FAMILY, PEER, AND TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AS PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN ADOLESCENT DATING VIOLENCE
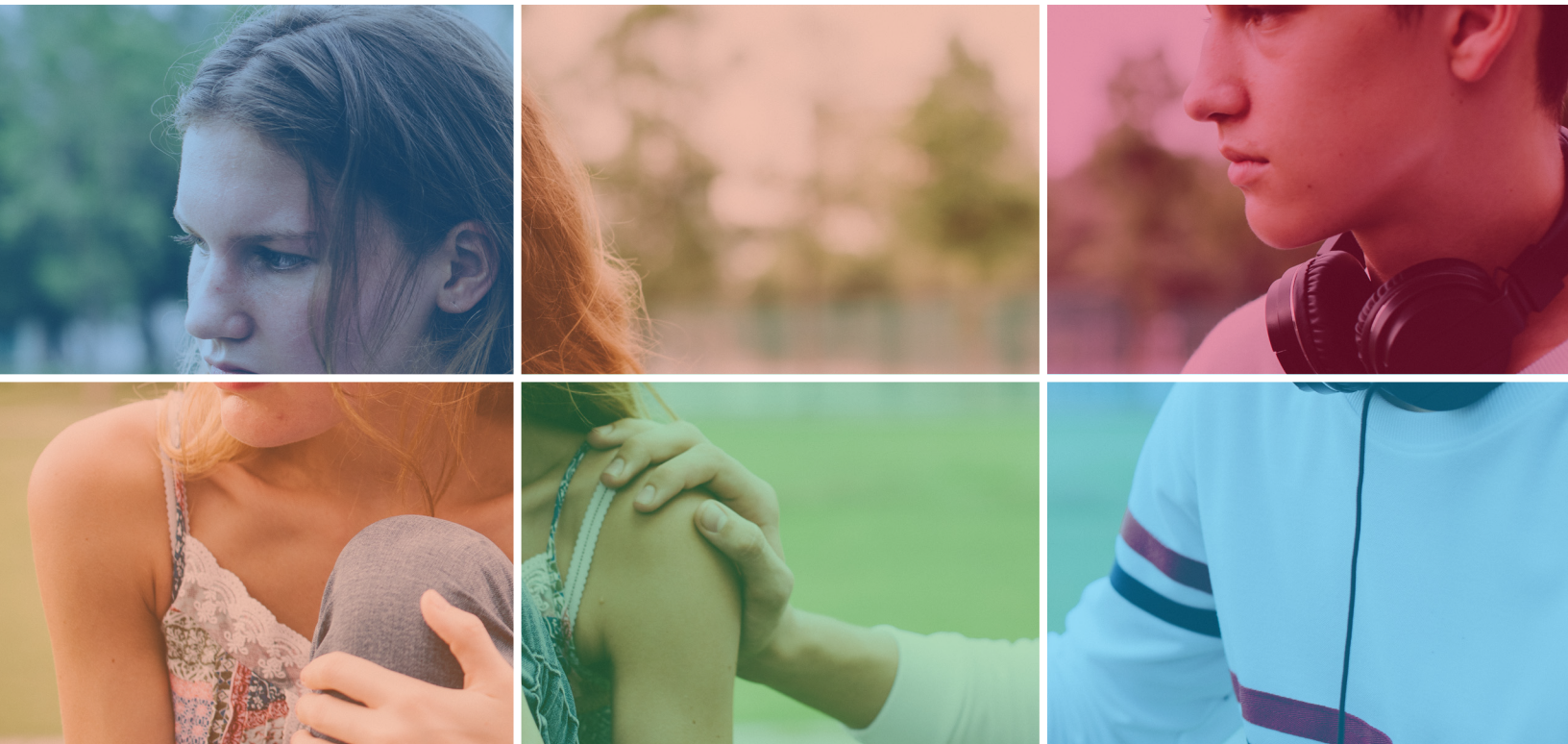
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HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
COLLABORATIVE CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY

FINDINGS FROM THE 2022 HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN STUDY

