

Running head: Self-defense and Adolescent Girls

Self-defense and Adolescent Girls:

Dating Violence, Self-concept and Self Confidence

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Professional responsibility: This project has been reviewed by collegial professional peers and has been submitted for on-line publication before being evaluated by faculty members from Portland State University. I am the author and take full responsibility for the project's contents and quality. This work serves as a baseline for my professional school counselor skills and demonstrates what I have done to develop and/or assess my actions directed toward serving students and schools. In other words, this is a snapshot or one indicator of my work at this stage of my career

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share the results of a 9-month study that focused on teaching self-defense to 7th and 8th grade girls in a public school setting. This paper addresses two very different but specific constructs – adolescent girl's views and acceptance of dating violence and their self-concept and confidence. In many ways these concepts are intimately connected, but for the sake of clarity they will be addressed within this paper as two unique constructs.

Introduction

From the movie *Thirteen* to a front page article in the *New York Times Magazine* touting the tag line *Mean Girls*, the last 10 years girls have increasingly been featured in the headlines. These headlines focus on adolescent girls' struggles to belong and the inhumane treatment between girls. According to Mary Pipher (1994), something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet (Pipher, 1994). They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic and "tomboyish" personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed (Simmons, 2002). Every bookstore is lined with titles such as: *Odd Girl Out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*, *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, *Ophelia Speaks*, etc. These books address the ways that girls treat other girls, as well as shedding light on concepts such as relational aggression and bullying. Bullying and the emotional turmoil that comes as a result of this behavior is not the only concern for the health and wellbeing of adolescents, but poses one of many areas of concern for parents, teachers, and school administrators. How to keep our daughters safe in an unsafe world is another concern had by those who care for children.

Dating violence, stranger abduction, and abuse at the hands of a parent/guardian is the reality for many teenage girls. The highest risk category for violent victimization is females between the ages of 12 and 24 (Rennison, 2001; Center for Disease Control, 2000). Female teens (ages 12 to 17) are more likely than males to be victims of physical abuse in the home (Brown & Bzostek, 2003). For girls, there are adverse consequences that have been linked to early victimization, including increased mental illness, failure in school, use of drugs and alcohol and teen pregnancy (Brown, 2003; Howard & Qi Wang, 2003). Violence towards adolescent girls is very real, and something that needs to be addressed. The question continually posed is, “what can we do to keep our daughters safe?”

This paper suggests that teaching adolescent girls self-defense will not only address their personal safety, but can impact their sense of self as well. Self-defense for women is not a new idea, but tailoring a course specifically for adolescent girls is something that many organizations that teach self-defense are starting to offer. This paper aims to address the following three questions:

1. Can teaching self-defense to adolescent girls reduce their acceptance of partner violence?
2. Can self-defense affect an adolescent girl’s self-concept?
3. Can self-defense affect the self confidence of an adolescent girl?

Lit review

Self-defense is a preventative program that can be used at a critical time in girl’s lives. Violence is a pervasive reality in the United States today. Violence in schools has reached epidemic proportions and is the major cause of mortality among youths in the United States (Weisz & Black, 2001). For the most part, schools and the media have chosen to focus on random acts of school violence when discussing the epidemic of violence in schools. But there

is a much more prevalent type of violence in schools today, a hidden violence, violence between intimate partners or dating violence. Dating violence is violent behavior that takes place in a context of dating or courtship. Unfortunately it is not a rare event, estimates of incidences vary, but statistics range from 20 percent to as high as 35.5 percent of adolescents experiencing violence at the hands of a boyfriend or girlfriend (Bauman, et al, 1998; O’Keeffe, Brockopp, & Chew, 1996).

