

The Relationship Between Adolescents' Experience of Family Violence and Dating Violence

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This study examines whether experiences of familial victimization and aggression are potential risk factors for dating violence in male and female teenage relationships. The authors compare 471 adolescents aged 12 to 19 in the care of a youth protection agency and from a community sample. Results show that adolescents carry negative childhood experiences of family violence into their intimate relationships in different ways, depending on gender and level of risk. Female adolescents who had been victimized by either of their parents were at greater risk for revictimization, but not aggression, within their dating relationships. High-risk adolescent males who reported childhood victimization were at a particularly high risk of being aggressive toward their girlfriends, especially if they were harshly disciplined by their father. The extent of aggression toward parents predicted aggression toward dating partners, particularly for girls. The authors discuss these findings in terms of prevention and early intervention efforts.

Keywords: *dating violence; childhood victimization; high-risk adolescents*

Family violence has been identified as an important risk for violence in intimate relationships among teenagers (Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, & Bangdiwala, 2001; Ismail, Berman, & Ward-Griffin, 2007; Vezina & Hébert, 2007; Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001). Studies investigating familial risk factors have traditionally focused on history of childhood

and adolescent victimization and exposure to parental violence to demonstrate relationships between violence in the family and dating violence. More recently, adolescents' aggression toward parents has been recognized as another important form of family violence (see the review in Kennair & Mellor, 2007), which could place these adolescents at risk for violence when they start dating in adolescence. Being a victim of child abuse and being aggressive toward parents are familial risks factors that may have differential impacts on dating relationships as a function of gender. Not many studies have concurrently investigated experiences of being the object of one or both parents' aggression, adolescents' own history of being aggressive toward their parents, and experiences of aggression and victimization in dating relationships. The aim of the present study is to investigate whether experiences of familial victimization and/or aggression are potential risk factors for experiencing or perpetrating violence in teenage dating relationships and to assess whether the associations between different forms of violent behaviors vary by gender of victims and perpetrators.

From Being a Victim of Family Violence to Violence in Dating Relationships

The theoretical basis for predicting a link between familial violence and dating violence draws from social learning theory and problem behavior theory. Developmental researchers contend that disruptive early family interactions interfere with normal development and might place children at risk for problems as they enter intimate relationships in adolescence (Wolfe et al., 2001). According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), children who have been subjected to harsh parental discipline learn that aggressive behaviors are a legitimate way to respond to interpersonal difficulties and may model their parents' behaviors and aggressive interpersonal styles when they are confronted with conflicts with peers and dating partners (Capaldi & Clark, 1998). In the same way, children who have been victimized by their parents may be at risk for repeating the patterns of subordination learned in childhood (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi, & Hops, 2000;

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Feiring, Rosenthal, & Taska, 2000). These children often lack models of positive relationships and the necessary interpersonal and conflict resolution skills for engaging in healthy relationships.

The explanatory framework for interpersonal relationship difficulties can also vary according to adolescents' gender. Throughout their lives, girls are generally more concerned about and more affected by relationships than are boys (Fehr, 1996) and thus may be particularly vulnerable and at risk for developing problem behaviors in their relationships (Pepler et al., 2001). As girls are still socialized according to traditional gender roles and influenced by sociocultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity, the expectations and gendered demands young women face from society could make them more vulnerable to experiencing violence in their dating relationships (Ismail et al., 2007). For their part, adolescent males are confronted with diverse messages about the characteristics of masculinity: aggressiveness, competitiveness, control, dominance, strength (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2001). The sociocultural conceptions of men's roles could bring adolescents to consider inappropriate relationship behaviors as normal and therefore acceptable. Boys and girls also have different familial role models as to how to solve interpersonal conflicts and therefore bring different behavioral styles into their relationships. Thus, as adolescent males and females experience developmental issues in different ways, invest in interpersonal relationships differently, and are confronted with mixed sociocultural conceptions of the roles ascribed to men and women, the pathways from experiencing family violence to being at risk for victimization or perpetration of violence in intimate relationships may vary by victim gender (Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999) and according to aggressor gender.

There have been inconsistent results in studies of gender differences in the association between childhood victimization and subsequent experiences of violence in dating relationships. In community studies, the association with perpetrating dating violence has been reported to be stronger for females (Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000) or stronger for males (Foo & Margolin, 1995; Wolfe et al., 2001; Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998). Studies of dating victimization have established that harsh punitive methods and childhood abuse are important risk factors for adolescent girls (see the review by Vezina & Hébert, 2007). Wolfe and colleagues (2001) did not find any evidence that a history of parental abuse is a predictor of dating victimization for male adolescents, whereas other studies have found a similar impact for adolescent males and females (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Riggs, O'Leary, & Breslin, 1990).

Research on high-risk youth who have been placed under child protection services have consistently reported that the experience of abuse in childhood is a substantial predictor of victimization or aggression in dating relationships, which varies according to gender and severity of childhood victimization (Wolfe & McGee, 1994). Wekerle et al. (2001) found that high-risk boys who were maltreated in childhood were more likely to use aggression with a dating partner than were maltreated boys from a community sample. For both high-risk and community girls, childhood maltreatment was a significant predictor of both dating aggression and victimization.