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Adolescent dating violence (ADV) involves either experiencing acts of physical, psychological, and/or cyber dating violence from a dating partner (victimization) or perpetrating these acts against one's dating partner (perpetration). When ADV is experienced online, it is referred to as cyber dating violence and includes sexual violence, psychological violence and stalking using technology or social media. Adolescents who experience dating violence are also at increased risk for experiencing both short and long term mental and physical health problems as well as substance use[1] issues. In addition, adolescents who experience dating violence are more likely to experience intimate partner violence in adulthood, potentially due to the fact that adolescence is a key period of identity development in the context of dating relationships.[2] There is also overlap in experiencing dating violence victimization and perpetrating dating violence, with individuals involved in both experiencing and perpetrating (i.e., bidirectional ADV) experiencing worse short—and long-term health outcomes. Thus, preventing ADV is critical to stopping cycles of victimization and to improving the health and wellbeing of youth. Identifying risk and protective factors for ADV can aid in the development of prevention and intervention programs. The goal of this report is to examine the risk and protective roles of family, friend, and teacher relationships in ADV victimization and perpetration among grade 9 and 10 students.

RESULTS

Table 1. Prevalence of adolescent dating violence by gender among students in grades 9 and 10 in a dating relationship

Gender	ADV involved				ADV uninvolved
	ADV Perpetration & victimization	**ADV** perpetration only	**ADV** victimization only	**Total** (victimization and/or perpetration)	
Cisgender girls	15.2%	na	24.9%	42.0%	58.0%
Cisgender boys	8.5%	2.3%	17.5%	28.3%	71.7%
Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth	17.6%	na	24.7%	44.4%	55.6%
Overall	12.6%	2.1%	21.7%	36.5%	63.5%

naReported by less than 30 participants, therefore for privacy cannot report.

Note. These prevalence rates are descriptive and represent students in Grades 9 and 10 who were in a dating relationship in the last year (34.0% of students). Uninvolved refers to youth who were involved in a dating relationship within the last year, but did not perpetrate ADV or experience ADV victimization.

Many youth reported ADV, with an estimated 36.4% of all youth in a dating relationship within the last year reporting some form of involvement. The highest percentage of involvement was among transgender and gender-diverse youth (TGD) (44.4%) and cisgender girls (42.0%), followed by cisgender boys (28.3%). Bidirectional violence, in which youth were engaged in both ADV perpetration and were victimized, was also common (Table 1).

Figure 1. Adolescent dating violence overall (perpetration and victimization in 2018 and 2022)
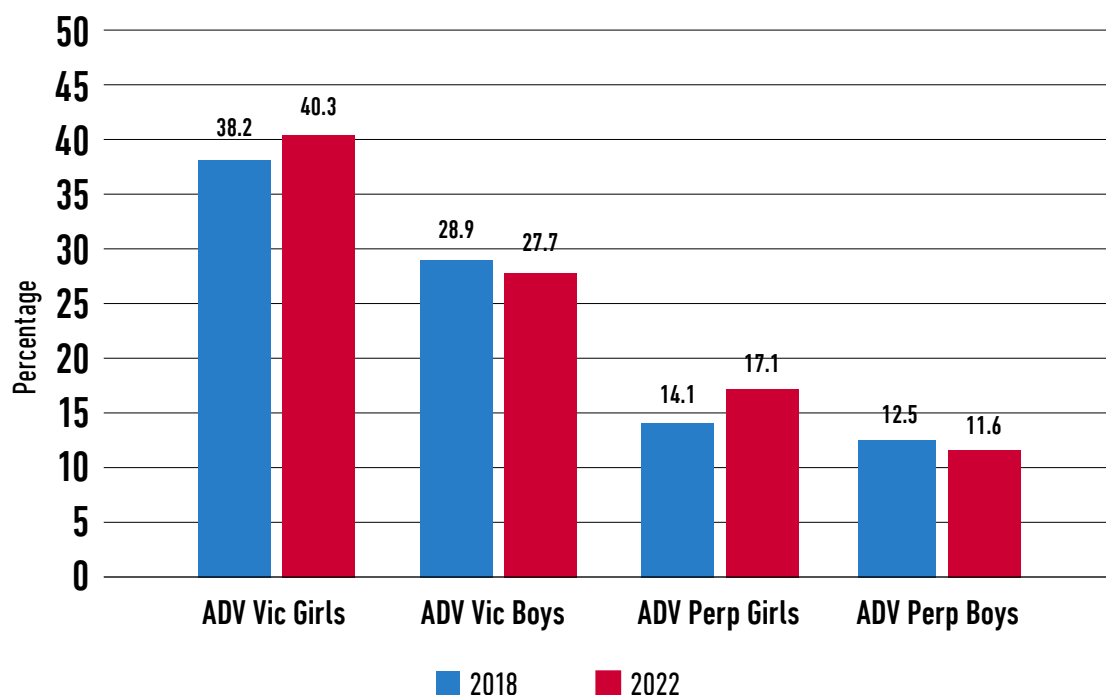
In 2018 and 2022, youth who participated in the survey were asked if they identified as a boy or a girl or if neither term described them3. In 2022, youth were also asked about their sex registered at birth. Combined with gender identity, we were able to categorize youth as cisgender girls, cisgender boys and TGD youth. Since the 2018 data did not include sex registered at birth, when comparing data from 2018 and 2022, we report on boys (cisgender and transgender) and girls (cisgender and transgender).