In a national survey by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) (2000), women were two to three times more likely than men to report that an intimate partner threw something that could hurt or pushed, grabbed, or shoved them. But when addressing interpersonal violence, women and girls were 7 to 14 times more likely to report that an intimate partner beat them up, choked or tried to drown them, threatened them with a gun, or actually used a gun on them (CDC, 2000). The National Violence Against Women Survey found that women are significantly more likely than men to be victimized by intimate partners (CDC, 2000). The importance of these statistics about adult women is their connection to adolescent girls. Studies have shown that women over the age of 18 years who report partner violence, are more likely to report they suffered the same level of violence as minors, and in fact most of the violence they experience started when they were teenagers dating (Gamache, 1991). Estimates for younger adolescent girls experiencing violence generally range from 10 percent to 35 percent (Bauman, et al., 1998). Dating violence has become so prevalent in teens lives that the CDC has called it an epidemic and rated it as one of the most dangerous threats to a teenagers life (2000).

There are many reasons why dating violence goes unnoticed, or unreported. One reason is many teens and young adults are unaware of the potential for physical and sexual assault in the context of a relationship; they may not recognize the signs of impending abuse, and don't know

where to go for help if abuse occurs (Sousa, 1991). Social norms also continue to support the idea that what occurs while dating is a private affair of those involved; many who observe trouble and are in a position to help may be reluctant to "butt in" or may not know what to do (Bauman, et al, 1998). Due to their inexperience and need to conform, teens are especially susceptible to adhering to traditionally "appropriate" roles for men and women including the belief that women should be passive and submissive whereas men should be dominant and have a right to reinforce their power with violence (Sousa, 1991). This lack of experience places young women at a higher risk for dating violence.

There is a belief by many in our society that both people in an intimate relationship are equally at fault when intimate partner violence is experienced. Although both partners may play a part in the violence, the level of violence experienced is markedly different. Studies of college and high school students suggest that both males and females inflict and receive dating violence in equal proportion, but the motivation for violence by women is more often for defensive purposes (CDC, 2000). Males usually initiate the violence, and use much more extreme levels than their female counterparts (Sousa, 1991). Even in studies where the females were the initiator, they usually slapped or punched their partner one time, whereas the male initiator was much more violent and repetitive in the incidences (Gamache, 1991). Women and girls are victims of dating violence twice as often as men and boys, and females suffer significantly more injuries than males (CDC, 2000). The impact on a girl's sense of self as a result of this violence is tremendous. Behavior correlates associated with dating violence victimization of girls include use of a variety of illicit substances, unhealthy weight control practices, sexual risk behaviors, and suicidality (Silverman, et al., 2001). Prevention programs specifically created to address dating violence have identified the pressures for young girls to have a boyfriend can sometimes

supercede their own sense of well being (Sousa, 1991). Being able to identify a potentially violent partner, and more importantly knowing how to address this person, can reduce the prevalence of intimate partner violence within this population.

Dating violence is a reality for a small percent of adolescent girls. The loss of self and the subsequent impact on girls' self-concept are very real in the lives of many more girls. Researchers who have studied female's development have noted a psychological shift that occurs as girls move from childhood in to adolescence (Pipher, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Simmons, 2002, Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). During the first decade of life, girls normally exhibit self confidence, exuberance and a sense of mastery in many areas, whereas the second decade of life is often accompanied by self doubt and inhibition (Gilligan, 1982). Many studies have revealed that upon entering adolescence, girls experience sudden and dramatic declines in self-esteem (Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2003). Life often becomes confusing for the young girl as she struggles to negotiate the conflicting demands of self and society.

Many educators report a general decline in school performance among girls as they enter adolescence (Orenstein, 1994). This decline is due to many reasons, one of which might be a new focus on their peer groups, and less focus on things that were important to them as elementary students. Researchers attribute self-image problems to the "perfect girl" or "nice girl" syndrome (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Rothenberg, nd). According to researchers, around the age of 10, many middle-class girls have internalized the messages and expectations they have received into the ideal of the "perfect girl" who is pretty, kind, and obedient, and never has bad thoughts or feelings (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Rothenberg, nd). They speculate that in trying to keep up with the impossible demands of this unrealistic view of perfect feminine behavior, girls may suppress some of their ability to express anger or to assert themselves, and they may begin

to judge themselves through others' eyes and to question their own worth (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Rothenberg, nd). In preadolescence, girls are also struggling to reconcile their conflicting knowledge of equality and justice, and the demands for compliance placed on them at home and in school (Debold, 1995). All of these mixed messages can create confusion and as a result a decline in self image.