In addition, when aggression by the mother and aggression by the father were investigated independently, gender differences emerged in adolescents' dating behaviors. Rich, Gidycz, Warkentin, Lohi, and Weiland (2005) reported that among 18- to 19-year-old male and female young adults, early verbal abuse by mothers or fathers predicted adolescents' perpetration of physical dating violence. Some studies indicated a stronger impact of father abuse on sons than on daughters (Alexander, Moore, & Alexander, 1991), another study indicated the opposite (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006), and others demonstrated that it was not predictive of later dating violence for 13- to 14-year-old boys or girls (Foshee, Bauman, & Linder, 1999). Other studies demonstrated that being hit by one's mother was associated with being aggressive toward a dating partner for females but not for males (Foshee et al., 1999). On the other hand, Martin (1990) found that both mother-daughter and father-daughter aggression predicted daughter-boyfriend aggression; this association was not significant for sons. These authors concluded that the receipt of parental violence had a greater impact for women. At this point, the findings have been inconsistent and contradictory, and there are no clear indications as to the patterns of effects of same-sex or opposite-sex parents' maltreatment on dating violence.

From Being a Perpetrator of Violence in the Family to Violence in Dating Relationships

Although social learning theory provides an explanation for the continuity between childhood victimization and involvement in violent relationships, problem behavior theory helps understand why an adolescent who is physically aggressive toward his or her parent is at greater risk of being violent toward a romantic partner. This theory indicates that adolescents who engage in one problem behavior, such as hitting their parents, are more

likely to engage in other problem behaviors (Jessor & Jessor, 1977). Aggressive behavior problems have been demonstrated to be relatively stable over time (Ehrensaft et al., 2003), across relationships (Andrews et al., 2000), and across contexts (Riggs et al., 1990; Swahn et al., 2008). A youth could have a general tendency to behave aggressively or could have learned this type of behavior because of modeled parental aggression. A potential developmental pathway for relationship difficulties for anti-social youth is to start with being aggressive toward their parents, then transferring this behavior pattern by becoming aggressive in their intimate relationships (Foshee et al., 2001).

Parent-directed aggression is a form of family violence that has been neglected in research in general (see the review in Kennair & Mellor, 2007) and in research on the antecedents of dating violence in particular. Yet this type of behavior seems to be common and may have the potential to be replayed in other relationship contexts (Nock & Kazdin, 2002). Although parent-directed aggression encompasses different forms of aggression (physical, emotional, psychological, financial), most research to date has focused on physical aggression. The prevalence of this type of family violence is still unclear: Reported rates of aggression for youth aged 11 to 20 range from 7% to 38%, depending on the methodology and measurement scales used (Herrera & McCloskey, 2003; Kennair & Mellor, 2007). Although there is generally no reported difference in parent aggression according to adolescent gender (Nock & Kazdin, 2002; Pagani et al., 2004), when the form of violence is considered, research has shown that adolescent males are more likely to hit their parents whereas females adolescents are more likely to engage in psychological aggression (Bobic, 2004, cited in Kennair & Mellor, 2007). In community studies, these findings differ when the youth's age and the victim's gender are considered. As they age, adolescent males are more likely to hit their fathers than their mothers whereas adolescent females are likely to hit both parents (Agnew & Huguley, 1989, cited in Kennair & Mellor, 2007).

To date, there has been a paucity of research investigating the potential pathways from youth-to-parent aggression to aggression in dating relationships. Most of the work has focused on delinquent and antisocial behaviors as risk factors for dating victimization and aggression (Andrews et al., 2000; Ozer, Tschann, Pasch, & Flores, 2004; Vezina & Hébert, 2007). In those studies, aggression toward parents is a form of delinquency that has not been explored. Higher levels of antisocial behavior have been found to increase the risk of youth involvement in physically aggressive intimate relationships. In some studies this association was stronger for males (Ozer et al., 2004), whereas in other studies it was stronger for females (Roberts et al., 2003, cited in Vezina & Hébert, 2007).

Research on the etiology of parent aggression has stressed that a large proportion of adolescents who engaged in parent-directed aggression had experienced childhood abuse either as victim or as witness of domestic violence (Kennair & Mellor, 2007). Because child abuse plays a role in the etiology of dating violence, and because the use of aggression toward others has also been considered an important predictor of involvement in violence in dating relationships (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000), we expected that the youth who physically harm their parents would be involved in dating violence. However, the relationship among childhood abuse, parent abuse, and dating violence has yet to be investigated.

In the present study, we examine the consistency of adolescents' victimization by their parents and by their romantic partners and whether gender and risk status moderate this association. We have also focus on the link between adolescents' aggression toward their parents and their romantic partners. We have the advantage of studying a group of adolescents who had been in the care of a youth protection agency (YPA), and we are able to compare these adolescents to those from a community sample. Finally, we explore the association between parents' harsh discipline and aggression and adolescents' subsequent aggressive behavior in their romantic relationships and the possible differences between behaviors inflicted by fathers versus mothers.

