

# Researchers find parent-child violence leads to teen dating violence

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Teens today are involved in intimate relationships at a much younger age and often have different definitions of what is acceptable behavior in a relationship. Violence is something that is all too common and according to researchers at Iowa State it is a reflection of the relationships teens have with their parents or their parent's partner.

"It is true that if you grow up in a violent household you have a higher likelihood of being in a violent relationship," said Brenda Lohman, lead author and an associate professor of human development and family studies at Iowa State University.

The research focused on psychological violence instead of [physical violence](#). Lohman and her colleagues discovered that psychological violence between a parent and child was more significant than a child witnessing violence between two adults in the home.

"If the parent is more aggressive toward the child, the child is more likely to be in relationships where they're being victimized or perpetrating violence against their partner a few years or even a decade later," Lohman said.

This study is part of a special series of articles on teen dating violence guest edited by Lohman for the April issue of the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. It is one of the first studies to examine patterns of violence over three decades to see how children exposed to psychological violence and family stress were affected in relationships later in life.

Researchers relied on data from the Iowa Youth and Family Project, a 24-year project assessing families in rural Iowa, as well as video recordings of families and couples having a discussion or completing assigned problem-solving tasks.

Researchers found family stress, both emotional and financial, during adolescence is another predictor of [intimate partner violence](#), but only when people are in their late 20s or early 30s, not during the teen years. Tricia Neppl, coauthor and an assistant professor in human development and family studies, said there could be several reasons why. It could be that people are more stable in their relationships or the fact that they have children.

"For whatever reason, the family stress that you experienced in early adolescence is having some kind of a lasting effect on your role as you settle into adulthood," Neppl said. "And more so than emerging adulthood, or your early 20s, when you're still trying to figure out what those roles are, you're young and you may or may not have children yet."

What is troubling for researchers is how the cycle of violence continues from one generation to the next. Adolescents who are influenced by family stress early in life not only grow up to have poor relationships with their partner or spouse, but Neppl's work shows it influences their children's development into adulthood as well.

Negative personality and the more sexual partners a teen has also increases the likelihood of risky behavior and violence in a relationship, researchers said.

## **Teenage girls and the definition of violence**

Perception and gender also factor into the cycle of violence. In a second study, Lohman interviewed teens in low-income neighborhoods in

Boston, Chicago and San Antonio and found an individual's perception made a difference in how violence was reported.

For example, Lohman said she and her colleague found that in an urban sample "females were a lot more psychologically violent during the teen years than boys. This includes minor acts of violence, like name-calling, hitting, slapping or pushing."

However, the data did not allow researchers to pinpoint how the cycle of violence started with each reported incident and whether the male or female was the perpetrator. But it is not surprising to them to see more teen girls initiating the violence.

In the second study, drug and alcohol use, low parental monitoring, academic difficulties and involvement with antisocial peers were also significant early risk factors for perpetration of dating violence in late adolescence. Differences in race, culture and gender also strongly influenced if teens perpetrated violence.

"Teens who were struggling in school or were using drugs and alcohol were more likely to perpetrate violence," Lohman said. "Furthermore, teens whose parents did not know who their friends were or did not know where their child hung out socially with peers, were more likely to be violent. This underscores the importance of prevention and intervention programs that address peers, families and schools."

## **Prevention and building relationship skills**

The fact that one in four adolescents report [dating violence](#) every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control, underscores the need for better and earlier prevention, Lohman said. The renewal of the Violence Against Women Act is a step in that direction, but researchers would like to see more education and programming in the schools or after-

school programs that focus on the teen years.

Family intervention is also important to preventing [psychological violence](#) later in life.

"Working with families who are under particular amounts of stress, whether it is economic or emotional distress, it's working with those families to help lower their stress loads," Neppl said. "We also want to help teach them how to be better parents and focus more on prevention services."

The results from these two studies imply that early warning signs across multiple systems, such as the family, peers and schools, should be addressed in dating [violence](#) prevention programs.

"Beyond parenting, I think it starts with peer skill building and peer development. Adults can start by explaining appropriate things to say to other peers and that you don't call peers names. These skills then carry over into future romantic relationships," Lohman said. "The earlier you can teach relationship skills the better. As for romantic relationship skills, I would like to see those taught at least by middle school and beyond."

**More information:** [link.springer.com/journal/10964/42/4/page/1](https://link.springer.com/journal/10964/42/4/page/1)

Provided by Iowa State University

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