A multi-dimensional self-defense course can address both the physical safety concerns, as well as the increased social pressures that adolescents navigate. A key component to self-defense is addressing the socialization. In what ways are girls conforming themselves to the pressures of society? As girls mold themselves to become more socially acceptable, there is the potential of losing sense of their authentic selves. That sparkling energetic girl you counseled in the fourth grade is transformed into a brooding, grumpy, secretive seventh grader. Today's young women are subtly influenced to interact in ways that reduce rather than enhance their underlying power to connect with one another (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). This gap between girl's true selves and cultural prescription for what is properly female creates enormous problems (Pipher, 1994), including a potential loss of self-concept.

Self-concept is extremely important, it's the overall self-worth beliefs and confidence in the self. It is thought to influence achievement through its affect on motivation and the self-regulation processes of metacognition (Hay & Ashman, 2003). As girls become more connected to their peer group, and less connected with their parents, their self-concept can be affected, and if they have connected with a group that is seen as potentially harmful this can decrease a girls' self-concept dramatically and quickly (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Individuals with low self-concept have been shown to have less positive characteristics in the domains of cooperation, persistence, leadership, anxiety, expectations for future education, and peer interactions when

compared to peers with high self-concept (Hay & Ashman, 2003). Addressing this potential loss is very important if we want adolescent girls to succeed. There are many researchers who believe the declining self-concept affecting young women as a significant factor in the dramatic changes seen in adolescent girls (Pipher, 1994; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Simmons, 2002), and as a result see them make decisions early in their lives that have lasting negative impact. By addressing self-concept a girl can connect her successes in multiple areas of her life to her own power. A girls' connection to their personal power could override the power that a peer group or a parent who is not supportive could otherwise have on an adolescent girl and her life. Self-defense can connect an adolescent girl to her own internal power and assist her in realizing she has the ability to create her own self-defense, and more importantly that she has a self worth defending.

Participants & Procedure

Participants were from two East County middle schools in the Portland metro area. They were girls in either seventh or eighth grade. The students were taught in an after school setting. Both groups of students self referred for the class. They had to receive parental permission before they could take the course, and strict guidelines were set up to ensure the girls did not use their physical self-defense skills outside the class, except in an emergency situation only.

Participants received six hours of self-defense instruction. Class format was different for the two independent groups. One group had a one-hour class twice a week for three weeks, while the other had class two hours a day for three consecutive days. (See appendix A for an outline of the course) The course uses lecture, hands on physical and verbal training, and open discussion on various topics. Role plays and skill-building exercises are used repeatedly to help participants build confidence and ability. Physical techniques are practiced in the air and to

striking shields. Participants develop real life role plays which combine verbal and physical strategies. The main types of verbal defense practiced are boundary setting, de-escalation and negotiation.

Forty percent of the course is taught through interactive discussion and sixty percent is verbal and physical skills-building exercises. The course covers physical aspects of self-defense including self-defense strategies, distance for safety, and self-defense action choices. A strong component of the course is verbal self-defense. Participants practice verbal skills that are universally applicable to staying safe. By rehearsing these skills, girls are prepared for situations that they might encounter and they are less likely to freeze or remain silent when faced with a threat. The course covers theory on various topics connected with self-defense. Using interactive discussions and role plays, girls discuss myths and facts regarding sexual violence and the socialization of girls, offender's ploys and tactics, relational aggression and trusting intuition as a protecting factor. Violence within a familiar relationship is discussed in addition to incidents that might take place with a stranger.

As girls transition to adulthood, they are establishing a sense of place in the world that is often tempered by a need to please others and to be accepted by peers (Pipher, 1994). Self-defense programs focus directly on increasing a girl's preparedness for a violent threat by directly addressing who can be a potential threat and how socialization of being a "nice girl" can increase their risk of threat.

