

# Electronic Dating Violence

## A Brief Guide for Educators and Parents



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Many teens across the United States experience dating violence, defined as “physical assault or acts of bodily harm, including psychological and emotional abuse, verbal or implied, that take place in private or in social situations.”<sup>1,34</sup> To be clear, the term “dating violence” is not intended to include violence between casual acquaintances but rather is reserved for those behaviors occurring between those whose relationship is characterized by dating, affection, or sexual involvement. It typically consists of various forms of mistreatment ranging from insults and rumor spreading to threats and physical assaults.

The number of persons who have been victimized offline by romantic partners ranges from 10% to 47%, depending on how the behaviors are defined and measured in research studies.<sup>2,3</sup> Interestingly, research has shown that teenagers are at a higher risk than adults when it comes to abuse by intimates.<sup>4</sup> Recent estimates from the nationally-representative Youth Risk Behavior Survey involving almost 15,000 high school students, found that approximately 1 out of 10 had experienced physical dating violence.<sup>5</sup> As might be expected, the rates for psychological and verbal violence are higher. Somewhere between 20% and 30% of teens have experienced this form of dating violence, according to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.<sup>6</sup> Finally, a study of high school students from 2007 reported that 85% of boys and 92% of girls engaged in *psychological* aggression against their partner in their current dating relationship; 85% of boys and 88% of girls also revealed that they had been the victim of this type of aggression in their current dating relationship.<sup>7</sup> In addition, 24% of boys and 40% of girls *physically* aggressed against their current partner, while 31% of boys and 30% of girls stated they were victims of such physical abuse from their current partner. An overarching finding was that psychological aggression has a strong direct effect on physical aggression,<sup>7</sup> highlighting the need to address the former before it contributes in some way to the latter.

It bears mentioning that dating violence may be pronounced during adolescence due to the newness of romantic relationships for boys and girls, and an as-yet underdeveloped ability to constructively cope with frustration, jealousy, or other negative emotions.<sup>8</sup> In addition, there may be a hesitance for one partner to leave his or her abuser since youth relationships are perceived

to be more significant in a shorter period of time.<sup>9</sup> There may also be peer pressure from outside sources to remain together or to simply *be* in a relationship with someone because it is socially expected or encouraged.

With respect to demographic differences, the distribution of dating violence victimization across the sexes appears to be mixed, depending on the research consulted. Some find that rates are similar among males and females,<sup>10, 11</sup> while others find that more females are targeted<sup>2</sup> and still others find that males are more frequently victimized.<sup>3, 12</sup> Males have previously been shown to offend more often,<sup>13, 14</sup> although recent studies are finding the opposite.<sup>15, 16</sup> Findings across race are also conflicting, with some identifying Blacks as more often involved as victims and offenders than Whites<sup>17-19</sup> and others finding the opposite.<sup>20, 21</sup> It has also been determined that adolescents involved in same-sex relationships are as likely to experience dating violence as those involved in opposite-sex relationships.<sup>22</sup>

**"I call it an electronic leash. I've had girls come into my office with cell phone bills showing 9,000 text messages and calls in a month. This is all hours of the day and night. And it's threatening. 'Hi. How are you? Where are you? Who are you with? Who are you talking to?'"**

*– Dr. Jill Murray, Psychologist  
US Department of Education*

Finally, a number of other factors correlated with dating violence deserve comment to emphasize the significance of this problem. Negative emotions such as anger,<sup>23</sup> anxiety,<sup>24</sup> sadness,<sup>25</sup> depression,<sup>26</sup> and fear<sup>27</sup> often stem from intimate partner abuse. Psychoemotional and physical well-being are also seemingly affected; violence within romantic relationships has been linked to lower self-esteem,<sup>28</sup> somatic health symptoms such as headaches and weight changes,<sup>29</sup> and suicidal ideation.<sup>4</sup> Many of these correlates have also been linked to cyberbullying,<sup>30, 31</sup> providing additional evidence that there are similarities and overlap between the two experiences.

### Cyberbullying as a Form of Teen Dating Violence

There are many ways in which teens can exploit Internet-enabled devices to cause harm to a romantic partner. Aggressors may be excessively mean-spirited to their significant other when communicating with them online for the same reasons that cyberbullies do so.<sup>31</sup> In addition, privacy violations can occur as perpetrators check up on, monitor, and even stalk their partners if there is provision for easy access of the latter's computer or cell phone. Some situations involve one person paying for the other's cell phone (and/or monthly bill), and then feeling entitled to constantly check and monitor who is being called and texted. When this happens – and conflict ensues – the abuser may take away or even destroy that cell phone, effectively cutting the victim off from help, support, and communication with others.