The prevalence of ADV perpetration and victimization has increased since 2018 for girls but has slightly decreased for boys (Figure 1). The increase in ADV for girls was predominately evident in psychological and cyber ADV victimization. For boys, rates of physical, psychological, and cyber ADV were relatively consistent over time3.

One important consideration when interpreting these rates is the percentage of youth who reported being in a dating relationship, as ADV rates are only calculated for youth who were dating. The rate of being in a dating relationship was slightly lower in 2022 at 34.0% relative to 2018 at 42.1%.

Table 2. Prevalence of adolescent dating violence perpetration and victimization among students in grades 9 and 10 in a dating relationship.

Gender	ADV victimization				ADV perpetration			
	Physical	Psychological	Cyber	Total (any)	Physical	Psychological	Cyber	Total (any)
Cisgender girls	11.5%	35.8%	20.9%	40.1%	7.4%	10.2%	8.1%	17.1%
Cisgender boys	11.9%	18.5%	14.3%	26.0%	6.8%	7.6%	7.2%	10.9%
Transgender and gender diverse youth	19.2%	34.9%	30.1%	42.3%	na	14.6%	na	19.7%
Overall	12.3%	28.3%	18.8%	34.2%	7.2%	9.5%	8.0%	14.6%

naReported by less than 30 participants, therefore for privacy cannot report.

Note. Frequencies are presented in parentheses. These prevalence rates are descriptive and represent students in Grades 9 and 10 who were in a dating relationship in the last year (34.0% of students). Total refers to experiencing any form of ADV victimization/perpetration at least once across physical, psychological, and cyber. Totals are not additive as the various forms can co-occur.

Rates of ADV victimization and perpetration vary based on youth's gender identity (Table 2). TGD youth and cisgender girls reported the highest levels of ADV perpetration and victimization. Specifically, of the estimated 34.0% of students in dating relationships in the last year, 42.3% of TGD youth, 40.1% of cisgender girls, and 26.0% of cisgender boys experienced ADV victimization at least once in the past year and 19.7% of TGD youth, 17.1% of cisgender girls, and 10.9% of cisgender boys perpetrated in ADV. Psychological ADV (e.g., controlling or emotionally hurting) was the most common form of perpetration and victimization among all youth, while physical ADV was the least common.

Table 3. Prevalence of family and peer relationships among students in grades 9 and 10 in a dating relationship.