Instruments

As stated earlier three constructs were tracked for this research: level of acceptance of dating violence, self-concept and self confidence. Ability to express level of acceptance of dating violence was measured by the Attitude and Belief Assessment created by the National

Center for Injury Prevention and Control. The instrument assesses the acceptance of couple violence with three subscales: male on female violence, female on male violence, and acceptance of general dating violence. The instrument is 11 questions long; 3 items focus on male on female violence, 3 items focus on female on male violence, and 5 items focus on acceptance of general dating violence. Because self-defense is prevention based, the need to identify current acceptance levels of dating violence is important, as this could be an indicator for vulnerability to future dating violence risk. Participants rated their acceptance of violence on a four-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree). The mean of the total score was used to assess the subject's acceptance of couple violence. A higher score indicates a high level of acceptance of couple violence; a low score indicates a low level of acceptance. The target group of the instrument is students in grades 8-9. The instrument has an overall internal consistency of .72.

To assess self-concept and self confidence, a Self-Concept—Individual Protective Factors Index questionnaire was used. Phillips and Springer designed this instrument for students in grade 7 – 11, with an internal consistency .58 & .59. The questionnaire is 12 questions long; 6 items focus on self-concept and 6 items focus on self confidence. Participants rated themselves on a four-point likert scale as well. The scores were broken down after administering the test into two categories based on the intention of the question. The higher a girl scored on a scale of 1 – 4 the higher their belief was in their self-concept or self confidence.

Statistical Analysis

The cumulative means, as well as specific questions, of the pretest and posttests were compared. After the course a paired t-test was performed to indicate if there was a statistically

significant difference between the pretest and posttest means. The results were broken down into three separate categories: acceptance of dating violence, self-concept and self confidence.

Results

As earlier stated the constructs will be broken down into two distinct areas: acceptance of dating violence and self-concept and self confidence. The following is the data results for each areas of the research.

Acceptance of dating violence

Table 1 – Acceptance of Dating Violence

Pretest scores		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
	N = 23	1.62	1.64	.416
Posttest score		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
	N= 23	1.21	1.09	.302

The girls started the class with a pretest mean of 1.62, indicating medium support of dating violence. By then end of the course the mean had dropped to 1.21, indicating a much lesser level of acceptance. The results of the data collected showed that there was significant change in the girls' attitudes regarding acceptance of dating violence ($p < .0000$). The two questions where students showed the highest acceptance of dating violence on the pretest scores were believing that is was okay for a girl to hit her boyfriend if he made her mad and the belief that violence was a private matter between two people. These two scores showed the most significant change by the end of the course.

The study to examine the effectiveness of teaching young women self-defense to decrease their tolerance of its practice was quite interesting. At the beginning of the project

many of the young women showed a high level of tolerance towards dating violence, at the end the students had a significantly decreased level of tolerance. This study has similar outcomes to the Safe Dates study conducted in 1994 - 1995 (Bauman, et al., 1998; Foshee, et al., 2000). The Safe Dates study showed promise for preventing dating violence among adolescents (Bauman, et al., 1998; Foshee, et al., 2000) by presenting students with alternatives to violence in both community based activities and classroom guidance. The students in the Safe Dates study showed significant changes regarding acceptance of dating violence when they received classroom guidance in conjunction with the community activities, compared to the students who received the community information only (Bauman, et al., 1998; Foshee, et al., 2000). The difference in scores demonstrates the power of the smaller group instruction. When students have the opportunity to receive information that is personally directed at them, it can increase the effectiveness of the program.

The teachers in the Safe Dates project were required to have twenty hours of training addressing and educating students on dating violence before presenting to their classes. This is true with the self-defense teachers for this project, teachers are required to have four years martial arts training and successfully complete a two-year self-defense instructor training.

