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Recognizing and Responding to Teen-Dating Violence: Implications for Women Coaches

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Online

Once again, *Journal* authors raise the bar by conducting a lucid and thorough examination of teen-dating violence (TDV), a worrisome and contentious subject that must be addressed by Canada's sport community if it is to be curbed and athletes of all genders protected.

Beginning with a thorough analysis of the contemporary situation regarding teen dating relationships, which is exacerbated by the pervasive influence of social media, three forms of TDV - psychological, physical, and sexual – are explained. Also explained are the distressing, even dangerous, effects of TDV, the pervasiveness of which continues to be under-estimated. The article stresses the importance of coaches, especially women coaches, in developing the knowledge and skills to competently handle situations in which an athlete is experiencing TDV and other unhealthy practices.

Importantly, the authors describe a four-goal project that will "assist coaches in recognizing, preventing, and addressing TDV and promoting healthy relationships in and through sport." Our thanks to the Public Health Agency of Canada for making this essential project possible through a grant to the Coaching Association of Canada and a research team at the University of Toronto. - Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor.

Forms of TVD

With incomplete development, intense emotions, and conflict stemming from romantic relationships, and social pressures to engage in sexual relationships, the potential for TDV emerges. Researchers have outlined three primary forms of TDV: psychological violence, physical violence, and sexual violence. Psychological TDV indirectly harms a partner through socially or emotionally manipulative behaviours. Physical TDV refers to a range of potentially harmful physical actions against a partner. Sexual TDV refers to a range of unwanted sexual actions against a partner.

It has also been proposed that threatening actions with the potential to harm be incorporated in the definition of TDV as these are considered violence as well. Examples of each form of violence are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of Forms of Teen Dating Violence

Psychological	Physical	Sexual
• Spoken to the other in a violent, hostile, or offensive tone. • Criticized the other as a person • Repeatedly made fun of what the other has said or done • Checked the other's last phone, text or social media connection • Taken the other's cell phone or laptop without permission. • Impersonated the other online • Texted the other continuously to know whereabouts and who the other person is with • Used the other's password to access social network profile without permission	• Had an object thrown at them • Pushed the other with force • Hit, slapped, or punched the other	• Sent unwanted sexually explicit remarks, jokes, or images through personal communication devices • Taken sexual photos of the other without their knowledge or consent • Shared sexual photos without the other's knowledge or consent • Forced the other to touch them sexually • Coerced the other to touch themselves sexually • Forced the other to have sex when they did not want to

Prevalence of TDV

Prevalence rates refer to the proportion of persons in a population who have a particular experience at or over a specified point of time. Prevalence data are important because they give us a sense of the scope of an experience, problem, or disease, and groups in the population who may be particularly vulnerable. This information can then be used to guide actions such as how to best allocate research and intervention resources.

Dating violence, both in-person and online, has become a significant societal concern. Survey data showed that 13.6% of high school students experienced adolescent relationship abuse, while closer to 60% experienced cyber dating abuse. Prevalence statistics show that 20% of seventh graders have perpetrated dating abuse online, whereas in a study in an older population of high school students, prevalence of perpetration was 12%. This highlights the importance of technology in the conversation about violence, specifically in adolescent populations, whose use of online technology is extensive.

Cyber dating abuse is extremely dangerous due to the speed and ease with which it can occur as well as the potentially large audience and the ability to give credence to lies by virtue of their popularity through views and likes. Moreover, revictimization could be more common in cyber abuse than other types of dating violence because of the spread of content on the Internet. Prevalence of various types of TDV perpetrated or experienced by boys and girls are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Type of TDV Perpetrated or Experienced by Boys and Girls

Type of TVD	**Boys**	**Girls**
Physical TDV Victimization	6-38 %	8-57 %
Sexual TDV Victimization	03-36 %	14-43 %
Physical TDV Perpetration	11-20 %	28-33 %
Sexual TDV Perpetration	3-37 %	2-24 %
Psychological Victimization	77-90 %	77-90 %

A more recent meta-analysis of TDV found that prevalence rates of physical and sexual TDV range from less than 10% to over 50%. More specifically, when looking at only physical TDV, prevalence ranged from 1% to 61%, and sexual TDV ranged from 1% to 54%. Across studies, physical TDV prevalence is higher than sexual TDV prevalence. In line with these results, in Ontario, a study showed that 43% of girls and 36% of boys reported being victims of sexual TDV by their dating partner of over one month; similarly, the same sample showed that physical TDV victims were more often boys (28%) than girls (19%). More recently, TDV victims were more likely to be girls; however, in a five-year follow-up, men became more likely to be victims, suggesting that age may play a role in victimization.

