

Abuse in Dating Relationships: Young People's Accounts of Disclosure, Non-disclosure, Help-seeking and Prevention Education

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Across the Western world the research literature documents the onset of violence and abuse in adolescents' heterosexual dating relationships. Comparatively little research, however, has examined how young people deal with the aftermath of such violence or abuse. This paper presents findings related to young people's disclosure or non-disclosure following experiences of abuse or violence. Findings are reported in two sections. The first section draws on material from a survey of 373 high school students that asked questions about abuse disclosure or non-disclosure and the respective consequences of each. The second section focuses on young people's talk about helping services and the prevention of relationship problems through education- material extracted from focus group data involving 101 high school students. Survey findings indicate variable patterns of disclosure across emotional abuse, sexual coercion, and physical violence, with disclosures made primarily to friends. Focus group data suggest that a number of barriers may operate to preclude help-seeking, including embarrassment, concerns about confidentiality, and lack of trust. These findings are discussed in the context of implications for service providers and school education programmes.

During adolescence the majority of young people enter into heterosexual romantic relationships. While for many the experiences of such relationships will be, in the main, positive, a growing research literature suggests that between 12% (Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983) and 59% (Jezl, Molitor, & Wright, 1996) of young people may experience emotional abuse, physical violence, or sexual coercion. The literature

is comparatively sparse, however, regarding the extent to which young people affected by abusive experiences disclose to others and, in addition, what the consequences of disclosure or non-disclosure may be. In a seminal study of relationship violence amongst an adolescent population Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, and Christopher (1983) found that their participants generally disclosed to friends rather than family or counsellors. Almost a decade later, Peterson and Olday (1992) noted a similar trend in addition to finding that females were more likely to talk to someone than males. Given the sparsity of research in the dating violence literature regarding disclosure and help-seeking in the aftermath of abusive experiences, two relevant bodies of literature appear to be useful. One of these is the sexual coercion/date rape literature on reporting/help-seeking behaviour, and the other the general help-seeking behaviour literature regarding adolescents who experience emotional distress. Unfortunately neither of these literatures is substantive; nonetheless there are some noteworthy findings in relation to each.

Within the date rape literature researchers consistently report low rates of disclosure, both informally within support networks, and more formally to the police or a rape crisis centre. About 20-40% of young people (high school and university populations) disclose sexual victimisation (e.g., Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Pitts & Schwartz, 1997; Patton & Mannison, 1995). Formal disclosure or reporting rates appear to be significantly lower, a figure of 5% found in Koss's (1988) research. In a New Zealand study (Martin, 1996) one third of the women surveyed in a Women's Health Survey reported they had never previously disclosed their sexual victimisation, and only a few (1.6%) of these women reported their experience to the police.

Amongst the reasons cited for non-reporting of sexual incidents in The International Crime Survey conducted in New Zealand in 1992 were that the incident was not serious enough and that respondents had resolved it themselves (Statistics New Zealand, 1996). The range of reasons for non reporting of sexual victimisation, particularly acquaintance rape, in the international literature include:

(a) not wanting to get the attacker into trouble, (b) embarrassment over the details of the rape, (c) fear of retribution from the attacker, (d) the belief that the rape was their fault, (e) that they will not be believed, and (f) that nothing will be done (Bechhofer & Parrot, 1991; Pino & Meier, 1999; Warshaw, 1988). There seems to be a significant gap in the literature concerning disclosure as opposed to formal reporting of sexual victimisation, in particular what factors prompt or hinder disclosure and what consequences ensue from disclosure. Contributions from a recent New Zealand study that develops a model of the disclosure process regarding stigmatising experiences such as sexual victimisation (Muir, 2001) indicate that disclosure may relate to a precipitating event, motivational factors (altruistic, affiliative, and instrumental needs), and risk assessment.

