

Boys victims of dating violence, too

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(HealthDay)—Contrary to what many people may think, teenage boys commonly suffer dating violence—including physical and emotional abuse, a new U.S. government study finds.

The study focused on teens considered to be at high risk for [dating violence](#)—those who had suffered or witnessed violence at home or in their neighborhoods.

It turned out that [boys](#) were about as likely as girls to say they'd been victims of some form of dating violence. The pattern was also corroborated by girls' reports: They commonly admitted to being perpetrators.

"To the average person, this is probably surprising," said Monica Swahn, a professor of epidemiology at Georgia State University who has studied dating violence.

"Parents and pediatricians may underestimate how common dating violence is, and how often boys are victims," said Swahn, who was not involved in the study.

A number of national surveys have found that U.S. girls are far more often the victims of dating violence than boys—particularly in terms of physical injuries.

But the new study conflicts with those findings, said lead researcher Dennis Reidy, of the division of [violence prevention](#) at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"One potential reason is that we looked at a high-risk population, and not a nationally representative sample," Reidy said.

Regardless, he added, the study points out that boys can be victims, too.

"We don't want to get locked into the mindset that boys are always the perpetrators and girls are always the victims," Reidy said.

The findings are based on more than 1,100 [kids](#) ages 11 to 17 who were surveyed about a wide range of dating violence. They were asked not only about physical abuse, but also how often they'd been sexually victimized—including having a boyfriend or girlfriend pressure them to have sex, or spread "sexual rumors" about them.

The researchers also asked about psychological and emotional abuse—like being yelled at, threatened or called names.

Overall, almost 11 percent of boys said they'd been physically abused by a dating partner at least three times. That compared with slightly less than 8 percent of girls. And a similar percentage of girls and boys—around 4 percent—said they'd been injured.

When it came to psychological abuse, 29 percent of boys and almost 34 percent of girls said they'd been victimized at least three times. Slightly more than 14 percent of boys and 12 percent of girls said they'd been sexually victimized that many times.

The findings on [sexual victimization](#) might sound particularly surprising, Reidy said. But, he added, it may relate to the survey questions, which asked about sexual "coercion," rather than rape.

The researchers found that some patterns varied by age. Older girls tended to report more sexual victimization than boys, for example. They also admitted inflicting physical injuries on a dating partner more often than older boys did.

But Swahn said it's not clear what to make of those patterns, since the study did not follow kids over time. "I'd be cautious about interpreting the age-related findings," she said. "You need to follow the same kids over time to see whether their behavior changes."

Reidy said more research is needed to confirm the current findings, which were published online Jan. 29 in the journal *Pediatrics*. But for now, he said, adults need to be aware that dating violence affects [girls](#) and boys—and it starts at an early age.

"Kids are dating at an age that's younger than you might think," Reidy said, "and dating violence is an issue much earlier than you might expect."

Swahn agreed. "We probably need to start education and prevention in middle school," she said.

Schools are probably the best place to reach kids, Reidy said. And parents, of course, have a "big role," he added. They can talk to their kids about how to manage romantic relationships, and try to be good role models in their own behavior.

But for kids from violent homes or neighborhoods, school and community programs can be crucial.

"These kids need help in learning what a healthy relationship is," Swahn said. "And right now, we have very limited resources for them."

Reidy agreed. But he stressed that the study findings don't mean only disadvantaged kids suffer or perpetrate dating violence.

"We know from national studies that about 10 percent of kids experienced sexual dating violence in the past year, and 10 percent experienced physical [violence](#)," Reidy said. "So this is a problem everywhere."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [teen dating violence](#).

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