In accordance with our theoretical framework and in line with previous research, we hypothesized that (a) adolescents who are aggressive toward their parents are more likely to be aggressive toward their romantic partners than those who are not, (b) adolescents who have been victims of parental aggression are more likely be victimized by their romantic partners than those who have not been victimized, and (c) such adolescents are more likely to be aggressive toward their romantic partners than those who have not been victimized. Because the high-risk adolescents in our study had experienced severe abuse or neglect or had demonstrated delinquent behaviors, we expected that these associations would be stronger for those youth compared to youth from the community. With respect to gender differences for which the empirical findings are varied, we conducted exploratory analyses.

Method

Participants

This cross-sectional study, comparing a high-risk sample of adolescents from a YPA to a sample of adolescents who participated in a community

study, included 1,007 French-speaking adolescents aged 12 to 19 years who voluntarily took part in the research. The high-risk group comprised 123 boys and 176 girls (32% from ethnic backgrounds other than French Canadian) with a mean age of 16 ($SD = 1.3$) who were receiving services from a YPA. These high-risk adolescents were recruited from various services and included young offenders in open or closed facilities, youth in residential programs, and youth living in group homes in need of protection because of parental abuse or neglect.

The comparison group comprised 336 boys and 372 girls (18% from ethnic backgrounds other than French Canadian) with a mean age of 16 ($SD = 1.4$) from the general population. These participants were recruited from a private high school, trade schools, centers for young adult education, and youth associations within Montreal, a large French-speaking metropolitan region. The majority of participants (67%) came from two-parent families. In the high-risk group, 42.9% of the adolescents were from low-income families (annual income less than Can \$20,000) and 5.7% were from high-income families (annual income more than Can \$80,000). In the comparison group, 12.9% of the adolescents were from low-income families and 26.5% were from high-income families.

Because our analyses focused on dating relationships, those adolescents who had not experienced any dating relationships (12% of the high-risk group and 36% of the comparison group) were excluded. In all, 32 questionnaires (0.3%) were eliminated because they were incomplete or incorrectly answered. To compare models with a likelihood ratio test, we filtered the data for missing information on background variables (age, family income). The final sample comprised 471 adolescents, 190 from the high-risk group and 281 from the low-risk group. There were no statistically significant differences between the included and excluded participants in terms of demographics and experiences of family violence.

Measures

Adolescents in the study completed a range of questionnaires to assess their experiences of being the object of one or both parents' aggression, their own history of being aggressive toward their parents, and their experiences of aggression and victimization in their dating relationships.

Experiences of Family Violence

Childhood victimization. Five questions measured childhood victimization. In the first three questions, participants were asked, "During your childhood

and adolescence, how often: (1) Were you threatened, humiliated or ridiculed by your parents? (2) Were you spanked by your parents? and (3) Were you hit by your parents?" Each item was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*never happened*) to 3 (*very often*). Two other questions assessed the mother's and the father's style of disciplining the participant according to the response categories of *easygoing*, *slightly harsh*, *very harsh*, and *violent*. For the analyses, all items were summed for a total victimization score. Cronbach's alpha was .77 for the Childhood Victimization scale.

Violence toward parents. Adolescents' aggression toward their parents was measured by a single-item question in which respondents were asked how often they had hit their parents. Response categories ranged from *never* to *very often*. Because very few adolescents reported *very often*, this variable was recoded by combining the categories of *often* and *very often* and treated as a three-level categorical variable.

Experiences of Dating Violence

Dating victimization. Four questions measured dating victimization. The participants were asked, "How often were you: (1) threatened, (2) humiliated, (3) ridiculed, and (4) hit by your dating partners?" Each item was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*never happened*) to 3 (*very often*). The level of victimization was measured with the sum of these four scores, with higher values indicating higher levels of victimization by their dating partners. The Cronbach's alpha was .77 for the Dating Victimization scale.

Dating aggression. The same four questions were used to measure adolescents' aggression toward any of their dating partners. Adolescents' aggression toward their partners was measured by summing the four types of aggression, with higher values indicating higher levels of aggression toward their dating partners. The Cronbach's alpha was .75 for the Dating Aggression scale.

Procedure

The data gathered for these analyses were part of a larger project. The research was introduced to the participants as a study of youths' relationships with dating partners, their attitudes about relationships, and their family's methods of solving conflicts. Consent procedures were conducted according to standards within the province of Quebec. Students 14 years and older were

able to provide their own consent. For the 1.5% of adolescents younger than 14, consent was provided by the adult responsible for them in a teaching or educational context. The anonymous self-report questionnaire took approximately 50 minutes to complete. In most instances, the questionnaires were completed by the comparison group in a group setting during supervised class time or during meetings. The YPA youth were approached by their case worker, and the questionnaires were typically administered during group meetings. Group leaders and teachers generally welcomed the opportunity to have their youth answer the questionnaires on the issue of dating relationships and violence. The youth were not paid for their participation.

