

Intro for Professionals:

Preventing Teen Dating Violence

During the adolescence, relationships are a very important part of the socialization and have a big impact on developing individual norms and values. Romantic relationships give teenagers the opportunity to pursue a range of goals, including fulfilling the desire for familiarity, support, sexual experience and gaining status. Partnership relationships promote the development of autonomy as young people can meet their needs for understanding and support outside the parent-child relationship. Building a partnership is often accompanied by an increase in self-esteem and a positive image of one's own attractiveness (cf. IzKK-Nachrichten 1/2008, p.8). And particular in this formative time, teenagers often make their first experiences with different types of violence in relationships.

To define teen dating violence, we have to take a look at definitions about domestic violence and about violence among youths as well, because there is no common definition in the literature. Different researches show, that teen dating violence is as widespread as domestic violence in adult relationships. This results are specially interesting, cause only a part of the adolescents already have made experiences in relationships (cf. Averdijk et al. 2014).

In the Istanbul-convention the term of domestic violence is used, to name all offenses of psychological, physical, sexual and economic violence, which take place within the family, marriage or in an emotional relationship. The Istanbul-convention has the objective to stop violence against women, to support the equality of women and men and to stop domestic violence in general (cf. Istanbul-Konvention, 2011).

The definition of domestic violence from Marianne Schwander mainly refers to adults, but it describes some aspects which also applies to teenagers. In a nutshell, it says that domestic violence is given, if the offender and the victim have a family tie, a marital, or a romantic relationship in which psychological, physical or sexual violence is occurred or threatened. Furthermore, within the relationship there is a gap of power, the relationship cannot be ended up easily and violent actions are done in an partnership which should offer security (cf. Schwander, 2003).

Because the dynamic of violence in youth relationships has some particularities compared to relationships between adults, this specificities will be described shortly.

Teen dating violence is much more than violence in serious relationships. It includes forms of violence exerted by the ex-partner, violence in dating situations and violence in short-lasting relationships (cf. Averdijk et al. 2014. p.124). A very widespread type of teen dating violence is the controlling and restriction of the partners mobility. Different studies show, that about one third of all teenagers already have experienced types of controlling behaviors and massive jealousy (cf. EBG 2017, p. 6-7). This

results can be attributed to the fact, that young people often think jealousy is a proof of love and cause of that they don't perceive it as a form of violence (cf. *ibid.*).

Programs about preventing teen dating violence have the objectives to change the beliefs and attitudes, which allow violence against the partner. Essential parts of different prevention programs are the promotion of healthy and respectful intimate relationships, which take care about individual boundaries as well as raising awareness about risky situations and the consequences of experienced violence for offender and victim (cf. Averdijk et al. 2014, p.123).

Different types of violence

Violence is much more than physical assault, violence is complex and varied and people from all social and economic sections can be affected. The different types of violence range from psychological and economic to physical and sexual violence.

According to an 2011 ÖIF study (austrian institute for family research), only 7.4% of women and 14.7% of men have never experienced any of these forms of violence. For most, these experiences of violence begin early. Around three quarters of all women and men surveyed experienced mental and physical violence as early as childhood. There are no gender differences in psychological and physical childhood violence, as opposed to childhood sexual violence: 27.7% of women reported experiencing sexual violence before the age of 16; for men, the percentage is much lower, around 12% (cf. ÖIF 2011).

Psychological violence takes place on the emotional level. That includes insults, threats, manipulation, bullying, stalking and monitoring. Cultural and social norms within the family and the society have a big influence on exercising teen dating violence. Gender stereotypes and values effect developing the personal expectations about relationships and shape the sensibility about different types of violence. Among youth relationships, psychological violence very often takes place via social media and communication services.

Stalking can take many different forms. A few examples can be: if you get multiple unwanted phonecalls a day, if you get letters, messages or presents which you don't want. But also if somebody spreads rumors about you which are detrimental for you, or if you're being followed.

One can also be confronted with violence online: This is called cyberbullying or cyberstalking. This forms of violence are often voiced through hateemail, mean comments or mean posts.

Violence on the internet is often very personal, but it can also be sexist, womenunfriendly or downright racist. The perpetrators usually have the goal of silencing the victim, or overpowering them. But the most common type of violence on the internet in youth relationships is monitoring. That means

to control the phone of the partner, to restrict the contact to friends or family and to monitor the offline activities of the partner through new media.