Gender	High family support	High friend support	High teacher support	High risky peers	High prosocial peers
Cisgender girls	33.5%	42.5%	24.4%	19.2%	56.9%
Cisgender boys	39.9%	38.1%	35.9%	14.6%	64.2%
Transgender and gender diverse youth	18.3%	50.7%	25.3%	18.1%	40.2%
Overall	34.8%	41.2%	29.4%	17.2%	58.6%

Note. Frequencies are presented in parentheses. These prevalence rates are descriptive and represent students in Grades 9 and 10 who were in a dating relationship in the last year (34.0% of students).

Table 3 presents the proportion of cisgender girls, cisgender boys, and TGD youth reporting high levels of family, friend, and teacher support (e.g., feeling like you can talk to your family, friends, and teachers). Cisgender boys were most likely to report feeling a high level of support from their family and teachers, with TGD youth having the lowest rates of high family support. However, TGD youth had the highest rates of high friend support.

Additionally, Table 3 presents the proportion of cisgender girls, cisgender boys, and TGD youth reporting having relationships with risky and prosocial peers (i.e., reporting that some or all their friends engage in a number of risky and prosocial behaviours). Cisgender boys had the lowest rate of risky peers as well as the highest rate of prosocial peers, suggesting they are most likely to be surrounded by peers who model adaptive behaviors such as volunteering and participating in sports and have peers who are least likely to engage in risky behaviors like substance use.

Table 4. Associations among family, peer, and teacher relationships and adolescent dating violence among students in grades 9 and 10 in a dating relationship

Predictors	ADV perpetration and victimization			ADV perpetration only			ADV victimization only		
	RR	CI lower	CI upper	RR	CI lower	CI upper	RR	CI lower	CI upper
Gender									
TGD vs. Cisgender girls	1.02	0.94	1.07	1.00	0.94	1.02	0.92	0.80	1.02
Cisgender boys vs. Cisgender girls	**0.84**	**0.77**	**0.90**	1.00	0.98	1.02	**0.86**	**0.79**	**0.92**
Socioeconomic status									
High vs. low	0.96	0.88	1.03	0.97	0.90	1.00	0.93	0.83	1.01
Average vs. low	0.95	0.86	1.02	0.96	0.89	1.00	0.93	0.83	1.02
Low family support (vs. high)	1.08	0.98	1.13	**0.77**	**0.21**	**1.00**	1.07	0.97	1.15
Low friend support (vs. high)	1.05	0.93	1.12	1.01	0.93	1.03	0.88	0.72	1.01
Low teacher support (vs. high)	**1.10**	**1.02**	**1.14**	**1.02**	**1.01**	**1.03**	1.06	0.97	1.14
Low prosocial peers (vs. high)	0.97	0.92	1.01	**1.02**	**1.01**	**1.03**	1.00	0.95	1.05
High risky peers (vs. low)	**1.13**	**1.11**	**1.15**	1.00	0.95	1.02	**1.14**	**1.09**	**1.17**
Low (vs. high) family x low (vs. high) friend	0.99	0.87	1.07	**1.03**	**1.02**	**1.04**	1.02	0.91	1.11
Low (vs. high) family x low (vs. high) teacher	0.99	0.85	1.09	1.03	0.97	1.03	1.03	0.91	1.13
Low (vs. high) teacher x low (vs. high) friend	1.03	0.90	1.10	**0.54**	**0.08**	**0.96**	1.08	0.97	1.16

Note. These analyses were on students in Grades 9 and 10 who were in a dating relationship in the last year (34.0% of students). Each of the three ADV groups are mutually exclusive. Significant findings are bolded, p <.05

Peer, family, and teacher relationships were significantly associated with the risk of ADV involvement for youth when examined simultaneously with interactive effects and adjusting for the associations with gender and socioeconomic status (see Statistical Analyses section for further details). Only significant results are discussed. Youth who had high levels of risky peers were 1.13 times at risk of bidirectional ADV and 1.14 times at risk of experiencing ADV victimization. Youth with low teacher support were 1.10 more times at risk for bidirectional ADV and 1.02 times at risk for ADV perpetration. ADV perpetration was additionally associated with having a low level of prosocial peers by 1.02 times.