Results

To examine the consistency of aggression and victimization across adolescents' relationships, we fit multivariate models using Poisson regressions. The multivariate analyses were built using the adolescents' aggression toward partner or adolescents' victimization by partner as dependent variables. These dependent variables were discrete and had limited count values. The substantial positively skewed distribution of the dependent variables indicated the need for the Poisson regression model. The models were estimated by the maximum likelihood method, and the effects of the independent variables were tested by likelihood ratio tests.

Consistency of Aggression Across Relationships

The first hypothesis was that adolescents who were aggressive toward their parents would be more aggressive toward their dating partners than those who did not report hitting their parents. This hypothesis was assessed with Poisson regression analyses, with the level of adolescents' aggression toward their dating partners as the dependent variable. The independent variable was violence toward parents, and the control variables included age, family income, dating victimization, and childhood victimization.

We fit two models to examine the association between violence toward parents and violence toward dating partner. Our first model (Model 1) examined the relationship between aggression toward parents and aggression toward dating partners, controlling for other variables. The second model (Model 2) examined whether the relationship between aggression toward parents and aggression toward dating partners was moderated by gender and group (high or low risk).

Table 1
Poisson Regression Estimates of Dating Aggression

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Intercept	-2.74	(0.66)****	-2.61	(0.68)****
Controlled variables				
Age	0.15	(0.04)****	0.14	(0.04)****
Family income	-0.08	(0.03)***	-0.06	(0.03)**
Dating victimization	0.18	(0.01)****	0.20	(0.02)****
Childhood victimization	0.05	(0.01)****	0.04	(0.02)**
Violence toward parents				
Rarely	0.24	(0.11)**	0.20	(0.18)
Often	0.72	(0.16)****	0.74	(0.23)****
Gender			-0.25	(0.12)**
Gender × violence toward parents				
Rarely			0.19	(0.24)
Often			-0.84	(0.47)*
Group			0.44	(0.17)**
Group × violence toward parents				
Rarely			-0.13	(0.32)
Often			-0.25	(0.34)
Gender × group			-0.70	(0.43)
Gender × group × violence toward parents				
Rarely			-0.42	(0.67)
Often			2.07	(0.83)**

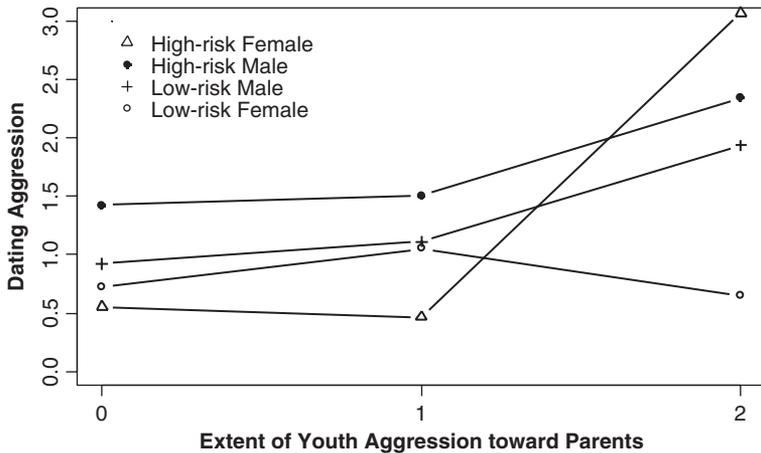
Note: *SE* = standard error. Group was coded as 0 for the comparison group and 1 for the high-risk group. Gender was coded as 0 for male and 1 for female.

p* < .1. *p* < .05. ****p* < .01. *****p* < .001.

The results are reported in Table 1 and indicate that the level of dating aggression for adolescents who hit their parents was much higher than for adolescents who reported that they had never hit their parents. The coefficients shown in Table 1 confirm that the effect was incremental: The more frequently adolescents reported hitting their parents, the more frequently they reported perpetrating aggression against their dating partners.

The results of Model 2 show that there is a significant three-way interaction among group, gender, and aggression toward parents, indicating a significant gender by group difference in the relationship between aggression toward parents and aggression toward partners. Gender by group

Figure 1
Consistency of Aggression Across Relationships



differences were most marked for those youth who reported being “often” aggressive toward their parents. Given the difficulty in interpreting the three-way interaction, we employed modeling prediction to examine group and gender differences in the consistency of aggression across relationships. The data, depicted in Figure 1, indicate that the high-risk girls who often hit their parents had the highest levels of dating aggression, whereas the comparable group of low-risk girls had the lowest level of aggression toward their dating partners. The difference between high- and low-risk boys was minimal, although the high-risk boys reported a higher level of dating aggression than did the low-risk boys.

Consistency of Victimization Across Relationships

A similar procedure was used to examine the relationship between adolescents’ experiences of being victimized by their parents and by their dating partners. A Poisson regression analysis was built, using the level of victimization by partners as the dependent variable. The independent variable was childhood victimization, and the control variables included age, family income, and dating aggression. We fit two models: Model 3 examined the association between childhood victimization and dating aggression; Model 4 added the main effects of gender and group as well as their

Table 2
Poisson Regression Estimates of Dating Victimization

	Model 3		Model 4	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Intercept	-1.08	(0.57)*	-1.59	(0.61)***
Controlled variables				
Age	0.05	(0.03)	0.05	(0.03)
Family income	-0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.03)
Dating aggression	0.22	(0.02)****	0.25	(0.02)****
Childhood victimization	0.04	(0.01)****	0.07	(0.02)****
Gender			0.72	(0.17)
Gender × childhood victimization			-0.04	(0.03)
Group			0.16	(0.28)
Group × childhood victimization			-0.07	(0.04)*
Gender × group			0.06	(0.43)
Gender × group × childhood victimization			0.10	(0.06)*

Note: *SE* = standard error. Group was coded as 0 for the comparison group and 1 for the high-risk group. Gender was coded as 0 for male and 1 for female.