While men are usually victims of violence in public spaces, women are more affected by violence in their family or in other close relationships. The offender is often a male person and in most cases he is the partner, a family member or an acquaintance. Because of this relationship between the offender and the victim, it can be very difficult for the victim to get help and to break the relationship off.

Domestic violence is not a single or sudden type of violence, very often it's a cycle of violence which starts with emotional and financial violence and ends in physical and sexual violence. One or both partners will repeatedly act violent, which intensifies until the situation escalates and gets out of control. At the end, the offender will be sorry for his/her behavior. The victim forgives them and the cycle starts at the beginning again.

Physical violence is the most known type of violence, because it is the most visible and also the easiest to detect. It includes beating, shoving, scratching, biting and all further forms of violent actions with or without an physical objects. Very often this type of violence occurs in combination with other forms. Physical violence affects both genders in the same way, as well as people with different sexual orientations and cultural backgrounds. Male teenagers use violent behaviors more often to take control over the partner, while female teenagers use it to defense oneself (cf. EBG 2017, S.3).

Where does sexual violence begin?

A study from the year 2001 (cf. AAUW 2001, gtd. in Allroggen et al. 2011, p. 17) on the motives of sexually harassing behaviour shows that many adolescents do not know where sexual violence begins and that it is considered to be something rather normal: 43 % of the boys and 34 % of the girls interviewed stated that it was "no big deal", something that "a lot of people do" or that it was "part of school life". Of only 10 % (boys) and respectively 12 % (girls) wanting to exercise power over others, further motives for sexually harassing behaviour and violence are the wish to establish a relationship. Some of the respondents said for example: "I was interested in the person, I thought the person likes it, I wanted to date the person". This shows the attempt of making contact and the wish to lead a relationship with the targeted person. However, it also reveals the fact that there is insecurity and ignorance regarding the way of dealing with others and knowing which behaviour is socially appropriate for the first contact, the establishing of mutual agreement and the building of a relationship. Peer pressure plays a part here that must not be underestimated: 23-24 % of adolescents stated that they were put up to it by friends (cf. ibid). These data prove that raising awareness among adolescents for how to empathise with other people and explaining to them where sexual violence begins is a crucial matter.

For adolescents 'sexting', i.e. the sending and receiving of sexual images and text messages, continues to play an important role in connection with experiences of sexual violence. A European survey among 4564 adolescents from Bulgaria, Cyprus, England, Italy and Norway between the ages of 14 and 17 years, could establish a clear correlation between sexting and real-life experiences of violence. Despite great differences between adolescents in the different countries, those reporting violence in their relationships were also more than twice as likely to have sent or received sexual image or text messages. A significant part of the girls interviewed (between 9 and 42 %) said that the pictures or messages sent by them had been forwarded to others. Furthermore 17 to 41 % of the girls and 9 to 25 % of the boys in this study said that they had experienced sexual violence from their partner (cf. STIR 2015).

Sexual health and sexualized violence among teenagers:

International studies and criminal statistics account for the fact that a majority of sexual assaults against young people are also committed by young people. The causes for this are complex and can be found, among other things, in inadequate sexual education, a culture of violating boundaries, traditional role models and a lack of possibilities for adolescents to deal with the subjects of love, relationships and sexuality, to build a positive approach towards these topics and consult competent persons of trust with their questions (cf. Hazissa 2017).

The consequences of sexual violence are multifaceted and develop differently for each individual. They may occur in the short, medium and long-term and become manifest on a psychological and physical level. The effects of sexual violence may occur over the course of a life-span and concern different areas: Relationship problems, sexual dysfunctions, addictive disorders, disturbed adaptations, depression, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, etc. compromise the lives of many adults, who have experienced sexual violence in their childhood or youth. The impacts concern not only the individual, but also their social environment. Therefore, the benefit of prevention intervention is vast when considering individuals as well as the overall economy (cf. Fegert et al. 2013, p. 51 ff).

One of the relevant challenges of adolescence is the development of a healthy and mature sexuality. Sexual health implies the avoiding of negative consequences from sexual intercourse, such as the infection with sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies on the one hand, but also a healthy sexuality on the other. Healthy sexuality covers attitudes, experiences and knowledge about sexuality (cf. Doherty et al. gtd. in BMG 2015, p. 54). A definition by the WHO from 1975 already included the perception, that sexual health not only comprises physical, but also emotional, mental and social aspects (cf. BZGA 2011, p. 19).