**"It's the phenomenon of no place to run and no place to hide. Now, you can be stalked electronically. You can't even see your predator coming."**

*– Kevin Jennings,  
Assistant Deputy Secretary,  
US Department of Education*

There have also been incidents where aggressors utilize textual, audio, picture, or video content stored on their cell phones or computers to blackmail, extort, or otherwise manipulate their partner into saying or doing something against their will. Notably, this content can be shared with a very large audience – a classroom of students, the entire student body, a neighborhood, the town, the entire world – with ease and great speed either through the forwarding of a text or multimedia message, or through its uploading to a site like Facebook or YouTube. Its "viral" nature, then, can greatly expand the extent of victimization a partner suffers, knowing that the embarrassing or harmful content is being viewed and shared – perhaps repeatedly – by so many people. The situation can become worse after realizing that it is often difficult to work with Internet Service Providers and web site administrators to get the content removed in a timely manner.

It is interesting to note that motivations for teenage dating violence include anger and a felt need to exert power;<sup>32</sup> both of these can be vividly demonstrated through the use of communications technologies. An adolescent can quickly send a scathing or harassing email or instant message to a girlfriend or boyfriend solely based on negative emotions, without taking the time to calm down

and react rationally to a feeling or situation and without considering the implications of that textual content.<sup>31</sup>

Also, power can be readily expressed in a dating relationship because the victim's past and present experiences with the abuser provide a unique relational dependency and history that make it difficult to resist or get away from online mistreatment or harm. Even though this may be less true in adolescent relationships than in adult relationships (where there is sometimes a need for financial assistance and sometimes the presence of children),<sup>8</sup> there still often exists a power dynamic that may be exploited if the relationship is unbalanced and dysfunctional. More suffering and pain may very well result from cyberbullying within a romantic relationship, as compared to cyberbullying among strangers, casual acquaintances, or even platonic friends. Relatedly, these technological devices allow abusers to feel constantly connected to (and within "reach" of) their dating partner, who often feels that he or she has no escape from the torment.<sup>31</sup> This is amplified by the fact that teens constantly have their phone with them day and night, and use it as their lifeline to maintain and grow their relationships.

There are many similarities between cyberbullying and electronic dating violence that should be pointed out. First, both naturally employ technology. Second, cyberbullying is largely perpetrated by and among known peers,<sup>33</sup> as is aggression in romantic relationships (where youth typically select partners from within their peer group). Third, both lead to specific emotional, psychological, physical, and behavioral consequences.<sup>34, 35</sup> Fourth, both also may have similar fundamental antecedents such as inherent insecurities and a need to demonstrate control and power. With regard to differences, cyberbullying tends to occur between individuals who do not like, and do not want to be around, each other. Electronic dating violence transpires between two people who are attracted to each other, at least on some level.

As a final but very important point, outside of victimization that is occurring (or has occurred) between teenage dating partners, it is possible that this form of abuse might lead to intimate partner violence during adulthood. Studies have shown that patterns of dating violence often start during adolescence and then carry on into adulthood,<sup>4</sup> and that the degree of intimate partner violence tends to increase if the behavior has taken root during one's formative years.<sup>36</sup> This possibility must be targeted and addressed so that problematic behavioral tendencies among youth can be corrected before they lead to harm in future interpersonal and romantic relationships.<sup>37</sup>

### What Does Research Tell Us About Electronic Dating Violence?

Recent studies have shown that dating violence among youthful populations remains a significant social problem, and a few studies sponsored in part by private sector corporations indicate that the Internet and cell phones serve a contributing role.<sup>7-9, 38, 39</sup> For example, an online survey of teens sponsored by the Liz Claiborne company revealed that 36% of teens say their boyfriend or girlfriend checked up on them as many as 30 times per day and 17% reported that their significant other made them afraid not to respond to cell phone calls, email, or text messages.<sup>40</sup> Another recent poll found that 22% of youth between the ages of 14 and 24 who were involved in a romantic relationship said that their partner wrote something about them online or in a text message that wasn't true.<sup>41</sup> This same survey reported that 22% of youth felt that their significant other checked up on them too often online or via cell phone.

