showed the percentages of students who had experienced each form of dating violence. Although many students did not like the idea of looking at graphs – they insisted it was too much like math class – this part of the presentation seemed to be well understood. However, although the students were able to read the numbers off the graph, they often were unable to translate these numbers into real-world terms. The numbers seemed to make more sense to them when they were converted from percentages into fractions. For example, the students seemed to understand 'one out of every four guys' much better than '25 per cent of guys.' Furthermore, as presenters, we found that some students were quick to dismiss the statistics as faceless numbers. However, when we reminded students that these were results from a recent survey of New Brunswick students, and that students from their own school may have participated, the numbers seemed much more persuasive to them.

The students found several of the results surprising. For example, many students were shocked that 25 per cent of guys said it was 'okay for their girlfriends to physically abuse them.' However, in keeping with the results of Study 1, some other classes agreed that it was more acceptable for a girl to hit a guy than for a guy to hit a girl. Clearly, the issue of physical violence by girls needs to be addressed further at the middle school level. Students need to understand clearly that initiating or escalating abusive behaviour against a dating partner is not acceptable whether that behaviour is perpetrated by boys or by girls. Also, many but not all students expressed surprise that *any* girls were accepting of violence done by boys against girls.

We then performed skits to stimulate discussion of several important ideas relating to dating violence, many of which were identified in Study 2. These included skits that dramatized the need for both boys and girls to talk about their feelings, the emotional impact of unwanted touching, and characteristics of healthy relationships. This led to a discussion in which the students were asked to explain what they thought should be part of a healthy relationship. Most often, they seemed to know what a healthy relationship is and what is important in a relationship. We also asked them whom they could talk to if they

were in an abusive relationship. Most classes came up with a long list of people. In keeping with Theme 4 of Study 2, as a final question, we asked them to generate ideas about what they think should be done to prevent dating violence. We asked them to identify things they could do to solve the problem of dating violence, as well as programs that they could think of to help people. This was a difficult question for the students. Most classes came up with the same small list of ideas, such as more presentations and more guidance counsellors, although some classes were quite creative. As the students left the room, information pamphlets about dating violence were distributed to those who wanted one.

Addressing the Focus Group Themes

We used the skits and surprise scenarios to address the themes revealed in the focus group study, Study 2. We purposely built some of these lessons into the presentation from the outset; others came about from doing the presentation and noticing the issues that students identified. Following is a list of the themes we incorporated. We also describe our perceptions of what the students knew and learned about each theme.

1. *Impact, not intent, is the criterion that defines an act as dating violence.*
The students understood this message when it was brought up in a non-situational way – for example, when we asked them directly whether intent or impact is more important in defining dating violence. However, when this theme was brought up in a skit, many students thought that a person cannot be held accountable for an action if they did not mean to do anything wrong.
2. *Physical violence done by girls can hurt guys, both physically and psychologically.*
Many students told us at first that since girls are weaker, physical violence done by girls is more acceptable than violence done by boys. This may reflect media portrayals that often legitimize and even romanticize a woman slapping a man (O’Keefe 1997) as well as awareness that adolescent girls are more likely to experience fear and be injured when physical violence occurs (Foshee 1996; Wekerle and Wolfe 1999). It is also consistent with the results of Study 1, which showed that adolescents are more accepting of female use

than of male use of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse against a dating partner. However, usually when probed further about whether it was okay for *anybody* to get hit, the students would come to agree that neither form of violence is more acceptable than the other. Another related and mistaken idea that we encountered at several schools in several parts of the province was the ‘three-hit rule.’ Many students indicated that they believe that if a girl hits a guy three times, he is *legally* allowed to hit her back. The prevalence of this myth is disturbing and points to the importance of assessing students’ beliefs – including their acceptance of myths about dating violence – as part of any dating violence prevention program instead of relying solely on standardized information. It was not difficult to dispel these types of myths once we were aware of them.

