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Controlling Behaviors in Middle School Youth's Dating Relationships: Reactions and Help-Seeking Behaviors

Nada Elias-Lambert[1], Beverly M. Black[2], and Kingsley U. Chigbu[2]

Abstract

This exploratory study examined middle school students' (*N* = 380) help-seeking behaviors and other reactions to controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Over three-fourths of the participants perpetrated and were victimized by controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Youth used emotional/verbal and dominance/isolation forms of controlling behaviors. More youth were victimized by dominance/isolation controlling behaviors than emotional/verbal controlling behaviors. Gender and age differences emerged when evaluating the type of controlling behaviors youth used. The majority of youth were willing to seek help when confronted with various types of controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Gender and age differences also emerged in youth's reactions to controlling behaviors. More understanding of youth's reactions to controlling behaviors in their dating relationships may assist prevention educators in intervening before controlling behaviors in dating relationships turn into actual dating violence.

Keywords

dating/dating violence, middle school, intervention/prevention, violence/violent behaviors, romantic/dating relationships, communication

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Controlling behaviors, similar to dating violence, affect the physical and psychological health and well-being of adolescents (J. Campbell et al., 2000; Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000), and correlate with high levels of depression, poor educational outcomes (M. Johnson, 1995), and risky behaviors (Coker et al., 2000; Gormely & Lopez, 2010). Controlling behavior is defined as the conscious attempt to dominate, restrict, and/or control an intimate partner (World Health Organization, 2003) without exerting physical or coercive violence, and has been identified as one of the most common precursors to teen dating violence (TDV; Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007; Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2004) and bullying (Nansel et al., 2001).

Many studies focus on youth's help-seeking behaviors with dating violence (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008; Black & Weisz, 2003), yet few studies have examined youth's help-seeking behaviors when they experience controlling behaviors in their dating relationships (Lin, Raymond, Catallozzi, Ryan, & Rickert, 2007). If we know more about youth's willingness to seek help when faced with controlling behaviors in their dating relationships, there is the potential to intervene before controlling behaviors turn into dating violence. This study examines the relationship between the types of controlling behaviors used by middle school youth in their dating relationships and their reactions and help-seeking behaviors toward this form of abuse.

Review of Literature

The dynamics of controlling behaviors have been studied in a variety of relationships (Florsheim & Smith, 2005; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2008); however, we concentrate our discussion of controlling behaviors in dating/intimate relationships. O'Leary (1999) defines controlling behavior as a form of psychological abuse that involves partner isolation, domination, threats, persistent criticism, and aggressive utterances against a partner. Consequently, controlling behavior can be understood as a form of aggression in dating relationships (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2008). Various scholars have measured controlling behaviors focusing on variables such as excessive monitoring of a partner's whereabouts (Antai, 2011; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003), accusing a partner of infidelity, orchestrated isolation from friends by a partner, and lack of trust in the partner over financial control (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006). In their study, Murphy and Hoover (1999) identified different forms of controlling behaviors such as nonphysical or psychological aggression, like partner restrictions and isolation from friends. Overall, controlling behaviors entail unequal power in a relationship (Barter, McCarry, Berridge, & Evans, 2009) and the use of intentional,

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nonviolent behavior in an effort to control or harm a partner emotionally (Kuffel & Katz, 2002).

The literature and national organizations related to domestic violence document the relationship between controlling behavior and violence in abusive relationships (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.; Strauchler et al., 2004; Washington State Office of the Attorney General, n.d.). In fact, controlling behaviors are cited as one of the most important risk factors or warnings signs of abusive relationships. Graham-Kevan and Archer (2008) found that controlling behaviors predict the use of physical aggression in various types of relationships including those characterized as "intimate terrorists," "common couple violence," and "violent resistance." J. C. Campbell et al. (2003) found that partners' use of controlling behaviors and verbal aggression contributed significantly to the risk of partner femicide.