Self-concept and Self Confidence

Table 2 - Self-concept

Pretest scores		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
	N = 23	2.93	2.83	.519
Posttest score		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
	N= 23	3.21	3.17	.395

Table 3 – Self Confidence

Pretest scores		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
	N = 22	3.12	3.10	.567
Posttest score		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
	N= 22	3.20	3.20	.243

According to the data there was a significant change in self-concept ($p < .047$), yet there was little change in self confidence ($p > .47$). This could be that students started out with more self confidence but had higher confusion regarding who they were, which ties into earlier assumptions that teen girls struggle with the their own identities vs. social norms.

These results are consistent with the qualitative information that instructors of the self-defense course have been receiving for many years. Girls report that they felt stronger, more able to address a threatening situation, more willing to stand up for themselves. Quantitatively the data taken from this study corroborate this information.

Limitations

There are many limitations that can be addressed. The first one is the small sample size, (only 23 girls) used for this study. For the study to increase significance, and have stronger generalization, further study must be done with higher numbers of participants. Another issue is the location of the study. A more cross sectional, demographically balanced, sample must be used. Both groups of girls were located in a suburb of a metropolitan area. One group of girls was entirely Caucasian, while the other group was 75% white and 25% Hispanic. The girls in

the group also represented a lower socioeconomic status, which needs to be accounted for as well; a much broader range of economic status needs to be addressed to add to the generalization of this study.

Another limitation was the time for the class. The class was offered after school, which meant that girls had the “option” to come to class, and those who had after school commitments were not able to attend. Future studies would benefit from the course being offered during regular school hours, perhaps in lieu of PE for three weeks.

Final Thoughts

This was a very interesting and important project for me to do, both professionally and personally. As a self-defense instructor I have been helping develop and teach this curriculum for over 10 years. I’ve known there are qualitative changes in the students that take this course and that something very important happens to the girls in my class, but I’ve never had actual data that shows these changes. Anecdotal information is one thing, but having data that shows that there is actual change is very important.

The girls who were in the group at my internship site have formed significant bonds with each other and myself. For the last class all girls were asked to break a board with their hand. Many of them had never known how to hit before this course. All the girls were able to break their board. They then had every girl in the course and myself sign the board with permanent ink pens, and many have told me they hung their board on a wall in their room to remind them of how strong they had become. One girl in the class has struggled for the past two years with significant peer issues and controlling her anger. She adopted the mantra “I have the right to walk away” and said this affirmation at the end of every class. Although she still struggles with

her anger, she is aware there are other, healthier, choices she can use when dealing with her anger. She has continued to come to my office and check in with me on a weekly basis.

Perhaps the most significant result of this course, for me personally, was the ability to connect with girls through their own power and help them connect with each other in a healthy and safe way. Boys are not allowed in the course, which allows the girls to let go of the outside distractions that a co-ed class could produce. The girls are encouraged to connect with each other and role play with one another. They are also given the freedom to discuss what is on their minds and disclose situations they have survived that have made them stronger. Through disclosure, many girls realized they had much more in common than earlier believed. It did not result in changing of peer groups outside the classroom, but did allow for me have closer contacts with many of the girls within their peer group. At a time when many girls are suspicious or unwilling to speak with an adult, these girls found an advocate that would listen to them and help them problem solve.

As a result of this course DHS has been called due to disclosures from within the course. Two girls who had been “cutting” came to my office for help in addressing this issue. Girls who were not in the class, but were friends with girls in the class, sought me out to help with areas of concern in their lives. As a counselor it allowed me to connect with a peer group that had previously been unreachable by other counselors. The girls in my class are now my “eyes and ears” in their group and are more apt to come to me when they see a significant issue involving a peer. My internship site supervisor has commented that I’ve been able to reach an extremely marginalized section of students as a result of this course, and do some very powerful work with them throughout the school year.

Teaching self-defense is not for everyone, nor is self-defense a correct choice for every girl. The curriculum used for this research was presented by a highly skilled martial artist and is under the direction of two extremely committed and educated individuals. Not all self-defense programs are alike, and the program used here is multi-dimensional, addressing many different aspects of self-defense, not just the physical. For a program to be effective there needs to be a combination of the above components, and the instructor needs to have the training to understand how these pieces fit in to a complicated puzzle. The program used for this paper was developed and is taught through One With Heart, in Portland Oregon. Further information regarding this program can be obtained by contacting One With Heart at (503)-231-1999 or on the web at <http://www.onewithheart.com/>.