The literature on adolescent help-seeking behaviour has more actively sought to find out what factors contribute to or hinders help-seeking behaviour, of which disclosure is an integral aspect. More specifically, the literature typically addresses correlates of help-seeking (e.g., Fallon & Bowles, 2000; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996), barriers to help-seeking (e.g., Dubow, Lovko, & Kausch, 1990; Kuhl, Jarkon-Horlick, & Morrissey, 1997) and, less commonly, the effectiveness of help-seeking (Rickwood, 1995). Complicating the picture somewhat is a tendency for this small literature to be contradictory regarding the characteristics of those seeking help, the role of distress, and the rates of help-seeking behaviour. Some studies appear to find moderate levels of help-seeking behaviour, including formal (professional) and informal sources of help, such as Fallon and Bowles' (2000) finding that 58% of students sought help for problems related to family, education, finances, or relationships. Others report significantly less help-seeking behaviour; Dubow et al. (1990) for example recorded that almost 70% of students with "distressing problems" did not seek help. More consistently, the literature suggests that friends are a more commonly cited source of help and that females seek help to a greater degree than males (e.g., Garland & Zigler, 1994; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). It would seem, too, that adolescents do not shrink from seeking help from their families, although mothers are significantly more likely to be turned to than fathers.

Where young people do seek help for problems, what kinds of outcomes are apparent in the literature? Answering this question with any conviction is difficult because, in an already small literature, the outcomes or effectiveness of help-seeking appear to have escaped attention. Rickwood's (1995) research, however, suggests that seeking help with a problem may not be effective in alleviating distress, regardless of whether the person turned to is professional or part of the support network. Rickwood seeks to explain his findings in terms of ways in which friends may exacerbate distress by relating their own problems or by offering interpretations that put a more distressing slant on the problem. He also draws on the thought-provoking work of Mechanic (1979, 1980), who postulates that help-seeking may be maladaptive for adolescents because it emphasises

a focus on self, problems and symptoms and, in so doing, may paradoxically heighten distress in a young person already acutely struggling with self-awareness.

Another relatively under-researched aspect of help-seeking behaviour amongst adolescents is factors that may inhibit asking for help. Some of the factors suggested (e.g., Dubow et al., 1990) include the problem being deemed "too personal", fear of lack of confidentiality, a preference for handling the problem autonomously, and a perception that no person or service could help. Kuhl et al. (1997) constructed a questionnaire (BASH, barriers to adolescents seeking help) to investigate barriers among adolescents, some of whom (30%) had been in therapy. Findings indicated help-seeking did not relate to distress or attitude to help-seeking, rather it was the perceived sufficiency of friends, family and self to deal with problems. Factors such as stigma, confidentiality and affordability were the least significant barriers to seeking help.

Clearly, the extant knowledge regarding to whom adolescents turn for help, for which types of problems, and with what outcomes, is limited. The majority of studies rely on survey research alone and there appears to be little qualitative work. The latter would be particularly useful to gather young people's perspectives of available helping services, whether they would use them or encourage friends to, and what factors come in to play that might deter young people from seeking help. Nor does the literature have a great deal to offer regarding the outcomes of disclosure or help-seeking behaviours and the extent to which they exacerbate rather than relieve distress. Such issues are of great importance to the dating violence literature, where distress may be one issue, but stopping further abuse is also crucial. Silence may or may not add to distress, but it increases the possibility of recurrence. Clinical psychology has historically tended to focus on the aspect of psychological distress but it also has an important role to play in the prevention of abuse through early intervention, providing appropriate services for youth, and becoming involved in education about abuse.

This paper addresses two aspects of abuse in adolescent dating relationships. First it presents material related to disclosure of reported abusive experiences including whether or not young people disclosed, to whom disclosures were made, and the outcomes of both disclosure and non-disclosure. Second, it explores the subjects of help-seeking and prevention education through an examination of material gathered from discussion groups with young people.

