

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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Understanding the Buffering Effects of Protective Factors on the Relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Teen Dating Violence Perpetration

BOTTOM LINE

Prevention strategies that address social support, empathy, school belonging and parental monitoring impacted students in a variety of ways, and most significantly, act as a buffer against the negative effects of exposure to family and community violence.

RESEARCH

Adverse childhood experiences (ACES) are potentially traumatic events that occur during the first 18 years of a child's life. Research over the last few decades have clearly shown that exposure to ACES can result in both immediate and life-long negative health outcomes. A number of studies have demonstrated the relationship between witnessing violence or experience violence in the home or the community and the perpetration of violence within relationships during adolescents. However, less is known about how specific protective factors may buffer the impact of ACES on later physical, sexual, threatening, verbal and relational teen dating violence perpetration.

This study explores how protective factors during middle school (e.g., empathy, social support, parental monitoring, school belonging and academic achievement affect subsequent perpetration of teen dating violence in high school.

The researchers found that high levels of family conflict at any period during early adolescence and high levels of community violence are both related to teen dating violence. The individuals who were the highest in physical and verbal teen dating violence experienced high family and community violence throughout their middle school years OR experienced decreasing family violence but increasing community violence during that same time. The results show that early witnessing violence in the home and community and especially increases in exposure to community violence during the crucial adolescent development have a significant effect on later perpetration.

The researchers also found that different protective factors buffer the impact of ACEs on teen dating violence perpetration. For example, youth from high functioning families (e.g., high parental monitoring and low discipline) and exposed to community violence had the lowest odds of perpetrating youth violence compared to lower functioning families. Social support and engagement of others as well as parental support in middle school years also had an impact on the likelihood of perpetration when community violence is increasing. The study also indicated which forms of teen dating violence perpetration may be most influenced by protective factors. For example, parental monitoring was only impactful on physical and verbal teen dating violence and social supports appear to reduce the perpetration of all forms of teen dating violence even with increasing community violence.

The results showed the buffering effect of various protective factors such as social support, school belonging and parental monitoring, on youth with different exposures to home or community violence. What emerged from this study was that the type of ACEs trajectory (e.g., increasing community violence) matters and protective factors vary for the youth in these various trajectories. Given the complexity, comprehensive prevention strategies need to address multiple forms of violence while bolstering multiple protective factors to ensure that children are given the best chance of staying safe.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Professionals treating adolescents who have abused others have long had access to literature regarding protective factors. All too often, society's concerns about risks posed by adolescents who have abused have outweighed our search for factors that will help prevent these teens from persisting in abusive behaviors. These findings highlight the fact that professionals working with young people can be most effective when they are considering the strengths and attributes that contribute to healthier and happier lives for all as well as the risk factors that can contribute to further harm.

Further, these findings highlight how important the interactions with family is to the children and teens who have been exposed to abuse. Professionals working with at-risk youth (at risk of behaving violently as well as at risk of being harmed) will virtually always be more effective when they are able to engage the family in meaningful efforts at change. It is easy to forget that family support is among the most important protective factors especially in communities where children and adolescents are exposed to increasing community violence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Many prevention programs have focused their efforts in one direction (e.g., providing the same education to all children or focusing solely on one aspect of prevention). Public health challenges us all to look at a more comprehensive approach to prevention. These findings show the importance of understanding the many "moving parts" that elevate and mitigate risk for harm. It is not as simple as identifying dangers and then managing them. Our clients come with abilities, talents, strengths, and resources that can help them move forward with their lives – our challenge then is to see the whole child with their risks as well as the protective factors in themselves, their families and their communities.

CITATION:

David, J.P., Ports, K.A., Basile, K.C., Espelage, D.L., & David-Ferdon, C.F. (2019). Understanding the Buffering Effects of Protective Factors on the Relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Teen Dating Violence Perpetration. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48:2343-2359.

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has demonstrated the scope and impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on health and wellbeing. Less is known about the trajectories from exposure to ACEs, such as witnessing family conflict and violence in the community, to teen dating violence perpetration, and the protective factors that buffer the association between early exposure to ACEs and later teen dating violence perpetration. Students ($n = 1611$) completed self-report surveys six times during middle and high school from 2008 to 2013. In early middle school, the sub-sample was 50.2% female and racially/ethnically diverse: 47.7% Black, 36.4% White, 3.4% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 10.8% other. Youth were, on average, 12.7 years old. Latent transition analysis was used to assess how trajectories of exposure to parental conflict and community violence during middle school transition into classes of teen dating violence perpetration (e.g., sexual, physical, threatening, relational, and verbal) in high school. Protective factors were then analyzed as moderators of the transition probabilities. Three class trajectories of ACEs during middle school were identified: decreasing family conflict and increasing community violence ($n = 103$; 6.4%), stable low family conflict and stable low community violence ($n = 1027$; 63.7%), stable high family conflict and stable high community violence ($n = 481$; 29.9%). A three class solution for teen dating violence perpetration in high school was found: high all teen dating violence class ($n = 113$; 7.0%), physical and verbal only teen dating violence class ($n = 335$; 20.8%), and low all teen dating violence class ($n = 1163$; 72.2%). Social support, empathy, school belonging and parental monitoring buffered some transitions from ACEs exposure trajectory classes to teen dating violence perpetration classes. Comprehensive prevention strategies that address multiple forms of violence while bolstering protective factors across the social ecology may buffer negative effects of exposure to violence in adolescence.