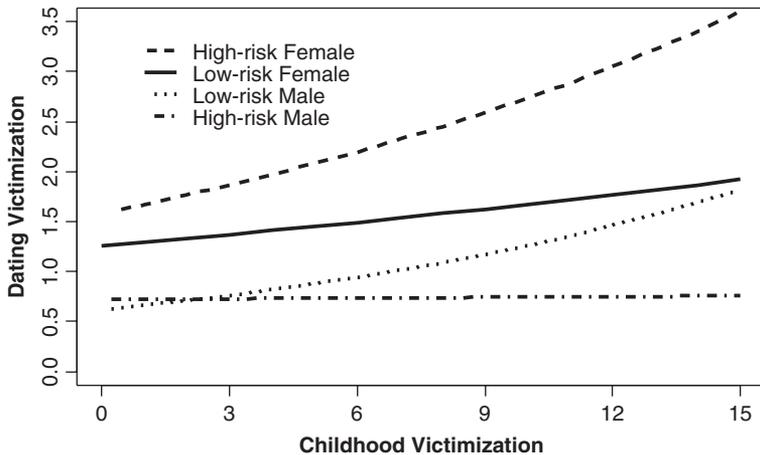
* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

interaction and their interactions with childhood victimization to examine gender and group differences in the associations.

The estimates of Models 3 and 4 are displayed in Table 2. The results from Model 3 show consistency in victimization across relationships: Adolescents who reported being most victimized by their parents were more likely to report being victimized by their dating partners. The results from Model 4 indicate that the association between childhood victimization and dating victimization is marginally moderated by gender and group interactions.

Figure 2 shows the predicted association between childhood victimization and dating victimization when other control variables are set at their average levels. As can be seen in Figure 2, there were gender differences in the consistency of victimization across relationships in both high-risk and low-risk comparison groups. In the high-risk group, the association between childhood victimization and dating victimization was stronger for girls than for boys. In the comparison group, however, the association between childhood victimization and dating victimization was stronger for boys than for girls. Similarly, in Figure 2, we see that this association was stronger for the

Figure 2
Consistency of Victimization Across Relationships



high-risk girls than for the comparison girls. Conversely, the association between childhood and dating victimization was stronger for the comparison boys than for the high-risk boys.

Childhood Victimization and Dating Aggression

In estimating adolescents' aggression toward their romantic partners, results from Model 1 (Table 1) show that adolescents who were victims of parental abuse were also more likely to be aggressive toward their dating partners. To examine whether gender and group modified this association, we fit Model 5, adding to Model 1 the main effects of gender and group as well as their interaction and their interactions with childhood victimization. The results, as reported in Table 3, indicate that the three-way interaction is nonsignificant.

Figure 3 shows the predicted association between childhood victimization and dating aggression when control variables are set at the average level. The association between childhood victimization and dating aggression is similar for comparison adolescent males and females from the community sample. The association between childhood victimization and dating aggression is stronger for the high-risk boys than for the high-risk girls. There was almost no differences for high-risk boys and comparison boys.

Table 3
The Association of Childhood Victimization and Dating Aggression

	Model 5	
	Estimate	SE
Intercept	-2.68	(0.69)****
Controlled variables		
Age	0.14	(0.04)****
Family income	-0.06	(0.03)**
Dating victimization	0.20	(0.02)****
Violence toward parents		
Rarely	0.21	(0.11)**
Often	0.60	(0.17)****
Childhood victimization	0.04	(0.02)**
Gender	-0.32	(0.19)*
Gender × childhood victimization	0.02	(0.03)
Group	0.46	(0.24)**
Group × childhood victimization	-0.02	(0.03)
Gender × group	-0.47	(0.50)
Gender × group × childhood victimization	-0.03	(0.06)

Note: *SE* = standard error. Group was coded as 0 for the comparison group and 1 for the high-risk group. Gender was coded as 0 for male and 1 for female.

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

Mothers' and Fathers' Harsh Discipline and Dating Violence

To examine whether the impact of mothers' harsh discipline on adolescents' subsequent aggression toward their partners was different from that of fathers, we fit another model (Model 6) by omitting the predictor childhood victimization in Model 1 and adding two predictors: mothers' harsh discipline and fathers' harsh discipline. The estimation results of Model 6 are reported in Table 4, and the prediction is shown in Figure 4.¹ After controlling for other risk factors, male adolescents had the greatest likelihood of reporting aggression toward their partners if they reported being victims of fathers' harsh discipline. Conversely, boys who were harshly disciplined by their mothers were not at risk of being aggressive toward their partners. Figure 4 indicates that both mothers' and fathers' harsh discipline with their daughters had a strong impact on girls' subsequent aggression toward their boyfriends. Girls had the greatest likelihood of high aggression toward their partners if they were victims of both mothers' and fathers' harsh discipline.

Figure 3
Association Between Childhood Victimization and Dating Aggression

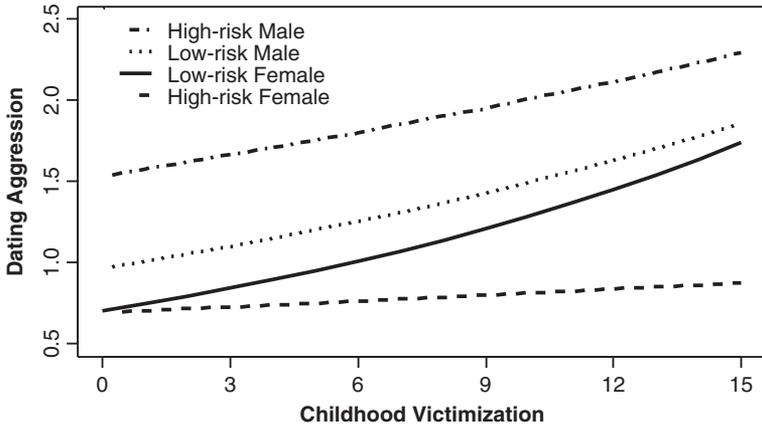


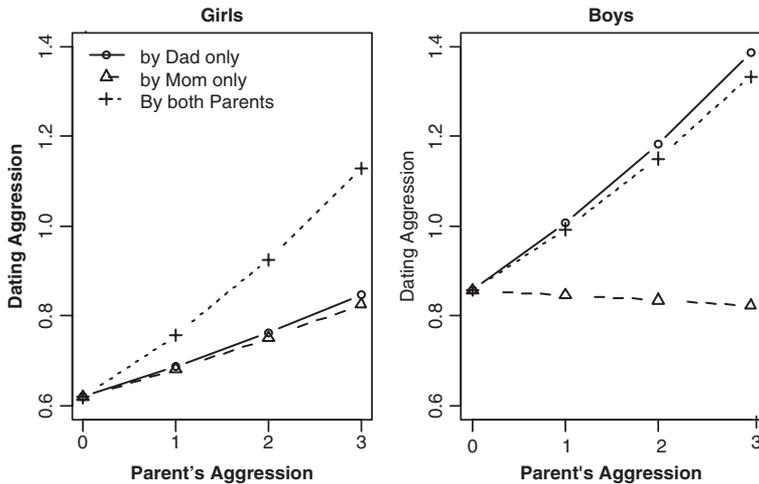
Table 4
Association Between Childhood Victimization and Dating Aggression

	Model 6	
	Estimate	SE
Intercept	-2.69	(0.71)****
Controlled variables		
Age	0.15	(0.04)****
Family income	-0.09	(0.03)***
Dating victimization	0.20	(0.02)****
Violence toward parents		
Rarely	0.21	(0.12)*
Often	0.67	(0.18)****
Mothers' harsh discipline	-0.01	(0.07)
Fathers' harsh discipline	0.17	(0.07)**
Gender	-0.32	(0.17)*
Gender × mothers' harsh discipline	0.11	(0.10)
Group × fathers' harsh discipline	-0.07	(0.10)

Note: SE = standard error. Gender was coded as 0 for male and 1 for female.

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

Figure 4
Impact of Parent's Aggression on Dating Aggression



Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the links between violence in the family context and violence in dating relationships in a group of high-risk adolescents and a group of adolescents from the community. We found that adolescents carry negative childhood experiences of family violence into their intimate relationships in different ways, depending on their gender and level of risk. The main findings were the following. (a) Male and female adolescents' aggression toward their dating partners was mostly predicted by the amount of victimization they experienced in their romantic relationships, followed by the extent of aggression toward their parents; this was especially salient for female adolescents. (b) There was generally no gender difference in the association between adolescents' reports of victimization by parents and victimization by romantic partners. Within the high-risk group, however, girls reported a high level of victimization across relationship contexts. (c) High-risk boys who reported childhood victimization were at a high risk of being aggressive with their girlfriends; this was especially true when they were harshly disciplined by their father. (d) Female adolescents who reported

harsh discipline from *both* parents seemed to be at increased risk for using aggression within their dating relationships.

In our discussion, we turn first to consider the risks that the youth themselves bring to their relationships, that is, their tendency to be aggressive toward their parents. We then consider the adolescents' experiences of maternal and paternal victimization in their families. From a risk and protective factor framework (Rutter, 1990), we were particularly concerned about the high-risk youth. Relative to the comparison group, they were expected to have more risk processes operating in their lives that might exacerbate their family context and fewer protective processes to buffer the negative influences of domestic aggression. In addition, the high-risk youth came from distressed or dysfunctional families, where they may not have had the opportunity to learn the requisite social skills for positive problem solving in intimate relationships.

Consistency of Adolescents' Aggression Across Relationships

As we had hypothesized, the more frequently the adolescents reported hitting their parents, the more frequently they reported being aggressive with their dating partners. Being aggressive toward one's parents suggests that the adolescents have antisocial behavior problems, and there is a strong research base indicating that antisocial or delinquent adolescents are more likely to be aggressive with their partners (Connolly et al., 2000; Ehrensaft et al., 2003). Although there was no difference between males and female adolescents, the difference between the high-risk and comparison groups was primarily found among girls.

A curious phenomenon exists within the literature on gender differences in aggressive behavior. Although boys are recognized to exhibit the highest levels of antisocial behaviors, reports of physical aggression in close relationships are more likely to come from adolescent girls than from adolescent boys (Shook et al., 2000). For example, in a high-risk sample of adolescents, 42% of the girls compared to 7% of the boys reported hitting a dating partner. In the same study, about 50% of females reported hitting their mothers or their fathers compared to about one fourth of males (Carlson, 1990). Either adolescent females really hit their parents and dating partners more frequently than adolescent males do or they are more willing to report that they engage in interpersonal aggression than are males. Several studies have demonstrated that male adolescents have more difficulty recognizing and reporting dating violence than do female adolescents (Simkins-Strong, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, in press). Also,

males may have more difficulty in identifying aggressive behavior toward their parents as violence and thus report only their most extreme behaviors. In the National Survey of Youth, 21% of all incidents of assault on parents were perceived as trivial (i.e., accidental or playful), and girls were twice as likely as boys to report trivial incidents. Because they recognize violence more readily, female adolescents may report any and all of their aggressive behaviors against their parents and partners and thus generate higher scores on perpetrated violence. It could also be that given the social sanctions against female aggression, girls may be more likely to perpetrate their aggression behind closed doors within the context of close relationships, in which the partner is less likely to break the relationship because of the aggression (Pepler & Craig, 2005).

Our results indicate that the strongest statistical effect in predicting adolescents' aggression toward their dating partners was the amount of victimization they experienced in their romantic relationships. This reciprocity in dating aggression has been demonstrated in many studies of clinical and nonclinical populations (Archer, 2000; Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2004). The next most predictive factor was the extent of violence toward their parents. This association has not been demonstrated before and seems especially salient for adolescent females, particularly those who come from a distressed or dysfunctional family.

Consistency of Adolescents' Victimization Across Relationships

We expected that adolescents who had been victimized within their family would also be at risk for victimization in their romantic relationships. This association was important for high-risk girls, who reported a high level of victimization across relationship contexts. For the high-risk boys, there was virtually no association between being victimized by their parents and by their girlfriends. Wolfe et al. (2001) also found little evidence that past experience of parental abuse is a predictor of victimization for male adolescents in their dating relationships.

These data raise concerns about the heightened risk for girls from dysfunctional or distressed families for violence in their romantic relationships. It seems as if these young women may not only lack the social skills for prolonged healthy relationships but also may not have been provided with the social and cognitive preparation within their family contexts to choose healthy romantic relationships with nonviolent partners and/or to leave relationships in which their boyfriends become aggressive. These

girls may be at a particularly high risk of choosing aggressive partners through assortative mating processes (Wolfe et al., 1998)—partners who, like them, have deficiencies in interpersonal skills (Feiring & Furman, 2000) and similar histories of aggressive or deviant behaviors (Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, & Li, 1995). This assortative mating process could constrain their development course into relationship violence (Wolfe et al., 1998). In fact, the risk of a girl pairing with an aggressive male is greater than that for a male pairing with an aggressive female because of the greater prevalence of aggressive young men in our society (Maughan, Pickles, & Quinton, 1995).

Adolescents' Victimization and Aggressive Behavior in Dating Relationships

High-risk boys who reported childhood victimization were at a particularly high risk of being aggressive with their girlfriends. These results are similar to the findings of Lavoie, Hebert, Tremblay, Vitaro, and McDuff (2002) and Wolfe et al. (1998). This association did not hold true for high-risk girls. The link between victimization by parents and aggression toward romantic partners was the weakest for the group of adolescent girls from youth protection services. Aggression toward their boyfriends seems to be more predicted by their aggression toward their parents. In studies of risk factors for dating aggression, this finding underlines the importance of expanding the notion of family violence to include aggression perpetrated against parents. Among low-risk adolescent males and females, the higher the scores of victimization reported, the more they report using aggression with their dating partners. It appears that adolescents who have been more severely abused in their family learn that aggression can be an effective strategy for controlling a partner.

The findings related to harsh discipline by mothers and fathers highlight the salient role that fathers have in their sons' lives. Boys who reported high levels of harsh discipline from their fathers or from both parents were much more likely to report similarly high levels of dating aggression. These results mirror those of Alexander et al. (1991). Conversely, boys who reported harsh discipline from their mothers were not at greater risk for being aggressive toward their partners. It is possible that the aggression by the father is more severe than that by the mother and therefore has more impact. In addition, fathers may provide a salient same-sex model of using aggression as a means of controlling others, and adolescent males are more likely to imitate the abusive behaviors of their fathers than those of their mothers. Adolescent

girls who reported harsh discipline from *both* parents seemed to be at increased risk for using aggression with their romantic partners. This result is similar to the findings of Martin (1990) that verbal aggression by mothers and fathers predicted girls' verbal aggression toward their boyfriends. In the present study, mothers' or fathers' harsh discipline did not have an effect on the girls' subsequent aggression toward their boyfriends, whereas being harshly disciplined by *both* parents had a very strong impact. Youth who have been harshly disciplined by their mother and by their father have learned from their two caretakers a unique model of dealing with conflicts. The co-occurrence of difficulties with adult caretakers and the possible absence of an adult's support could exert an even stronger impact on the subsequent use of aggression in dating relationships.

It seems that adolescents carry negative childhood experiences forward into their intimate relationships in different ways depending on their gender and on their high- or low-risk status. Thus, these factors must be taken into consideration in the assessment of high-risk individuals as compared to the general population.

Limitations

The present study has some limitations. We are inclined to cautiously interpret our findings because of the self-report nature of the data and the absence of corroborative reports. The reports of aggression toward parents and partners were calibrated in terms of frequency; hence, we cannot make interpretations about the severity of harm that the aggression caused. Other researchers have found that expectations of harm from men's aggression are much greater than from women's aggression (Capaldi & Clark, 1998). The questions in the present study uniquely focused on behavior and not on the subjective impact of aggression on the victim (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1999). This potential confound in the adolescents' self-reports and in the dynamics of the aggressive interactions must be taken into consideration within the present study. In the dating violence literature, the potential biases in girls' and boys' reports have been cited as a factor partially accounting for the relatively equivalent rates of female and male reports of dating aggression across numerous studies (Capaldi et al., 2004). Unfortunately, we did not have access to the adolescents' partners' points of view, which is an additional limitation of our study. Research indicates that adult women tend to report more incidents of abuse or give different accounts than their husbands (Gondolf, 2002), a pattern that may similarly exist with adolescents. A final limitation for the generalization of these findings relates to the heterogeneity

within the high-risk group; these adolescents were referred to protective services for a wide range of problems.

The interpretation of results requires caution given the cross-sectional nature of our study. For example, we were unable to determine whether adolescents' experiences of hitting their parents came before or after their experiences of hitting their dating partners. Also, because of time constraints and school policies, we were not able to ask about all forms of abuse and assess their severity. Therefore, this study does not identify all types of abuse in a given category and probably underestimates the extent of violence in the lives of these adolescents. Furthermore, only one item was used to measure violence against parents. We recognize that the reliability of this assessment is necessarily poorer than for a multi-item scale. Had we been able to explore the psychological abuse toward parents, results pertaining to adolescent females could have been quite different. Future research may take the abovementioned factors into consideration.

Implications for Supporting Adolescents in Healthy Relationships

Adolescent romantic relationships form the foundation for intimate relationships throughout one's lifespan. Therefore, it is essential to promote the development of healthy romantic relationships among male and female adolescents. Both high-risk male and female adolescents appear to transfer interactional styles from their familial experiences to their romantic relationships. Therefore, prevention programs that identify high-risk youth before or in the early stages of romantic interest and that support positive relationship skills and attitudes may aid in diverting youth from the maladaptive trajectories of dating aggression. The strength of the associations between experiences of violence within the family and within romantic relationships also depends on gender. Gender differences in the links between childhood victimization and aggression and subsequent experiences of violence in dating relationships suggest that prevention and intervention programs should be gender sensitive. Male adolescents who were most likely to engage in dating aggression were those who had been hit by their fathers. Interventions to support these adolescents might focus on protecting them from further abuse, developing positive relationship skills and attitudes, providing a positive male role model, and helping them explore and challenge cultural conceptions of men's role. Dating violence seems to be socially and culturally sanctioned (Ismail et al., 2007), and interventions should also help

challenge the trivialization of dating violence. School can play a role in enabling young women, and men, to challenge the limitations of stereotypical roles and the perpetuation of expected gender-based behaviors (Clever, 2001). Female adolescents who were most likely to engage in dating aggression were those who had hit their parents. This gender-atypical aggressive behavior appears to be a significant indicator of girls' risk for relationship problems. In addition, if female adolescents had been victimized by either of their parents in childhood, they were at greater risk for revictimization, but not for aggression, within their dating relationships (Rich et al., 2005). The first step in providing support to these young women would be to identify whether they exhibited patterns of aggression, victimization, or both. For those who are aggressive, interventions might focus on promoting positive parent-child relationships, enhancing the adolescents' emotional and behavioral regulation, and promoting positive relationship skills and attitudes. For those who have been victimized by their parents, interventions might focus on protecting them from further abuse, helping them to identify features of healthy and risky relationships, and promoting self-confidence, self-assertion, and positive connections. Support in the early stages of the development of romantic attachments may serve to prevent serious family violence problems over the life course.

Note

1. Model 6 was fit on a subsample of 430 adolescents. Because of missing data on mother's or father's harsh discipline, 41 were further excluded from the Model 6 analysis.

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