It is my hope that every girl can connect with something that allows her to feel strong, not only physically but emotionally and mentally as well. Self-defense is just one piece that can proactively address the ways girls treat each other. Girls are part of our future, and school counselors need to create ways that we can support them during this trying time to help them come through mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually intact.

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Appendix A – Girls Self-defense Outline

Course consists of six one-hour or three two hour classes
40% interactive presentation, 60% skills building

Class 1 - What is self-defense and self-defense strategies

- intro
- rules
- self-defense strategies (*display 1 and 2*)
- distance= safety (body language)
- verbal defense (*display 3*)
- nice girl presentation(socialization) (*display 4*)
- review stance and stop
- physical defense
- workbook
- close

Class 2 - Violence/ intuition

- intro
- warm up
- review strategies
- presentation on violence (*display 5 and 6*)
- presentation on intuition (warning signs) (*display 7*)
- review strategies
- verbal defense
- physical skills building
- workbook
- close

Class 3 - Relational aggression & peer pressure

- intro
- warm up
- walk the boulevard
- exercise for strengthening boundaries
- presentation on relational aggression (*display 8*)
- verbal defense in relational aggression situations (*display 9*)
- physical defense skills building/ combine verbal-physical
- workbook
- close

Class 4 - Strangers

- intro
- warm up
- review strategies
- presentation about stranger danger (*display 10 and 11*)
- verbal defense against strangers (*display 12*)

- ploys and tactics strangers use (*display 13*)
- review self-defense strategies
- physical defense
- workbook
- close

Class 5 - Familiar adult

- intro
- warm up
- review strategies
- presentation about familiar adult
- strategies to use
- practice verbal defense against familiar adult (*display 14*)
- role play situation with familiar adult
- workbook
- close

class 6 - Dating violence

- intro
- warm up
- review strategies
- presentation on dating violence (*displays 15, 16, 17*)
- ploys and tactics
- review strategies
- verbal defense against dating violence (de-escalation/negotiation) (*display 18*)
- physical skills/defense on the ground
- evaluation
- board breaking
- finish workbook
- hand out certificates/diplomas

Appendix B – Permission Slip

**SCHOOL DISTRICT
Middle School**

11111 SE Anywhere Road
East Co. , Oregon 97267

PRINCIPAL -
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL -
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL -

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your daughter has the opportunity to be involved in a girls Self-defense class/group. This group is for any girl who would like to learn effective self-defense techniques: verbal, physical, and mental strategies and skills.

Group is voluntary; no student is required to participate in a group. Group will meet twice a week for a total of eight sessions. Self-defense will be held on Mondays and Thursdays after school; students will be required to take the activity bus home.

Basic requirements for group are:

- The ability to list and share respectfully with others.
- The ability to use the skills in an emergency self-defense situation only.
- Willingness to work on the skills presented.
- The ability to maintain confidentiality about who is in the group and what is shared during group time.

Students will be asked to complete an anonymous survey before and after the class to facilitate in the creation of a research project about girls and self-defense. Their names and school will not be used; you may see a copy of the test and project if you should so desire.

Please sign and return the permission slip below if you are willing to have your child participate in the girls self-defense class/group. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to call or e-mail me.

Sincerely yours,

Shannon Foxley-Baker
Counseling Intern, Middle School

I give my permission for _____, to attend Self-defense Class. I understand that portions of this program involve physical contact and could result in injury to the participants. Any injuries or medical problems would be the responsibility of the student and her parents or guardian. We also understand that confidentiality is the rule for this group and the skills involved are for self-defense in an emergency situation only. Misuse of these skills with other students could results in loss of group privilege and possible disciplinary action.

Signed _____ Date _____
Parent or Guardian

Signed _____ Date _____
Student