Method

The material presented in this paper is drawn from a larger project on teenage dating relationships comprising a survey of high school students' (aged 16 to 18 years) experiences of violence and sexual coercion in their heterosexual dating relationships (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000), focus group interviews about heterosexual relationships (Hird & Jackson, 2001; Jackson, 1997a, 1997b) and interviews with young women reporting experiences of abuse (Jackson, 2001). Aspects of the study reported here focus on selected findings from two phases of the research: the survey and

the focus group interviews. The particular survey findings presented are from the open-ended questions in the survey asking students who reported experiences of abuse in their romantic relationships to identify whether or not they told anyone of the abuse and, if so, who they chose to tell or, if not, what prevented them from telling anyone. Students were also asked to describe the outcomes of disclosing or not disclosing the abuse to a third party. Selected data from the focus group interviews include students' accounts of what services they would perceive as useful for both prevention of dating abuse and intervention where abuse had already occurred in a relationship.

Participants

For the anonymous survey, participants were 200 female and 173 male senior high school students, aged between 16 and 20 (mean age 16.7), who volunteered to take part in the study. Of the total students, 169 females and 135 males reported that they had been in a dating relationship. The majority of participants came from two parent families (66.4%) in which there was at least one parent in paid employment (89%). According to the Elley Irving Scale (Elley, 1985), a scale that uses occupation as a measure of socioeconomic status, the majority of students came from families in the lower middle to high socioeconomic range (79%). Students came from a diverse range of self-described ethnic groups, but the two largest of these were NZ Pakeha (54.7%) and Asian (17.5%). Similar percentages of participants identified themselves as Maori or Maori/Pakeha (8.4%) and Pacific Island or Pacific Island/Palangi (9.4%). Cultural safety issues were addressed through consultation with Maori service providers, Maori youth researchers and through working with a Maori supervisor. Focus group participants were drawn from the same population base but did not necessarily comprise the same students who participated in the survey. There were 12 focus groups involving a total of 101 students, comprising an average of 8 students in each group.

Students were drawn from five schools in the Auckland metropolitan area for the survey. Focus group participants were also from these five schools with the addition of two single-sex schools. The Ministry of Education socioeconomic index of schools, developed for targeting of education funding, was used to guide the selection of schools from high, middle and low socio-economic sectors. The criteria for school selection from within these groups was that the school had a demonstrated commitment to violence prevention programmes, given the desired outcome that schools could utilize research results in the development of such programmes.

Procedure

For the survey, participant schools selected sixth form classes attended by the majority of students, primarily English and free study classes. The researcher provided full information about the study then invited students to participate if they wished. The response rate across all schools was high, with 95-100% of students in each class choosing to complete the questionnaire. All students received the questionnaire in

order not to draw attention to those who chose not to participate. Non-participants continued with class work. Students who had not been in a dating relationship completed sections on knowledge of peer dating violence, family violence, and acceptance of dating violence myths.

For the focus group interviews, key school contact personnel issued classes of students with information sheets about the research, gathered names of students wanting to participate and co-ordinated appropriate meeting times and places with the students. The two-hour group discussions were loosely structured to enhance informality. Questions about what kinds of education and prevention services should be available came at the end of sessions, following discussion on topics such as relationship expectations, pressures in relationships, and the ways in which partners hurt each other. Although there were key probe questions addressing the topics, much of the questioning involved clarification and extension of material put forward by the students. Key aspects of facilitating the groups were encouraging all students to speak (using non-verbal cues and directly addressing a student), preventing domination of the group by one member, and drawing out various views. Students were not required to talk about personal experiences. Sessions were audiotaped with the consent of students and later transcribed. All students were given written summaries of the main themes emerging from the group discussions once the initial analysis had been completed. They were also invited to contact the researcher if there was anything in the summary they wished to question, if they wanted their data withdrawn or if they wished to discuss issues in the summary further. None of these occurred.

Results

Results are presented in three sections: (a) students' reports of disclosure (whether it occurred and to whom if it did occur), (b) the consequences of disclosure or non-disclosure, and (c) students' accounts of prevention and intervention services for young people.

Disclosure of Abusive Experiences

Students reported experiences of abuse in three domains: emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual coercion (see Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000). The extent of reported disclosure varied considerably according to the type of abuse, as did the pattern regarding to whom disclosures were made. Reports of emotional abuse were considerably higher than for sexual coercion or physical abuse and, interestingly, this was also the most disclosed of the three types of abuse for both males and females. Most students reporting emotional abuse disclosed this to friends, with comparatively few reports of disclosure to other family members or counsellors (see Table 1). Significant gender differences emerged, with more females disclosing to friends, $\chi^2=16.6$, $p<.0001$; significantly more males not disclosing at all, $\chi^2=16.6$, $p<.001$; and significantly more males reporting no need to disclose to anyone, $\chi^2=9.7$, $p<.01$.