Friend support served as an important moderating factor for the role of teacher and family support. To understand the specific direction of moderating effects, simple slopes were estimated separately for family support and teacher support (see Statistical Analyses section for further details). Only significant simple slopes are presented. Youth with low family support had an increased risk for ADV perpetration in the context of low friend support (RR = 1.03, 95%CI [1.01, 1.03]). This association was not significant at high friend support (not shown), suggesting that low friend support exacerbates the impact of low family support on ADV perpetration. An opposite effect was observed looking at friend and teacher support. Youth with high teacher support had a reduced risk for ADV perpetration in the context of high friend support (RR= 0.91 95% CI [0.73, 0.98]). This association was not significant at low friend support, suggesting that the protective effects of teacher support was heightened at high levels of peer support. Therefore, low friend support is a risk factor and high friend support is a protective factor against ADV perpetration.

LIMITATIONS

The data are self-reported and subject to biases such that youth may be reluctant to report that they perpetrate and/or are victimized by ADV. As a result, the true prevalence of both perpetration and victimization may be underestimated. In addition, sex registered at birth was asked in 2022 but not in 2018, allowing for results to be reported for TGD youth in 2022 but not 2018. Given the increased risk of ADV perpetration and victimization for these youth, it is important to continue monitoring these trends for all youth over time, especially using disaggregated data (e.g., cisgender boys, cisgender girls, TGD youth). Finally, the data are cross-sectional, so we cannot make any causal claims regarding the impact of family, peer, and teacher relationships in ADV.

CONCLUSIONS

In this nationally representative sample of Canadian adolescents in grades 9-10 who are dating, approximately 1 in 4 cisgender girls and TGD youth report being victimized by ADV, whereas approximately 1 in 6 cisgender boys do. Additionally concerning is that the rates of ADV have increased over time, particularly for girls. The most common form of ADV is psychological.

The quality of youth's relationships with their family, friends, and teachers matters when it comes to the likelihood of experiencing ADV victimization. Low family support or having friends who engaged in risky behaviours increased the risk for experiencing ADV victimization. Friend support served as an important moderating factor for the support of teachers and families. For example, low friend support exacerbated the impact of low family support on ADV perpetration. In contrast, having high friend support buffered the effect of low teacher support and reduced the risk of ADV perpetration.

The results highlight the important role of relationships in preventing ADV. Effective prevention of ADV involves focusing on creating healthy relationship contexts for youth at home, in school, and with their peers. At the individual level, programs should focus on building healthy relationship capacities and social-emotional skills. There is also a need to support TGD youth who are disproportionately more likely to experience ADV victimization and are less likely to have healthy relationships.

METHODS

Data were from the Canadian Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, a national cross-sectional study of adolescents conducted every four years since 1989-90 (**www.hbsc.org**) [PHAC, 2020]. In Canada, data for the 2021-2022 cycle were collected in school settings during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years from a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 6 to 10 from all provinces and two territories in Canada. For this study, we included the 3064 participants in grades 9 and 10 who reported being in a dating relationship and responded to all of the adolescent dating violence items, with 17.9% of them participating in 2022 and 82.1% participating in 2023.

MEASURES

Adolescent dating violence. ADV perpetration and victimization were each measured by 3 items asking about the frequency of psychological, physical, and cyber forms of ADV in the past 12 months (e.g., you physically hurt someone you were going out with"; "you purposely tried to control or emotionally hurt"; "you use social media to hurt, embarrass, or monitor someone you were dating or going

out with") for perpetration, alpha = .75. Similar items were used for victimization, alpha = .71). Items were rated on a 5-point scale (0 = I did not date or go out with anyone in the past 12 months, 1 = 0 times, 2 = 1 time, 3 = 2 or 3 times, 4 = 4 or 5 times, 5 = 6 or more times), with participants indicating a score of 0 (i.e., they did not date) being excluded from all analyses. Each item was dichotomized to 0 = no ADV and 1 = ADV. We then created overall ADV perpetration (scoring 1 for any of the 3 perpetration items) and overall ADV victimization (scoring 1 for any of the 3 victimization items). We also created a variable categorizing whether participants experienced ADV victimization only, perpetrated in ADV only, perpetrated in and was victimized by ADV, or uninvolved (i.e., was in a dating relationship but did not perpetrate or was victimized by ADV).