Psychological abuse has been found to be the most frequently perpetrated type of TDV. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that violence was often bidirectional, specifically in psychological aggression, meaning that partners were both perpetrators and victims; often when one partner is violent, the other partner responds in a way that is also violent. This finding aligns with other research reporting that women may have increased prevalence of physical TDV through self-defence.

Prior to 2017, few studies examined the prevalence of TDV victimization in sexual minority youth, and the results were contradictory. Data showed that prevalence was similar to heterosexual

TDV rates, while other data showed higher prevalence in women who identified as a sexual minority. In 2017, a study used national survey data from the United States and found that heterosexual men had the lowest prevalence of TDV victimization. Similarly, heterosexual women had lower prevalence of physical and sexual TDV victimization than women students who identified as a sexual minority. Men who were unsure about their sexual identity had higher prevalence rates of sexual and physical TDV victimization in comparison to heterosexual and self-declared sexual minority men, as well as higher risk of physical TDV victimization in comparison to women students who were unsure about their sexual identity. Prevalence statistics among sexual minority students were higher amongst women (29%) than men (25.8%).

Based on data gathered to date, TDV most commonly is psychological in nature. Girls and those of minority sexual orientation tend to experience more sexual dating violence than heterosexual boys. The reliance of teens on social media and the accessibility of online communication makes the online environment a concern for the occurrence of TVD, and an area for adults in positions of authority to proactively attend to. Additionally, research is needed on teen TDV experiences amongst those from equity-denied groups.

Effects of TVD

Research remains inconclusive on the direct effect of TDV, specifically the varying of effects resulting from sexual, physical, and psychological TDV. Analysis of survey data shows that TDV has an impact on teens' mental health, including depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide, hostility, psychological functioning, educational outcomes, unhealthy sexual behaviours, psychological distress, and future interpersonal violence. Women victims of physical TDV may experience more trauma symptoms following violent experiences than men victims. In women adolescent victims, effects of TDV are low self-esteem and emotional dependency. Non-gendered effects include feelings of guilt, pain, rage, decreased psychosocial wellbeing, negatively impacted academic performance, and anxiety. Perpetrators of TDV were more likely to show symptoms of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and hostility.

In sum, all of these factors will have a direct impact on individual athlete well-being and team relationships and well-being, which in turn will likely affect the athlete's ability to perform in their sport.

Coaches' Roles in Addressing TVD

The coach-athlete relationship is referred to as one of the most influential relationships in an athlete's career. As close, confiding relationships often develop between teens and their coaches, teens may share personal information about life events and sensitive matters such as dating, sex, and experiences of violence. Given the time spent together and the close relationships that often form between coaches and teen athletes, coaches may become aware of or suspect the athlete is experiencing difficulties in life, including violence in their relationships.

Current research acknowledges the ability of coaches to intervene in athletes' engagement in violent behaviours. Coaches are in the unique position as an ally for targeting TVD. Coaches are typically a non-parent adult, who can spend upwards of 30 hours a week with their athletes, and athletes have suggested that, at times, their coaches know them better than do their own families. For example, researchers suggested that high school coaches who embraced a mentor or educator role could reduce sexual violence within youth relationships. Similarly, college coaches reportedly have similar potential in influencing student-athletes to act against sexual violence since student-athletes who have discussed issues of sexual violence are more likely to get involved in prevention initiatives. As such, coaches may play a central role in preventing and addressing TVD.

Sport researchers have highlighted the emotional labour engaged in by women coaches, including being the ones many athletes turn to for information and emotional support during difficult or challenging times. Female athletes identify the benefits of having a woman coach to connect with and talk to about daily activities as well as life events, citing the ease with which rapport is typically developed with woman coaches. In fact, in the athlete maltreatment literature, girl and women athletes were found to be more likely to report experiences of violence when a woman was part of the entourage as, for example, a coach, health personnel, or mental performance consultant. This evidence further supports the importance of having women as part of coaching staff.

Given that girls and women experience more of every form of TVD, and that girls and women prefer to disclose and/or report their experiences of harm to women, it is important that women coaches are aware of the forms, signs, and symptoms of TVD, and have knowledge of how best to intervene or address disclosures.

In addition to recognizing and addressing TVD, coaches play a significant role in teaching teen athletes about healthy relationships by modelling such relationships with their athletes and other sport stakeholders.

The critical role of coaches has been acknowledged in promoting athlete outcomes. Positive athlete outcomes may include the development of self-esteem, competence, character, autonomy, and meaningful social engagement among athletes; the achievement of these outcomes is contingent on positive and effective coaching practices. In addition to positively influencing the sport experience for athletes, coaches have a significant impact on athletes' lives outside of sport. Coaches can positively influence youth development, mentor young participants by teaching them valuable life skills, and discourage youth from engaging in unhealthy behaviours such as using alcohol or performance-enhancing drugs.