Compared with emotional abuse, sexual coercion was considerably less disclosed overall, evident in the similar

Table 1. Persons to Whom High School Students Disclosed Emotional Abuse, Sexual Coercion and Physical Abuse

Person told	Emotional Abuse		Sexual Coercion		Physical Abuse	
	F (N=145) %	M (N=94) %	F (N=76) %	M (N=37) %	F (N=29) %	M (N=22) %
Friend	89	68**	54	43	41	18
Mother	16	2	5	3	-	-
Nobody	10	30**	46	47	55	45
Sibling	9	7	4	0	7	4
Partner	13	3	9	3	7	0
Relative	7	1	13	8	17	4
Counsellor	5	2	7	3	-	-
No Need	4	15*	13	13	3	32

Note : Students could give more than one response

number of girls (46%) and boys (47%) reporting coercion who chose not to tell anyone. Again, where disclosure of sexual coercion occurred, most students' responses, boys and girls, indicated a preference for telling a friend rather than a family member, partner or counsellor (see Table 1). In contrast to disclosure of emotional abuse, there were no significant gender differences.

Disclosure of physical abuse followed a different pattern to both emotional abuse and sexual coercion, in that reports of telling nobody about the abuse (55% of girls, 46% of boys) were more common than disclosure to another person (see Table 2). Amongst reports of disclosure, friends ranked as most common among girls (41%), whereas around one third of the boys' responses (32%) indicated no felt need to tell anyone. The small number of responses precluded significance testing for gender differences in disclosure of physical abuse.

Outcomes of Disclosure and Non-Disclosure

In addition to being asked to whom they talked, students were also asked what happened after they talked. Overall, students reported positive outcomes of disclosure across the three types of abuse in terms of feeling supported and "sorting it out". However, for sexual coercion and physical

abuse, some students reported feeling supported without disclosure. Similarly, a number of students reporting emotional abuse indicated they "sorted it out" without disclosure (Table 2).

The report of "broke up" (or "dumped" partner) is not easily categorised as negative or positive, but in the context of stopping the abuse (if this occurred) it could be deemed a constructive outcome. Sometimes this occurred as a consequence of disclosure, but it also occurred as a consequence of not disclosing the abuse to anyone. Across all three types of abuse, reports of breaking up were higher for non-disclosure than disclosure, especially for sexual coercion. Conversely, lack of change or worsening of the relationship featured more often as a consequence of non-disclosure than of disclosure and, notably for physical abuse, the abuse kept on occurring in the absence of disclosure.

Generally, the outcomes of disclosure and non-disclosure showed similar patterns for girls and boys, but there were some exceptions. Reports of the relationship breaking up after disclosing emotional abuse, for example, occurred significantly more often amongst girls than boys, $\chi^2=4.2, p < .05$. So too was a significant gender difference (more girls than boys) found for breaking up after sexual

Table 2. Reported Outcomes of Disclosure and Non-Disclosure of Emotional Abuse, Sexual Coercion and Physical Abuse

	Emotional Abuse				Sexual Coercion				Physical Abuse			
	Disclosure		Non-disclosure		Disclosure		Non-disclosure		Disclosure		Non-disclosure	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
	101	52	28	38	40	16	63	41	10	5	26	21
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Support	45	73	-	-	63	63	27	27	30	40	46	33
Sorted it out	51	48	75	63	40	19	-	-	60	40	-	-
Broke up	23	10	47	61	7	6	83	46**	30	0	42	19
No Change	12	17	21	24	25	25	43	66***	20	0	8	24
Worse	12	10	-	-	12	10	25	32	-	-	10	12
Kept Happening	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	23	19

Note : Students could give more than one response

coercion, except in this instance the breaking-up occurred in the absence of talking to anyone about the coercive experience for a high percentage of girls - 82%, $\chi^2 = 5.1$, $p < .05$. Reports of "no change" after non-disclosure of sexual coercion also exhibited gender difference with significantly more males than females reporting this as an outcome, $\chi^2 = 15.2$, $p < .0001$. While small numbers precluded significance testing for physical abuse outcomes, "no change" constituted a greater proportion of boys' responses than girls'.