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Family and friend support. Family support was measured with four items (e.g., "My family really tries to help me,"; alpha = .92). Friend support was measured with four items (e.g., I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows," alpha = .93). Responses for family and peer support were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree. Both variables were dichotomized by calculating the means and scores of 5 or higher were considered "high family support" and "high friend support," respectively, with remaining participants considered "low family support" and "low friend support," respectively.

Teacher support. Teacher support was measured with 8 items (e.g., "I feel that my teachers accept me as I am,"; alpha = .89). Teacher support was scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. Teacher support was dichotomized by reverse scoring the items, calculating the mean, and considering scores of 4 or higher as "high teacher support" and considering remaining participants as "low teacher support."

Risky and prosocial peers. Youth were asked to estimate how many of their friends (on a 5-point scale from 1 = none to 5 = all) engaged in risky or prosocial behaviours. Risky peers was measured with 4 items (e.g., "smoke," "get high,"; alpha = .88). Prosocial peers was measured with 4 items (e.g., "do well at school," "participate in sports,"; alpha = .76). Both variables were dichotomized by calculating the means and scores of 3 or higher were considered "high risky peers" and "high prosocial peers", respectively, with remaining participants considered "low risky peers" and "low prosocial peers," respectively.

Perceived wealth. Perceived wealth was used as an indicator of socioeconomic status and was assessed by asking students how well off they thought their family was. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 = very well off to 5 = not at all well off. We collapsed the responses into three categories of well-off (quite well off/ very well off), average (average), and not well-off (not very well off/not at all well off). Perceived wealth was examined as a control variable.

STATISTICAL ANALYSES

All analyses were conducted on SPSS version 29. All analyses were weighted by province and territory. Only students in Grades 9 and 10 who reported being in a dating relationship (34.0%) were selected for analyses. Descriptive prevalence rates of ADV perpetration and victimization were examined through percentages first by type (physical, psychological, cyber) and by gender (cisgender girls, cisgender boys, transgender and gender diverse youth). We then examined prevalence rates through percentages of bidirectional ADV (bidirectional perpetration and victimization, perpetration only, victimization only, uninvolved).

We descriptively compared the prevalence rates of overall ADV perpetration and victimization by gender in 2022 to the 2018 data. All procedures for calculating ADV prevalence rates in 2018 were the same as in 2022. For these prevalence rates, we only compared boys (cisgender and transgender) and girls (cisgender and transgender) for consistency as the 2018 data did not include information on sex registered at birth that would allow us to distinguish cisgender youth from transgender youth.

We also examined the prevalence rates of youth who reported high family, peer, and teacher support, high prosocial peers, and high risky peers, by gender.

A multinomial logistic regression was conducted to simultaneously examine family support, friend support, teacher support, risky peers, prosocial peers, the interaction between friend support and teacher support, and the interaction between friend support and family support on the risk for each of the possible ADV experiences (bidirectional, perpetration only, victimization) compared to not being involved. All predictors were dichotomously coded (e.g., low family support vs. high family support; high risky peers vs. low risky peers). Thus, the risk ratios represent the risk in ADV involvement given a risk factor.

To examine the moderating role of friend support on both family support and teacher support, we created interaction terms. We also adjusted for the associations with gender and socioeconomic status (perceived wealth). For gender, cisgender girls were the comparison group. For socioeconomic status, the low group was the comparison group. Significant interactions were examined by splitting the file by friend support.

For any statistically significant interaction terms, simple slopes were examined separately. To examine simple slopes, separate sets of logistic regressions were conducted for each independent variable (family support, teacher support). For each independent variable, two logistic regressions were conducted: the first at high levels of the moderator, friendship support, and the second at low levels of the moderator, friendship support. Only results of significant simple slopes are presented.

All odds ratios and confidence intervals from the logistic regression were converted into risk ratios.

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