3. *Guys can experience sexual dating violence.*
When the students were shown the graph depicting the percentage of girls who had been sexually violent toward a guy, they would often laugh and discount these findings by making remarks about how guys want sex all the time, with any girl. They seemed to accept this male stereotype (Byers 1996, Zilbergeld 1999). Often we could not convince them that it is *possible* for a guy to be sexually abused. The prevalence of this stereotype may make it difficult for boys to refuse unwanted sexual advances or to report sexually abusive experiences when they occur (Byers and O’Sullivan 1998; O’Sullivan, Byers, and Finkelman 1998).
4. *It is acceptable for guys to talk about their feelings if they are being abused.*
Students often felt uncomfortable discussing this topic. They seemed to accept a social norm that talking about feelings is inconsistent with masculinity and the male role (Byers 1996). Thus, girls felt that boys would want to talk to a girl rather than another guy if their girlfriend was being violent, as girls might be more accepting of this departure from the masculine stereotype. The boys often stayed quiet during this discussion.
5. *Even if something happens all the time, it may still be violence.*
As one of the surprise scenarios, the male presenter slaps the butt of the female presenter. Some students were almost always able to identify this as wrong. However, in further discussion of this incident, some students would argue that the behaviour is acceptable

because it happens all the time in the hallways at school. This demonstrates the strong impact of peer norms on adolescents' perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (DeKeseredy 1990; Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, and Bohmer 1987; Price et al. 1999).

6. *Disagreement and argument are normal parts of a healthy relationship.*
This was already well understood by most students before our presentation. Nonetheless, as evident in their confusion about what constitutes psychological abuse, the adolescents were not always clear on the difference between non-abusive disagreements and attempts to resolve conflict, and psychological abuse.
7. *Revenge is not an excuse for violence.*
Early in the presentation, many students commented that if somebody was violent toward them, they would do the same thing back so that the other person would learn a lesson. Some students did not seem to understand that such an action may simply escalate the violence. Certainly, research has consistently shown that dating violence is most often bidirectional (Bookwala et al. 1992; Foshee et al. 2001; O'Keefe 1997; Sharpe and Taylor 1999; Simonelli and Ingram 1998).
8. *There is no excuse for violence even if a boyfriend/girlfriend cheats on you.*
The most frequent excuse that students gave for engaging in physical violence was that a boyfriend or girlfriend was 'cheating' on them. For example, they believed that if somebody cheats on you, it is permissible to slap that person. Consistent with students' greater acceptance of violence by girls than of violence by boys found in Study 1, they also tended to agree that it is more acceptable for a girl to slap a guy if he cheats on her than the other way around. To the students, cheating seems to be one clear exception to the rule that violence is never right. This demonstrates that although students are not accepting of dating violence in general, there are specific circumstances in which they feel the use of violence is justified – another finding of Study 1. Justifying dating violence, even if only in certain circumstances, is a risk factor for inflicting violence (Foshee et al. 2001; Price et al. 1999; O'Keefe 1997).
9. *Getting out of an abusive relationship does not solve the problem.*
When asked how a couple in a specific skit could solve their prob-

lems, many students replied that the person should just break up with their partner. Students seem to understand that it is important to get out of an abusive relationship. However, they do not seem to be aware of how difficult it can be to end an abusive relationship when there are positive aspects to the relationship in addition to the abusive behaviour (Kasian and Painter 1992). Furthermore, many students did not realize that ending an abusive relationship is not enough, as it does not provide help to either the abuser or the victim.

Students' Reactions to the Presentation

None of the students seemed too old or too young to benefit from the presentation. Students at all grade levels gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about our presentation. Some classes asked us to stay beyond the allotted time, and suggested impromptu skits that we could perform (which we did if there was time). After the presentation, some students wanted to chat with us about our personal lives and tell us about theirs. On other occasions, students would come and sit and talk with us about the presentation or about other things while we were having lunch in their school cafeteria or after finishing the day's presentations. Students have recognized and remembered us several weeks after we spoke to them.

To improve our presentation and to gain information that the Dating Violence Research Team could use to further their action-oriented research agenda, we asked the students what they liked and did not like about our presentation, as well as what they would change about it. Their answers were quite consistent across all schools and grades. One idea that came up repeatedly is the value of having young university students as presenters. Many students also said they liked the fact that we were people they did not know and would probably never see again. As presenters, we found that being young and not knowing the students gave us several advantages – for example, we felt freer to make jokes and act silly in a way that would be inappropriate for an older person. This helped us develop a rapport with each of the classes.

Presenting in pairs of one male and one female worked well. Each partner worked as a moral support for the other, and also as backup. For example, if a student in a class said it is acceptable for girls to hit boys, having both presenters challenge that statement gave our message greater impact. Similarly, having both a male and a female pre-

sender demonstrated that people of both genders agree that dating violence is wrong. This may be especially important for male students, who may be quick to dismiss and discount similar messages from female-only presentations and/or presentations that focus exclusively on male use of violence (Wekerle and Wolfe 1999).