Intervention and Prevention

Focus group interviews gathered students' perceptions of helping services and school-based education programmes relevant to young people's relationship issues. While this topic was not the only focus of the discussions, the material presented here is drawn from the corpus of data that comprised all the talk about helping services and education. Three major themes emerged: sources of help, accessing services, and education programmes. A descriptive analysis of each of these themes follows:

Sources of help. In response to the question "What kinds of services or people do you know of that can provide help for people in your age group?", students identified a range of services perceived as being available to young people. These in the main included telephone services such as Youthline, Kidsline, and Lifeline and school guidance counsellors, with more isolated references to services such as the Bridge counsellor, Victim Support, Family Planning and Women's Refuge. Two of the boys' groups also mentioned turning to family members for help with a relationship problem. The following is one example:

- Joel *You'd rather talk to your brother or sister about it if you didn't want to talk to your parents.*
 Sue *Okay, so talking to parents, talking to people in the family maybe, using an outside service like Youth line- what other services do you know about?*
 Alex *Parents, if you're in a good relationship with them*
 Joel *Yeah but I don't know if you are though.*

Although parents are identified as a possible helping "service" in this extract, it is a tentative suggestion conditional upon having "a good relationship" with them. In the absence of such a relationship, or not wanting to talk to parents, a sibling may be a preferable option. Friends, male and female, were identified as another potential source of support in the face of abusive relationships but, perhaps somewhat surprisingly in the context of previously reported survey findings, this occurred only in one of the boys' groups:

- Sue *Who would people be most likely to turn to?*
 Ben *I think friends.*
 Sue *Friends.*
 Ben *Friends are a good source, like really trusted friends and that.*
 Sue *Mm okay.*
 Sam *I reckon that's the good thing about chicks. You can talk to chicks about problems like that heaps easier than you can talk to your mates 'cos you're more likely to get hassles from your mate than the chick.*

- Ben *Yeah, girls are a lot more um understanding and that I think they're more sympathetic they're not, not sympathy but they can give you like a....*
 Sam *You can just talk to them and they won't judge you and they'll give their opinion when it's wanted they won't...*

Ben and Sam both identify the qualities that engender feeling supported or helped as trust ("really trusted friends"), understanding (which girls are deemed to possess more of than boys), being non-judgemental and, less certainly, being sympathetic.

Accessing support or helping services. Although most groups readily identified the kinds of formal and informal support available to them, students discussed various barriers to accessing such support. One type of barrier talked about by a number of students resided in how they might feel about asking for help, such as feeling too embarrassed or awkward. The boys in the following extract, for example, talk about what might stop students going to see a school counsellor. The extract follows on immediately from the earlier extract in which parents are identified as a possible source of help:

- Todd *If you are and you can trust them (parents) that would be a good path to take maybe. A school counsellor, but I don't know if anyone would actually do that*
 Sue *So would you say it would be quite hard to go to someone like a school counsellor to deal with a problem in your relationship?*
 Todd *Yeah, it would.*
 Sue *Can you tell me why it would be hard.*
 Todd *It's embarrassment.*
 Joel *It's sort of like somebody outside your group and you don't want to (Todd: trust) feel like talking to them about anything, like at the start of a group discussion like.*
 Todd *Once you'd gotten used to talking to them I think you'd sort of be alright.*

Todd suggests that feelings of embarrassment make it difficult to see a guidance counsellor. Earlier in this groups' discussion, Todd had also raised the issue of seeking help being seen as an "admission of failure" as well as challenging the "tough guy image" ("it's not tough if you call such a line"). In the above extract, the notion of trust again emerges as an important feature of a helping relationship, together with not knowing a person (and therefore by implication not knowing if she/he can be trusted). Earlier in the talk, Joel had also commented that "I s'pose like when you're in that situation you don't really want to talk to someone you don't know". Similar ideas emerged in some of the girls' talk:

