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The proportion of U.S. parents who talk with their adolescent children about dating abuse

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Abstract

Purpose—To estimate the proportion of U.S. parents who talked about dating abuse (DA) with their adolescent children in the past year, and explore reasons for not talking about DA among those who did not.

Methods—500 parents of 11–18 year old children were assessed via a national online survey.

Results—55% of parents had discussed DA with their children in the past year. Mothers were more likely than fathers to discuss DA with both male and female children (59.0% vs. 50.2%, $p < .05$). Parents' age, income, and region of the U.S. were not related to having discussed DA. DA was substantially less likely to be discussed than school work, drugs, alcohol, family finances, the economy, money management, dating relationships in general, and sex. Parents who did not discuss DA reported that their children were not dating, too young, that their children would learn about it through experience, that they would not know what to say, or that it was too embarrassing to discuss.

Conclusions—Programs that equip parents to talk with children about DA are needed.

Keywords

dating violence; dating abuse; domestic violence; partner abuse; adolescents; parents; parental concern

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION: This study is the first to estimate the proportion of U.S. parents who talk about dating abuse (DA) with their children. Using a sample of 500 parents, the authors found that 55% had discussed DA with their adolescent children in the past year. DA was less commonly discussed than drugs, alcohol, or sex.

INTRODUCTION

Ten percent of U.S. teens report experiencing assault by a dating partner in a given year.[1] The objectives of this study were two-fold. First, we sought to estimate the proportion of U.S. parents who have raised the topic of dating abuse (DA) with their adolescent children in the past year, and whether DA was any more or less commonly a topic of parent-child discussion than selected other adolescent health-related and family issues. Second, among parents who did not discuss DA with their children in the past year, we sought to explore their reasons for not doing so.

METHODS

Participants and procedure

We analyzed cross-sectional survey data from a sample of 500 parents of 11–18 year olds collected in 2009. Data were collected by a consumer information company (Luth Research, LLC) that maintains a pre-recruited Internet panel with respondents from approximately 1.2 million U.S. households. Members of the panel were initially recruited via random digit dial and through self-referral (*i.e.*, they requested to join the panel). Panel members were then sent email invitations to opt-in to the present survey. Parents with between one and four children 11–18 years old were invited to participate. A targeted recruitment scheme was used to ensure that the age, race, ethnicity, gender and income distributions of the sample matched those of U.S. census respondents. Respondents received \$2 for completing the 15 minute online survey. The analysis was determined to be exempt from IRB review by the authors' respective human subjects committees.

The demographic characteristics of the sample were 50% female, mean age 43.4 years old, 76% White, 9% Black, 7% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 10% reported earning less than \$25,000 a year, 25% were urban residents, 20% lived in the Northeast, 25% in the Central states, 32% in the South, and 22% in the West.

Measures

Discussion topics—We utilized responses to the following survey question: “Have you had conversations about any of the following topics with any of your teenage children in the past year?”. The list of nine topics are presented in Table 1. The first eight topics were suspected to be commonly addressed by parents. Respondents specified with which of their children, by the children's gender and age, they had held the conversations.

Reasons for not discussing dating or dating abuse—Respondents who reported that they had not discussed DA with one or more of their 11–18 year old children were asked the following question: “What would you say are the reasons that you haven't talked with your {son/daughter} about dating relationships or abuse in dating relationships?” and selected reasons from a list of response options (presented in Table 2).

Data Analysis

The prevalence of parent-child conversations about nine possible topics were calculated by the gender and age of the children. We ordered the topics from most to least frequently discussed, and compared the estimates for parents of boys vs. parents of girls using Pearson chi-square test statistics.

RESULTS

Approximately half (55%) of parents had discussed DA with their adolescent children in the past year. Mothers were more likely than fathers to report having discussed DA with children (59.0% vs. 50.2%, $p<.05$). Parents' age, income, and region of the U.S. were not related to having discussed DA. DA was substantially less likely to be discussed than school work, drugs, alcohol, family finances, the economy, money management, dating relationships in general, and sex (Table 1). The likelihood of having discussed DA varied by the age of the children and by their gender; parents were 1.5 times as likely to report having discussed DA with their female children ages 15–16 as with similarly aged male children, and 1.4–1.7 times as likely to discuss DA with children ages 17–18 as with children ages 12–13 (Table 1).