In a publication by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the BZgA (Federal Centre for Health Education Germany), sexual education is considered an important contribution to the promotion of

health in general, as it not only adds to the avoidance of negative consequences of sexuality thanks to preventive measures, but also helps to improve quality of life, health and general well-being (cf. *ibid*, p. 7).

“The holistic approach sees sexuality as a human potential, as general life energy and helps children and adolescents in developing basic abilities, with which they themselves can determine their sexuality and relationships in the different developmental stages. It encourages them to live their sexuality and partnerships in a fulfilling and responsible way. These abilities are furthermore vital when it comes to protecting oneself from possible risks” (cf. BZGA 2011, p. 5-6).

One possible risk is sexual violence. Sexual violence among adolescents is a problem relevant to society. This is documented by police crime statistics and sociological studies: In 2016 (Data for 2017 are not available yet), 5210 crimes against sexual integrity and self-determination were reported in Austria (cf. BMI 2016, p. B9, gtd. in Schrenk & Seidler 2018). The police detected 4375 suspects. A majority, being 95.2 %, of the possible offenders were male, and only 4.8 % female. What is striking apart from this gender distribution, is that in adolescents the percentage of girls among suspects is higher than the female proportion in adults: the most common crime of girls aged 14 to 18 is the pornographic representation of minors (§ 207a). Equally remarkable is the fact that 12 % of suspects are between the ages of 14 to 18 (553 suspects), which also constitutes a rather large proportion compared to older age groups.

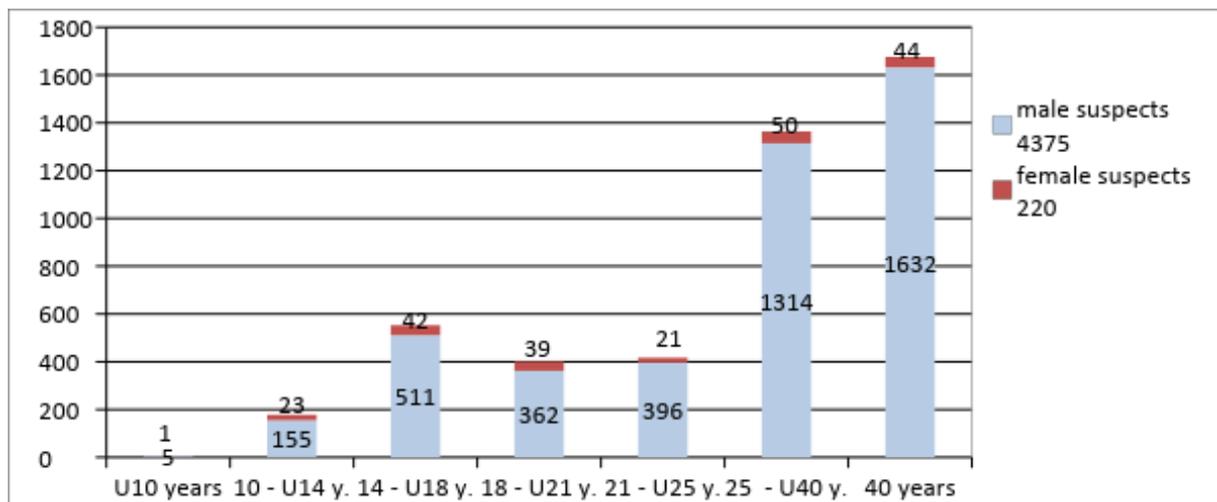


Figure 1: Suspects by sex and age (cf. BMI 2016, p. B9, gtd. in Schrenk/Seidler 2018)

The percentage of adolescent suspects below the age of 21 amounts to 24.7 % (cf. BMI 2016, S. B9, gtd. in. Schrenk & Seidler 2018). With regard to these numbers it needs to be taken into account that only a fraction of the cases of sexual violence is reported and even less are convicted: according to

Statistik Austria 1138 cases were reported concerning suspects under the age of 21 in the year 2016, but in only 206 cases a suspect was convicted – which is a fairly small number. The most common crimes are serious sexual abuse of minors (§ 206) and pornographic representation of minors (§ 207a) (cf. Statistik Austria 2016).