- Emily *The problem is that people don't trust...*
 Zara *You don't, you don't know them you know.*
 Caitlin *Placing your trust in a stranger telling them personal things about yourself- you can't just go up to any ...person....(several talking at once).*
 Toni *It's embarrassment a lot of it I think.*
 Zara *It's like it's your fault, like if you were to get raped obviously it wasn't your fault but you know you'd feel embarrassed about it.*
 Jen *I would feel ashamed, it would be harder to tell*

someone to their face that you've been raped than a phone....

Caitlin *Then again I mean guidance counsellors, they're a link up to other services which can help you (several: "yeah").*

Amelia *Like if you can't tell them like they'll give you other services which you know can help you.*

Zara *Yeah some people just don't like to share their problems though, they don't like people to know.*

Amelia *Sometimes, you know, it's just really hard to tell people, you know, what you're feeling and stuff.*

In addition to not knowing and not trusting a "stranger" in a helping service these girls, like the boys in the previous extract, also link the difficulties of seeking help to feeling at fault for what has happened and, implicitly linked to this in their talk, feeling embarrassed, especially in a face to face counselling situation. There is acknowledgement, however, that a guidance counsellor can be a useful link to other services that might be available.

The notion that talking to a counsellor or other helping service might not be confidential emerged as another factor that might prevent students accessing help in several of the group discussions. The girls in the following extract, for example, discuss which services are likely to be confidential, and therefore are seen as more user-friendly.

Sue *What about outside of school - are there any kinds of services that people know about?*

Kara *Yeah, Family Planning, Victim Support.*

Hana *Women's Refuge.*

Kara *Really only older women go there.*

Jess *The only thing that might stop me from going to those kinds of places that they might notify your parents and sometimes you don't want them to know. I wouldn't go to my family doctor (Kara: Family Planning is confidential) because immediately he might contact my Mum*

Leigh *And they do tell too. They say they don't tell anyone but...*

Jess *Doesn't Family Planning?*

Hana *Family planning are quite honest and straight up.*

Kara *Yeah they're cool.*

In this extract Jess expresses the concern of parents being told about the contact or visit and deems this to be, potentially, a personal barrier to her using any of the named helping services. Unlike doctors, who are characterised here as high risk in terms of confidentiality, Family Planning is seen as "confidential" and more trustworthy ("quite honest and straight-up") regarding disclosure of any information.

Education programmes. Discussion about education and prevention focused mainly on sexuality education, yet the question put to groups addressed needs regarding heterosexual relationships more generally. Given that the central interest in this paper is help seeking and prevention in the context of abusive relationships, the more general sexuality material is not considered here. Outside of sex education, then, ideas for education or prevention programmes included communication, relationships skills, problem-solving skills, and the abolition of single-sex schools (the boys' group from a single-sex school). One of

the boys' groups, for example, offered the following suggestions about skills needed for enhancing relationships:

Sue *I guess that's what I'm really interested in because we you know we've talked about the idea of having some sort of education stuff around the issues of relationships- what are the skills that people need and can they be helped with those skills?*

Todd *Relating to one another.*

Jared *Yeah, emotions.*

Todd *Teaching just about that.*

Paul *You probably know someone really well when you start going out...you know initially.*

Alex *I mean you can teach people to be assertive, it would help them quite a lot.*

Todd *Be more confident.*

Students also offered a range of ideas about how education about relationships might best be undertaken, some of which related to experiences with various school presentations or programmes. Amongst the ideas suggested were drama productions (acting out situations such as dealing with an abusive relationship), group discussions about relationship issues (like the focus groups), and guest speakers (provided they were the kind of people the students could relate to). The need for the opportunity to talk in smaller groups, rather than whole class sessions, rated mention in most of the groups. The following extract sums up the kind of sentiment expressed on the topic:

Mick *Prevention I think is gonna come from like this, talking about it and I think we all agree that a guy who's gonna beat up a girl is a total dork and um I mean if there was someone here that didn't think that then you know we might be able change his view so if you don't talk about it....*

Chas *Yeah, oh they wouldn't be accepted anyway 'cos like if there was a group of 20 people and one of them beat up girls then he wouldn't be ...*

Guy *'Cos you've gotta do it in small groups 'cos otherwise in large groups they won't say anything.*

Discussion

Consistent with the adolescent help-seeking literature, friends featured prominently as the people students talked to about all types of violence, although the extent to which this occurred was markedly lower for sexual coercion and physical abuse than for emotional abuse. This reflects low rates of telling anyone at all about sexual coercion or physical violence. Secrecy and concomitant non-disclosure is commonly referred to in both the child sexual abuse literature (e.g., Finkelhor, 1988; Summit, 1983) and the domestic violence literature (e.g., Peled, 1996) and it may be that a similar dynamic operates in the context of a dating relationship. The tendency to disclose to a friend, if to anyone at all, is perhaps because this is less threatening and more likely to be kept in confidence (not reported to authority figure). Consequently, there is less chance of what might be perceived by teenagers as a negative outcome (e.g., partner labelled an abuser, break up of the relationship by a parent).

That most students reported positive outcomes when they talked to someone about their experiences of violence is encouraging. However, there is a possibility suggested by the findings that talking to someone might discourage terminating a relationship in which violence has occurred. Very few students reported that they broke up after being sexually coerced and none after emotional abuse when they had talked to someone. Conversely when they did not talk to someone, breaking up was a more common option, particularly for female students. It is possible that students primarily talked about less serious violence to friends, therefore making it easier to resolve and perhaps less necessary to terminate the relationship. Interestingly, the low termination rate post-talking to someone did not occur for physical abuse.

Consistent with the help-seeking literature, more boys overall indicated they talked to nobody or felt no need to talk than was the case for females. This would be consistent with not perceiving experiences as particularly abusive. Alternatively, it may reflect the construction of masculinity as tough and "macho", which runs counter to the expression of feelings or admission of abuse by a female. To talk is to run the risk of losing face or of being laughed at or being considered a "sissy" (Kimmel, 1997). This construction of masculinity is further reflected in the minuscule number of students who talk to their fathers about abuse. Fathers are not perceived as empathetic listeners in the same way that mothers are. The greater disclosure by female students, on the other hand, is entirely consistent with constructions of traditional femininity, which position women as expressive and emotional.

The qualitative data from the group discussions adds an informative layer to the patterns seen in the survey reports of disclosure about experiences of abuse in dating relationships. Young people suggested that elements of trust, confidentiality and knowing somebody (versus a stranger) were important to disclosure of abuse and seeking help to deal with it. Thus, friends may be perceived as a better option for disclosure because of the trust and confidentiality available within that close relationship. Counsellors and other professionals represent the 'unknown' and consequently are not yet to be trusted or placed in a young person's confidence. Such elements as trust and confidentiality may be of greater importance when the nature of the problem is deeply personal as is the case with experiences of abuse, coercion or violence. Indeed, feelings of embarrassment, and self-blame were identified as barriers to disclosing and seeking help. Exposing these kinds of feelings arguably requires considerable trust.

To summarise, these findings suggest that students will be unlikely to seek help directly from school counselors or skilled workers in the community. They do talk to their friends. It makes sense, therefore, to optimise this and provide programmes to develop helping skills for students so that when friends do talk to them about abuse they are able to listen, respond appropriately and make suggestions about what to do or who to see. The impact of this kind of programme extends beyond the ability to help friends as it

provides important communication tools and knowledge for students to use in resolving their own relationship problems. In addition to peer counselling programmes being suggested here, young people in this study offered some clear guidelines about both the content and process of programmes aimed at preventing abuse in dating relationships. In particular, programmes should focus on the emotional aspects of relationships and the enhancement of communication skills. Above all, the strongest message for those committed to engaging in prevention work is that any education programme needs to happen in small discussion groups to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate.

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