The majority (65.5%) of parents who had not discussed DA with their children reported that the reason for this was that their child had never been in a dating relationship (Table 2). A substantial proportion of those who had not discussed DA (28.1%) reported that they felt that their child was too young. Other reasons were that the child would learn about it from experience (8.5%), that it would be too embarrassing for the child (7.7%), and that the respondent would not know what to say to their child (5.1%).

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study is the first to benchmark the proportion of U.S. parents who discuss the topic of dating abuse (DA) with their adolescent children. We found that slightly more than half of parents in our sample reported talking about DA with their children in the past year (55%), and that parents were substantially less likely to talk about DA than eight other selected sensitive topics. The fact that 55% of parents had talked about DA with their adolescent children in the past year is encouraging, but not ideal. As many as 44% of girls and 36% of boys experience physical or sexual partner abuse by young adulthood[2], and the consequences can include unwanted pregnancy, injuries, mental health disorders, and death.[3] For this reason, parents should be as likely to talk with their adolescent children about the safety of dating relationships as they are about drugs, alcohol and sex.

A substantial proportion of parents in this sample thought it was not necessary to talk to their children about DA unless their children had already begun to date. This is consistent with what prior studies have found to be true of parents with regard to children's sexual activity: many believe that conversations about sex can wait until they know that their children are sexually active.[4–6] However, parents typically underestimate the extent of their children's sexual behavior, particularly when their children are young.[5] We suspect that they similarly underestimate their children's dating activity. Second, the results of numerous studies suggest that the optimal time to expose youth to prevention messages is *before* the potentially risky behavior begins.[7–9]

This study faced at least five limitations. First, parents were asked whether they had spoken with any adolescent child in their household about DA in the past year, and some may have spoken with their children about DA but more than one year ago. Second, the measures used were not tested for reliability. Third, it was not possible to calculate a response rate nor to weight the data to account for sampling strata. Fourth, the results are only generalizable to parents who have a computer. Fifth, parents' reports were not cross-checked against their children's recollection of conversations.

CONCLUSION

Programs that equip parents with the skills and confidence to talk knowledgeably with their children about DA should be developed.

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Table 1

Percent of parents reporting parent-child conversations about issues with the potential to affect adolescent health in the past year, by sex and age of children (N=500)[†]