**Well I was in this relationship with this boy and he started to get upset because I didn't want to do anything sexual or physical so he started to post mean and hurtful blogs about me. He even commented on my status. I was embarrassed. When I confronted him about it he didn't even care or have any regret but it was a different story when I got revenge by telling the school principal on him. Then he got upset and did even meaner things to me like sexually harassing me but since then it been better because I erased all of my email accounts and even got out of public school.**

In research based on a random sample of approximately 4,400 11-18 year-old youth from a large school district in the southern United States from 2010, we found that about 12% of students had been the victim of some form of electronic dating violence. More specific results are summarized below.

#### VICTIMIZATION

- 10% of youth said a romantic partner has prevented them from using a computer or cell phone.
- 6% of boys and girls say their romantic partner posted something publicly online to make fun of, threaten, or embarrass them.

- 10.4% of boys and 9.8% of girls said they received a threatening cell phone message from their romantic partner.
- 5.4% of boys and 3.4% of girls said their romantic partner uploaded or shared a humiliating or harassing picture of them online or through their cell phone.

#### OFFENDING

- 7% of youth admitted that they prevented their romantic partner from using a computer or cell phone.
- 6% of boys and 4% of girls say they posted something publicly online to make fun of, threaten, or embarrass their romantic partner.
- About 7% of youth said they sent a threatening cell phone message to their romantic partner.
- 5% of boys and 3% of girls said they uploaded or shared a humiliating or harassing picture of their romantic partner online or through their cell phone.

#### RELATIONSHIPS

- Victims of traditional (offline) dating violence are significantly more likely to be victims of electronic forms of dating violence ( $r=.75$ ) than those who have not experienced offline bullying.
- Those who admit to engaging in traditional dating violence also report engaging in electronic forms of dating violence ( $r=.77$ ).
- Victims of dating violence ( $r=.51$ ) and specifically electronic forms of dating violence ( $r=.64$ ) are significantly more likely to also be victims of cyberbullying.
- Youth who are cyberbullied are 3.6 times as likely to experience electronic teen dating violence as those who are not cyberbullied.
- Youth who admit to engaging in dating violence ( $r=.52$ ) and specifically electronic forms of dating violence ( $r=.65$ ) also admit to engaging in cyberbullying.
- Youth who share their passwords with their significant other are nearly three times as likely to be victims of electronic dating violence.
- All forms of dating violence increase as youth get older.

#### Policy Implications

It is clear that electronic dating violence affects a meaningful proportion of teenagers. As this problem continues to be studied, we hope to learn much more about context, contributing factors, and consequences. As described above, there are a number of individual- and familial-level factors that have been correlated with being either an abuser or victim in offline romantic relationships.

Future research must determine if they are also relevant in technology-based instances of dating violence, and can consequently shape general programmatic strategies implemented within the school and community. In this way, youth-serving adults can be mindful of who might be most susceptible to this phenomenon and can concentrate their efforts on those teenagers. Preventive informational and educational efforts based on data-driven knowledge, then, may go a long way in curtailing adolescent partner abuse.

**"Tell somebody you trust and try to get help  
because you can't go through it yourself.  
It's too much of a burden to carry."  
—Allyson Pereira, teenage dating violence victim**

Additionally, there are laws on the books that enable police to step in and address domestic and dating violence in practically every jurisdiction. Law enforcement and other responding entities need, however, to be perceived as capable, compassionate entities who can deal with the problem in a way that does not make it worse for the victim. Research has consistently identified a reluctance on the part of battered women and the sexually abused to contact police,<sup>42-45</sup> and this is tragic because it denies the opportunity to help where it is most needed. A deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological mindset – and the situational circumstances – of teenaged victims in a tenuous and complicated developmental stage provided through the current research may help inform police practice when called to deal with cases of teen dating violence. These issues are perhaps made worse when the violence is perpetrated via technology, as officers unfamiliar with cyberbullying and/or dating violence may not appreciate their significance and simply disregard them as non-serious issues.

Finally, identifying and measuring certain predictors and outcomes of offline and online teenage partner abuse (such as suicidal ideation and traditional delinquency) may serve to illuminate its weighty real-world ramifications, and should hopefully lead to more attention and resources to reduce its frequency. While it is increasingly on the radar of criminal justice, educational, victim advocacy, and social service institutions, there appears to be a lack of knowledge associated with what can be done about it. Future research should work to identify which factors lead to harm in youthful romantic relationships, and can also pave the way for more informed prevention and response strategies.

#### Suggested citation:

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#### Notes

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The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more information, visit <http://www.cyberbullying.us>. © 2011 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin