



CONTACT: Jennifer Lewis
703-288-0801

NEW STUDY SUGGESTS WAYS TO REDUCE WIDESPREAD AGGRESSIVE DATING BEHAVIOR AMONG TEENAGERS

WASHINGTON, DC. November 17, 2004— Aggressive dating behavior which can often lead to dating violence is quite common among teenagers, but it may be reduced if high school kids are shown the difference between how they behave and how they believe they should behave toward their dates, according to a new study published in the December issue of *Prevention Science*, a peer reviewed journal of the Society for Prevention Research.

An estimated 40% of adolescents report physical violence in their dating relationships. Research has shown that such violence does not occur in isolation. It is often accompanied or preceded by aggressive dating behaviors, such as verbal abuse, insults, suspicion and jealousy. Reducing aggressive dating behavior may be the first step in reducing dating violence.

The study, which was part of a larger study conducted by researchers at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, surveyed 398 students from racially and ethnically diverse schools in Long Island, NY. The students were asked how frequently they had engaged in a variety of aggressive behaviors such as insulting or swearing at their dating partner or accusing their dating partner of seeing another boy or girl. Attitudes about aggressive behavior were measured by asking students to rank the behaviors on a five-point scale ranging from justified in many situations to not justified no matter what the situation may be. The surveys were administered once and repeated three months later.

The research showed that 84% of males engaged in verbal aggression over their partners, although only 58% believed that engaging in such behaviors was justified. Similarly, 70% of the males reported using jealous tactics, while only 45% thought that the jealousy was justified. Among females, 94% used verbal aggression, with only 63% believing that their actions were justifiable, and 88% behaved jealously, while only 45% believed that it was justifiable. A follow-up survey three months later revealed that illustrating this discrepancy between behaviors and beliefs to the teens involved was associated with significant reductions in levels of aggressive dating behaviors.

“This is one of the early studies to suggest that teenagers may be likely to reduce aggression in their dating relationships over time if they realize that there is a difference between how they actually behave and how they believe they ought to behave toward their dates. Having to face that discrepancy may motivate positive changes in behavior,” according to Julie Schumacher, Ph.D., who began this investigation at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and completed the work while she was at the State University of New York in Buffalo.

=more=

Aggressive behavior/ add one

The study also showed that teenagers who reduce their acceptability of aggressive behaviors are also less likely to engage in such behaviors.

“Many teenagers may believe that verbally aggressive and jealous behavior is not acceptable, and yet they may swear at their own dating partners or accuse them of seeing other boys or girls. We don’t know precisely why that is the case, they may be in denial about such behavior; they may minimize its importance, or somehow rationalize it. In high school dating relationships we commonly find that boys and girls are both perpetrators and victims of aggressive behavior,” according to Schumacher, who is now at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson.

Schumacher said that it may not be enough to lecture students about aggressive behaviors and the negative consequences associated with it. The findings of this study suggest that one way to improve the effectiveness of current educational programs on dating aggression would be to add components that increase students’ awareness of the discrepancy between their own behaviors and their own attitudes about dating-related aggression. Researchers refer to discrepancies between behavior and beliefs as “cognitive dissonance.”

Prevention Science is a peer-reviewed journal of the Society for Prevention Research (SPR), an international organization focused upon the advancement of science-based prevention programs and policies through empirical research. The membership of the organization includes scientists, practitioners, advocates, administrators, and policy makers who are concerned with the prevention of social, physical and mental health problems and the promotion of health, safety, and well-being.

=end=