Audience participation was a large component of our presentation. We allowed questions or comments at any time, and we encouraged students to participate as often as possible. Our games were interactive, and we often had students join us in front of the classroom to perform the skits. Students seemed to like being part of the presentation because it turned the presentation from a lecture into more of a workshop. It also helped dissipate behaviour problems in all but the most difficult classes. Interestingly, in many classes boys participated more often than girls, sometimes almost shutting the girls totally out of the discussion. This indicates that although our informal interactive style of presentation was effective at retaining student interest, it may not always be the most effective style for girls. Research has shown that, consistent with our observations, males tend to dominate the discussion in mixed sex groups (Beal 1994). As girls are most often the victims of dating violence, we feel it is especially important to find strategies that work for them.

Presenting to small groups of students one class at a time enhanced the effectiveness of our presentation. We feel (and the students agreed) that speaking to a smaller group allowed students to participate more in the presentation and to really feel part of it. Although presentations given in a school assembly may reach more students and be simpler to implement, we feel strongly that speaking to students a class at a time is a better alternative. The attention that each student receives in a smaller group means that students 'get' the message, and we hope this means they will be more likely to change their attitudes and behaviour.

We received varying amounts of support from the classroom teachers, and the extent of their support seemed to have an impact on the attentiveness of the class. Classes in which the teacher welcomed us and introduced us enthusiastically seemed more receptive to our message. Some teachers chose to stay in the classroom during the presentation, usually sitting quietly at the back of the room; others chose to leave us alone with the class. For the most part, we found that the classes in which the teacher remained and those in which the teacher left the classroom reacted similarly to the presentation. However, the few classes that were hard to control were all classes in which the

teacher was not present. In some cases the teacher remained in the classroom and was an active participant in the presentation. This was the least effective situation, as it took away from our authority as presenters and made the students feel as if they were still in the normal classroom situation rather than in an interactive workshop.

Many students indicated that they enjoyed the humour that we sprinkled into the presentation, as well as the games we played with them. They felt that these elements kept their attention and made the presentation more interesting. As presenters, we were sometimes worried that the fun would take away from the seriousness of our message, but students told us this was not the case.

The students had many suggestions for other topics, such as learning more about dating in general, and about *how* to date in particular. One student raised the issue of friends pressuring other friends into having sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend. Some students suggested having survivors of dating violence speak to them, or having police officers talk to them about the legal consequences of dating violence. They were interested in writing their own skits and presenting them to the class. They also wanted tips on what they should do if they ever find themselves in an abusive relationship.

Our Final Thoughts

Overall, we found this experience both educational and enjoyable. We are sure that our presentations had an impact on the students we met; we know they had an impact on us personally. Our understanding of the problem of dating violence was broadened enormously. When answering students' questions, we realized that sometimes we too have difficulty drawing the line between what is and what is not dating violence. For each of us, it was eye opening to see the variety of experiences and attitudes of New Brunswick students. We were surprised at the impact of our one-hour presentation. Running into students a few weeks, or in one case a few months, after we met them, and having them remember us and our message, made us feel that we had done something really worthwhile with our time.

We also feel that we have learned new attitudes and skills that apply far beyond this job. One of us (Tammy) was finishing an education degree, and believed this experience would change the way she would approach her work. For example, she would be more aware of the things that go on in the hallways at school. Two of us (Justin and

Krista) have worked at summer camps, and we feel that our general skills of working with young people really improved. Our fourth member (Jamie) became more watchful among his friends to make sure that a joke did not cross the boundary between friendly teasing and psychological abuse.

Dating violence should be a part of the curriculum in all schools in New Brunswick and throughout Canada. We believe that this type of presentation is an especially effective way to address this issue. Unfortunately, we were able to visit only a small proportion of New Brunswick schools. Nonetheless, in only one-and-a-half months, more than two thousand New Brunswick students received interactive and interesting training about dating violence. We hope our program has made an impact on these students and has – even if only in a small way – changed their lives as well as their current and future relationships for the better.

Every school in New Brunswick would benefit from this type of dating violence education, especially if there was follow-up to the presentation. Thus, we also hope that a similar model in which students are trained to present interactive and engaging dating violence prevention programs to younger students can be implemented on a widespread and permanent (as opposed to *ad hoc*) basis.