Topics discussed in the past year	Parents of boys					Parents of girls				
	Any 11–18 yrs. % (95% CI)	11–12 yrs % (95% CI)	13–14 yrs % (95% CI)	15–16 yrs % (95% CI)	17–18 yrs % (95% CI)	Any 11–18 yrs % (95% CI)	11–12 yrs % (95% CI)	13–14 yrs % (95% CI)	15–16 yrs % (95% CI)	17–18 yrs % (95% CI)
Total (n)	308	109	93	106	49	308	109	93	106	49
School /grades	95.8 (92.8–97.6)	93.5 (87.1–97.1)	98.9 (94.1–100.0)	96.2 (90.4–98.8)	91.8 (80.3–97.3)	95.0 (91.7–97.1)	97.6 (91.1–99.9)	96.1 (90.0–98.8)	93.6 (86.4–97.3)	88.5 (76.7–95.0)
Money	92.5 (89.0–95.0)	85.3 (77.4–90.9)	94.6 (87.6–98.0)	96.2 (90.4–98.8)	93.9 (82.9–98.5)	81.7 (82.7–90.6)	89.2 (80.5–94.4)	86.3 (78.1–91.8)	83.8 (75.0–90.1)	88.5 (76.7–95.0)
Drugs	90.9 (87.1–93.7)	90.8 (83.8–95.1)	90.2 (82.2–95.0)	93.4 (86.6–97.0)	85.7 (73.0–93.2)	89.6 (85.5–92.7)	85.5 (76.3–91.7)	93.1 (86.3–96.9)	92.5 (85.0–96.5)	82.7 (70.0–90.8)
Alcohol	82.8 (78.2–86.6)	75.2 (66.3–82.4)	82.6 (73.5–89.1)	86.8 (78.9–92.1)	79.6 (66.2–88.7)	82.1 (77.2–86.2)	65.7 (51.9–72.3)	83.3 (74.8–89.4)	90.3 (82.4–95.0)	86.5 (74.4–93.6)
The economy	81.5 (76.8–85.5)	73.4 (64.4–80.8)	81.5 (72.3–88.2)	87.7 (80.0–92.8)	81.6 (68.4–90.3)	82.1 (77.2–86.2)	73.5 (63.1–81.9)	79.4 (70.5–86.2)	85.0 (76.2–90.9)	82.7 (70.0–90.8)
Family finances	79.2 (74.3–83.4)	67.9 (58.6–75.9)	77.2 (67.5–84.6)	80.2 (71.5–86.7)	85.7 (73.0–93.2)	80.7 (75.7–84.9)	69.9 (59.3–78.7)	72.6 (63.2–80.3)	71.0 (61.0–79.3)	76.9 (63.7–86.4)
Dating (general)	76.3 (71.2–80.7)	55.1 (45.7–64.1)	80.4 (71.1–87.3)	84.9 (76.8–90.6)	79.6 (66.2–88.7)	80.4 (75.3–84.6)	57.8 (47.1–67.9)	85.3 (77.0–91.0)	86.0 (77.4–91.8)	86.5 (74.4–93.6)
Sex ^a	74.7 (69.5–79.2)	60.6 (51.2–69.2)	75.0 (65.2–82.8)	81.1 (72.6–87.5)	83.7 (70.7–91.8)	74.6 (69.2–79.4)	50.6 (40.1–61.1)	77.5 (68.4–91.8)	86.0 (77.4–91.8)	78.9 (65.8–87.9)
Dating abuse	47.4 (41.9–53.0) ^a	36.7 (28.2–46.1)	50.0 (40.0–60.0)	47.2 (37.9–56.6) ^b	63.3 (49.2–75.4)	59.3 (53.4–64.9) ^d	44.6 (34.4–55.3)	58.8 (49.1–67.9)	69.9 (59.9–78.3) ^c	61.5 (47.9–73.6)

^a The difference between this pair of estimates was significant at the p<.05 level;

^b The difference between this pair of estimates was significant at the p<.05 level

^c The difference between this pair of estimates was significant at the p<.05 level

[†] 88 parents reported on conversations with more than one of their children 11–18 years old, therefore the total number of children exceeds the number of parents

Table 2

Reasons why parents are reluctant to discuss dating abuse with their adolescent children, among parents who have not discussed dating abuse in the past year

Reasons	Parents (N=235)	Parents of boys (N=155)	Parents of girls (N=114)
	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)
Child has never been in a relationship	65.5 (58.5–71.7)	65.4 (56.7–73.1)	67.0 (57.1–75.9)
Child is too young	28.1 (22.0–34.2)	24.5 (18.4–31.9)	29.8 (22.2–38.8)
Child will learn from experience	8.5 (5.5–12.8)	12.3 (7.9–18.4)	5.3 (2.2–11.2)
It would be too embarrassing for my child	7.7 (4.8–11.8)	8.4 (4.9–13.9)	5.3 (2.2–11.2)
My child would not want to talk about it if I brought it up	7.7 (4.8–11.8)	6.5 (3.4–11.6)	8.8 (4.7–15.6)
Child is very private about these things	5.1 (2.9–8.8)	6.5 (3.4–11.6)	6.1 (2.8–12.3)
This is just something we don't talk about	5.1 (2.9–8.8)	4.5 (2.0–9.2)	5.3 (2.2–11.2)
I wouldn't know what to say to my child	5.1 (2.9–8.8)	3.9 (1.6–8.4)	5.3 (2.2–11.2)
My child is not interested when I bring it up and won't pay attention	4.7 (2.5–8.3)	5.8 (2.9–10.8)	3.5 (1.1–9.0)
None of these	23.8 (18.8–29.7)	23.9 (17.8–31.2)	22.8 (16.0–31.4)