These are the data available for Austria. In the German statistics of criminal complaints similar numbers can be identified, showing that young suspects are overrepresented (cf. Allroggen et al. 2011, p. 9). In Germany sexual offenses occurring in a group context are reported separately, in these cases up to 60 % of suspects are below the age of 21 (cf. *ibid.*).

In addition to criminal statistics, social studies also document the high proportion of adolescents among sexual offenders. In the US according to Katz, more than 50 % of all sexual acts of violence against children and 20 % of all rapes are committed by adolescents under the age of 18 (cf. Katz 1990).

These numbers are substantiated by an American study, according to which one in five rapes and 30-50 % of the cases of sexual abuse are committed by adolescents (cf. Eisner & Ribeoud 1990). Another survey carried out in the US in 2009 among high school students revealed that 50 % of girls and about 25 % of boys have already experienced abusive behaviour in high school. Also, 5.4 % of students aged between 12 and 19 stated that they themselves had already demonstrated sexually aggressive behaviour (vgl. Harlander et al. 2011, S.20).

An investigation conducted in Switzerland shows that 40 % of all sexual offenders are minors, adolescent offenders are, however, far less often reported to the police than adult offenders, accounting for 3 % against 17 % (cf. BZGA 2015, p. 196-198, gtd. in Schrenk & Seidler 2018). In the survey “Sexual health of adolescents” conducted in Styria, Austria, 11.2 % of adolescents interviewed stated already having experienced sexual violence (“Kissing or more against your will”), 61 % of the offenders were described as being under 18 years of age (cf. Harlander et al. 2011, p. 20).

In the survey on adolescent sexuality conducted by the German Federal Centre for Health Education (BzgA) in 2015, which interviewed 14 to 25-year-olds about their sexual experiences, one in five young women (about one in four among those sexually active) reported having experienced sexual violence. Among male adolescents the number of those affected is much smaller, (only 4 % stated having been forced to partake in sexual acts), even though among homosexual or bisexual male adolescents and young men this number was significantly higher: in this group, too, one in five had experienced sexual assault. For homosexual and bisexual male adolescents the offenders can be found mainly among new acquaintances. For girls and young women, offenders are in equal parts either new acquaintances as well as friends or ex-partners. Especially those girls and young women, who did not

or barely know the partner with whom they had their first sexual intercourse, referred to forced sexual acts (cf. BZGA 2015, p.196-198, gtd. in Schrenk & Seidler 2018).

Even if the number of studies on the prevalence of adolescent sexual offenders in German-speaking regions is not very large, it can be noted, based on the data available, that sexual violence among adolescents represents a major social problem, which also influences their mental and social development of identity.

Important stages of psychosocial development involve the development of an independent, self-determined sexual identity, the ability of classifying one's own emotions and learning to empathise with others, as well as the development of one's own sexuality: it is essential that adolescents learn to live their sexuality in a way that is socially acceptable, self-determined but also responsible. It is thus a question of being able to live sexuality in a consensual way, and developing this ability seems to present a great challenge to adolescents.

In the above-mentioned study a large part of sexually active adolescents, almost 40 %, stated not being able to determine how far they were willing to go, i.e. perceiving themselves to be directed by others (cf. Harlander et al. 2011, p. 20). We can therefore speak of a 'grey area', which describes that adolescents often perform sexual acts 'voluntarily', try something and thereby go beyond their personal boundaries. Some things may not be considered as sexual violence in individual self-interpretation, neither however as self-determined. This means that there is a fine line between self-determination and heteronomy, between voluntariness and force.

Since these behavioural patterns are highly gender-specific, it is a vital aspect of prevention to encourage girls in finding out what they want and communicating it, while supporting boys in behaving responsibly. For both sexes it needs to be ensured that they make decisions in a responsible way and question predetermined role models (cf. *ibid.*).

Conclusio

Based on the above-mentioned results the following can be noted: The promotion of sexual health and education for adolescents is necessary while working on prevention of teen dating violence. Consensual sexuality, respectful treatment of the partners privacy and acceptable behaviours according to the wishes and perceptions of the partners are areas in which adolescents have to learn a lot. It is an overall social task to start discussions about healthy relationships and to raise awareness about teen dating violence. The massive health effects of experienced violence show, that preventive and interventive measures have a high priority to achieve changes in relationships and to avoid the negative consequences. We, as professionals, have the responsibility to be available as contact person and to inform about adequate counselling and help services.

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