Reflections from the Dating Violence Research Team

We (the Dating Violence Research Team) viewed the dissemination phase of our research as an opportunity to actively transform research findings into effective interventions. There were several ways in which the presentations helped us do this. First, the presentations were a means for us to repay the contributions that students had made to our research through their participation. (Soon after the research was completed, we also had provided a written summary of the results to the students who completed questionnaires and participated in focus groups, and to participating schools.) Second, the presentations seem to have helped educate some students about dating violence and, hopefully, to have prevented at least some instances of dating violence. Third, doing the presentations seems to have been a positive and growth experience for the student presenters themselves. Our student presenters extended their knowledge and awareness of dating violence; also, they are likely to become activists against violence in their own lives and in their social networks as a result of developing and

giving the presentations. In this way, we feel that we are passing the torch by involving a new generation in efforts to prevent dating violence. Fourth, students' responses to the presentations, and feedback from them, extended our understanding of the types of dating violence prevention programs that are likely to be effective. This will help us make recommendations for a comprehensive dating violence prevention strategy for the province of New Brunswick. We are more aware than ever that it is important to pay attention to the characteristics of the presenters, and to the context of the presentation in addition to its content. We know it is important to assess local attitudes toward and experiences with dating violence and to incorporate this information into any program. Similarly, we have been struck by the influence of peer groups in maintaining myths about dating violence as well as violence-supportive attitudes, and by the importance of targeting these beliefs in any program. Again, this is more likely accomplished by presenters who are seen more as peers and less as authority figures who do not really understand adolescents. Furthermore, student presenters themselves will become further sensitized to the issue of dating violence, and be in a position to positively influence behaviour among their own social networks. Finally, by asking middle and high school students to identify strategies and interventions to deal with adolescent dating violence, we involved the students themselves in the prevention effort. In this way, we tried to make use of the knowledge and wisdom of adolescents about what is best for them – knowledge and wisdom that is based on their own daily lived experiences in their own communities.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct a formal evaluation of the dating violence prevention presentations. However, feedback that the Dating Violence Research Team received from teachers and guidance counsellors who sat in on the presentations was highly positive. As is too often the case, this program was not a required part of the curriculum but rather was an 'extra' supported by one-time grants. If we are to be truly successful at preventing dating violence, it is important that there be sustained support, both financial and nonfinancial, from government, school administrators, and teachers. Educational programs aimed at informing students about dating violence, challenging their violence-supportive beliefs, and arming them with skills for developing healthy non-abusive relationships must be a required part of middle school and high school curricula. We have taken a few steps in this direction by having representatives of the Department of

education as members of the Dating Violence Research Team. Thus, the Department of Education contributed to the design of the research, contributed resources to enable the research, and eased our way into the schools to conduct the initial research as well as to make the dating violence presentations. The Department of Education has also written in support of our efforts to develop a comprehensive dating violence prevention strategy for the province of New Brunswick.

In keeping with our recognition of the need for a curriculum aimed at preventing dating violence, the next step of the action-oriented research agenda of the Dating Violence Research Team is to develop, in partnership with others, a comprehensive provincial strategy for dating violence prevention programming in New Brunswick. We will be doing this, in part, through evaluation of the existing dating violence prevention program in the province. We will also be incorporating findings from evaluations of interventions that have been developed and implemented outside the province (see Wekerle and Wolfe 1999, for a review). The results of our research and of our experience with the dating violence presentations we have implemented in anglophone and francophone schools in New Brunswick will be essential in designing a comprehensive strategy for preventing dating violence.

NOTES

Dr E. Sandra Byers is the coordinator of the Dating Violence Research Team. Krista Byers-Heinlein, Jamie Hart, Tammy Harrison, and Justin Matchett were the student presenters. Other members of the Dating Violence Research Team who contributed to this research were Nicole Beliveau, Robert Bonner, Bruno Caron, Cynthia Davis, Daniel Doiron, Jan Greenough, Alice Guerette-Breau, Leslie Brannen, Aline Landry, Brigitte Lavoie, Margaret Layden-Oreto, Linda Legere, Suzanne Lemieux, Marie-Berthe Lirette, Gabrielle Maillet, Carol McMullin, Rebecca Moore, Lisa Price, Marcelle Saint-Pierre, Heather Sears, and John Whelan.

In May and June of 2001, we hired student presenters to give similar presentations in francophone schools in New Brunswick with a support grant from the New Brunswick Board of School Trustees. The student presenters gave fifty-three presentations involving a total of about 1,300 students. Their experiences were extremely similar to the experiences of the students who presented in the anglophone schools.

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