

research snapshot

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Aggressive Media Leads to Aggressive Dating

What is this research about?

Dating aggression among teenagers is a serious problem. Between 30% and 50% of teens report being involved in at least one act of dating aggression in a six month period. Research shows that difficult family life can set the stage for dating aggression. But it has also become clear that other factors can have a harmful impact on the lives of young people, resulting in destructive attitudes and behaviours. Urban density, ethnicity, family structure, and socio-economic disadvantage can increase the risk of dating aggression. Attitudes that are tolerant of violence can also create an atmosphere in which dating aggression can take root. Hostile interactions between teenagers who are dating often predict physical violence.

To better grasp the complex nature of dating aggression, many researchers have adopted an 'ecological' approach. That is, they look at how the environment in which a couple lives and interacts can cause dating aggression to occur. Some environmental influences, however, like the popular media, have not received a lot of study. This presents a problem. Teenagers, after all, are avid consumers of TV, music, movies, internet, magazines, and video games. It is thought that these media can make violence, especially in relationships, seem more acceptable.

What you need to know:

TV shows, movies, and other forms of media that depict aggressive behaviours can lead to dating aggression among youth. Teenagers who are ethnic minorities are especially at risk.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers set out to improve our understanding of the risks that lead to dating aggression. They studied over 600 Canadian teenagers, in three cities, over a period of twelve months. Their approach was innovative; they did not focus on people who commit violence and people who are victims. Rather, they looked at dating aggression as a problem facing couples.

What did the researchers find?

Researchers found that TV shows, movies, and other forms of media that depict aggressive behaviours can result in dating aggression. More specifically, these media promote attitudes that are more tolerant of aggression and violence. Boys tend to be more heavily involved in multiple forms of media. They also see their media preferences as more aggressive. But both boys and girls are at risk. This is one of the first studies to show that a teenager's preference for aggressive media can predict that he or she will be

involved in an act of aggressive dating.

Nearly a quarter of the teenagers studied had been involved in aggressive dating behaviour in the past six months. The more risk factors a teenager has, the more likely he or she will take part in these behaviours. Teenagers who are ethnic minorities are especially at risk. It may be that these youth are searching for guidance on how to behave with a romantic partner. As a result, they may be more likely than others to be influenced by media images in which relationships are represented in a negative or aggressive way.

How can you use this research?

This research has practical applications for adults who work with teenagers, either in a school environment or a clinical setting. Decision-makers need to take a two-pronged approach: they need to address the attitudes of teenagers as well as the influence of environmental factors that pose a risk. Prevention programs need to have a media awareness component especially since the popular media can shape how impressionable teenagers think about romantic relationships. These programs need to be culturally sensitive, and should address teenagers in high-needs neighbourhoods.

More research is needed on the link between aggressive media and relationship dynamics. Researchers should think about the extent to which vulnerable teenagers are drawn to certain kinds of media that can then shape their attitudes and make them more tolerant of dating aggression.

About the Researchers

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