

U.S. high schools lax in preventing dating abuse: study

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Counselors say they lack training in prevention, assistance.

(HealthDay) -- Although dating violence is a recognized problem for U.S. teens, a majority of high school counselors say their school provides no training or guidelines for dealing with abusive romantic relationships, a new study finds.

Prior research has found that between 10 percent and 30 percent of teens have been physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend, according to background information in the study. And dating abuse has been linked to [suicidal thoughts](#), [weight gain](#), sexually transmitted diseases and other physical and [mental health problems](#), the researchers noted.

But preventing dating abuse and assisting victims are not priorities for U.S. high schools, the new study concluded.

"We found that the majority of schools don't have a protocol to deal with

incidents of teen dating abuse," said lead researcher Dr. Jagdish Khubchandani, an assistant professor of community health education at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.

"This means that most of the school counselors would not know what to do. This is also true for school nurses," he said.

The reasons vary from not considering dating abuse a serious issue to [school administrators'](#) reluctance to get involved in [romantic relationships](#), he said. Some also fear parents will object to school interference in a child's personal or [sexual life](#).

"There needs to be more awareness and education about dating violence," Khubchandani said. "Parents and school personnel should collaborate, and there should be regular assessments of the prevalence of this problem."

In addition to [physical aggression](#) and [sexual assault](#), dating violence includes [psychological abuse](#). Because teenage victims of dating violence are just beginning to date, they may think abusive behavior is the norm, which can perpetuate the cycle, experts say.

For the study, published online July 9 and in the August print issue of *Pediatrics*, Khubchandani's team sent [questionnaires](#) to 550 high school counselors asking about their training and ability to deal with teen dating violence.

More than 81 percent of the respondents said their school had no protocol for responding to a report of dating violence.

Ninety percent said there had been no staff training in the previous two years regarding student victims of dating abuse, and more than three-quarters said their school had no committee that dealt with health and

safety issues including dating abuse or healthy relationships.

Yet the majority of counselors (61 percent) said they had had occasion to advise a victim of dating violence in the previous two years. Most of those they helped were girls.

Counselors with no training in dating abuse stated it was not a serious issue, the study found, while those who had had some training recognized its importance and were much more likely to help students who reported it.

Dr. Andra Tharp, a health scientist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said that "adolescence is a high-risk period for sexual and dating violence.

"It's a problem we need to be working on with anyone who interacts with youth," added Tharp, who works in the division of violence prevention.

Besides training staff, Tharp believes students, both victims and perpetrators, need to be educated about relationship abuse, so the blame doesn't fall on the victim, but on the perpetrators -- where it belongs, she said.

Most schools responded to reports of dating violence by calling a parent or reporting it to the police. Fewer referred the student to child protection services or the school nurse for medical or legal advice, the researchers found.

"Sexual violence and [dating violence](#) are sensitive topics for everyone," Tharp said. "The fact that it's of a sexual nature adds a level of sensitivity to it. For school and parents, it may be awkward to address the issue."

Schools need to create an environment where the problem is recognized and students feel safe in reporting it, Tharp said.

More information: For more information on teen dating violence, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/) .

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