Coaches are stewards of the team environment and central actors in establishing how the group will operate. This includes taking deliberate actions toward the creation of a supportive team culture that is violence-free, educating themselves and the athletes they coach on how to recognize and intervene when TDV is suspected, and modelling healthy relationships thereby using their coaching power in preventive and responsive ways regarding TDV.

Given the exposure coaches have to teens and the opportunities afforded to prevent and address TDV, the development of educational materials would be useful in educating coaches, ideally resulting in coaches incorporating important messages about TDV into their coaching practices. While a wealth of resources exists on TDV, there remains a need for a tool specific to sport and coaches. Especially, given the rising social awareness of gender-based violence, it is critical for coaches to have this specialized knowledge to best support their athletes.

One study involving coaches of youth reported that specialized sexual violence training improved coaches' knowledge of the topic and increased their confidence in their ability to identify abuse, resulting in an increase in the likelihood of reporting. Additionally, training may be able to decrease incidences of sexual violence by identifying inappropriate behavior early. Similarly, the researchers proposed that a sport-specific resource would give coaches the tools and skills to identify signs of TDV in their athletes. Importantly, a sport-specific tool could enhance coaches' confidence and competencies as teachers and role models for their athletes. For instance, one study proposed that schoolteachers who had access to and experience with 'frequent and rich' opportunities for professional development were able to teach in more ambitious and effective ways that were relevant to their teaching context.

A Project to Help Coaches Recognize and Respond to TDV

Through a grant from the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) and a research team at the University of Toronto are embarking on a project designed to assist coaches in recognizing, preventing, and addressing TDV and promoting healthy relationships in and through sport. The intervention program aims to assist coaches in addressing violence experienced by adolescents regardless of whether the violence occurs within or outside of the sport context. The overarching aim of this project is to fill a gap in existing resources by providing Canadian coaches with the most important and up-to-date information on topics that are essential to teen athletes' health and well-being.

Specifically, the goals of this project are:

1. **Awareness-Raising**: To document and disseminate information about the prevalence and forms of TDV experienced by sport participants.
2. **Understanding Stakeholder Needs**: To assess the educational and support needs of coaches in preventing and addressing TDV and promoting healthy relationships in and through sport.
3. **Development and Implementation of Education**: To develop and implement online educational modules for coaches. The modules target the prevention of TDV amongst athletes between the ages of 16 and 24 years. Additionally, an educational toolkit, containing exercises and activities, readings, and resources for coaches has been designed to accompany the online educational modules.
4. **Development of Advocacy Resources**: To develop advocacy resources targeting the prevention of TDV, and promotion of healthy relationships.
5. **Sustainability and Scalability**: To use the evaluative data to revise the educational modules and toolkit and advocacy resources. To support long-term and wide implementation, all aspects of the intervention program will be placed online in both official languages and disseminated nation-wide via the CAC.

To-date, a comprehensive literature review of gender-based violence in sport and TDV has been conducted. Online educational modules have been developed based upon the literature review, survey data from coaches and athletes, and feedback from the advisory committee that was established for this project.

The online educational modules address the topics of Understanding Teen-Dating Violence, Gender-Based Violence in Sport; Bystander Empowerment; and Modelling Healthy Relationships, and can be accessed here: https://coach.ca/sport-safety/support-through-sport.

A toolkit, advocacy posters, and research information are also available at https://coach.ca/support-through-sport/toolkit.

Conclusion

Given the significant amount of time coaches and teen athletes spend together and the close relationships that often result, coaches have important opportunities to help teens navigate serious life experiences and challenges.

During adolescence, teens engage in identity exploration, including sexuality, a sexual identity and expression, and various social and romantic relationships. Dating is prevalent in teens and, while recognized dating relationships may exist, the exploration of sexuality and relationships also occurs through hook-up culture. Unfortunately, many teens experience violence in their sexual and romantic encounters, including psychological, physical, and sexual violence.

TDV is prevalent and appears to be enabled and amplified by the reach and anonymity of the digital world. TDV is likely to be reproduced in the sport environment if nothing is done in prevention and mitigation. Coaches can play a central role in making sure it doesn't by virtue of

the proximity and privileges of the relationships they create with the athletes they coach.
their roles in modelling appropriate behaviours and healthy relationships.
the central role they play as a steward of the sport environments and team cultures in which they work.

The CAC has released the four online educational modules mentioned above as well as associated resources for coaches in French and English to help identify and address TDV and to model healthy relationships.

About the Authors

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