Controlling behavior is a prevalent problem among dating adolescents. Catallozzi, Simon, Davidson, Breitbart, and Rickert (2011) examined the use of controlling behavior among 603 female adolescents and young adults, ages 15 to 24, and found that 68% of the participants had witnessed one or more partner-induced controlling behavior, and 38% had experienced at least one controlling behavior episode in their lifetimes. Close to half of the participants reported experiencing a variety of controlling behaviors such as their male partner being suspicious that they had been unfaithful (41%, n = 244), their male partner becoming angry if they had a conversation with another man (41%, n = 246), or their male partner insisting on knowing their whereabouts at all times (46%, n = 277).

Although some studies on experiences with controlling behaviors do not separate adolescents from adults, evidence suggests that controlling behaviors are experienced across cultural contexts. For example, a national study of female adolescents and adults in Nigeria (N = 2,877, 15-49 years old) found that 63% of participants had experienced at least one form of controlling behavior by a husband or male partner (Antai, 2011). Similarly, in a study of high school students in New Zealand (N = 373, 16-20 years old), 85.1% and 73.6% of the male and female participants, respectively, reported having experienced controlling behavior by a dating partner (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000).

Adverse Effects of Controlling Behaviors

Similar to other studies on dating violence, controlling behaviors lead to numerous adverse outcomes and have negative effects on the well-being of youth (Coker et al., 2000). The negative consequences of controlling behaviors include poor physical health (Coker et al., 2000), emotional problems

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such as depression, sexual violence (Jezl, Molidor, & Wright, 1996), low self-esteem, sense of dependency, and participation in risky behaviors including episodic heavy drinking, sexual intercourse, fatal suicide attempts, and unwanted pregnancy (Coker et al., 2000; Gormely & Lopez, 2010; O'Leary, 1999). In addition, middle-school aged youth who are victims of controlling behaviors may experience isolation from their peers (OhioCanDo4Kids, 2006), have negative academic outcomes, and be exposed to future violent relationships (Burks, 2006; Catallozzi et al., 2011; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006).

Gender, Age, and Controlling Behaviors

Due to the limited number of studies addressing controlling behaviors among adolescents, little is known about how gender impacts the use of controlling behaviors. Hamberger and Guse (2002) maintain that unlike girls, boys may achieve dominance and control in their relationships with their partners through the use of violence. On the other hand, Kuffel and Katz (2002), in a study of college-aged students, reported fairly similar rates of the perpetration and victimization of controlling behaviors by the male and female participants.

Apart from the gender differences in the kinds of controlling behaviors perpetrated by adolescents, gender differences in terms of perception of dating violence and controlling behavior persists. For example, in an experimental study of ninth-grade Latino students ($N = 41$, mean age = 14.68), Rayburn et al. (2007) reported that girls used more physical aggression toward boys and received more timely response from law enforcement when they were victims than boys. On the other hand, boys were ridiculed when the perpetrator of dating violence was a girl.

Age differences may also exert an influence on the use of controlling behaviors and on the type of controlling behaviors used in relationships. According to Catallozzi et al. (2011), younger girls and girls who were less than 3 years of their male partner's age were more likely to become victims of controlling behaviors compared with older girls and those girls who had male partners who were at least 5 years older than they were.

Help-Seeking and Reactions to Controlling Behaviors

Literature on help-seeking behaviors by adolescents experiencing controlling behavior is lacking. Drawing from studies examining help-seeking behaviors by adolescents experiencing dating violence (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Black et al., 2008; Molider & Tolman, 1998), we know that victims of controlling behavior rarely seek help, and when they do, they turn to their friends.

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Existing literature also shows that more girls seek help for dating violence than boys (Jackson et al., 2000). In one of the few studies exploring help-seeking among adolescents and young adults experiencing controlling behaviors, Catallozzi et al. (2011) examined whether female adolescents and young adults experiencing controlling behaviors objected to being screened by a health care provider. The authors found that 58% of the participants in the study with long histories of controlling behavior victimization (more than six episodes of controlling behavior victimization) would mind "a bit" or mind "a lot" being screened by health professionals. The study also found that the younger female victims of controlling behavior were more than two times as likely to refuse being screened for controlling behaviors by health personnel compared with nonvictims of controlling behavior.

Youth often exert other responses, besides help-seeking, when faced with controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. These reactions may include fighting back or breaking up with the controlling partner (National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health, 2002). Thus, controlling behaviors may lead to retaliation, thereby increasing physical aggression in relationships (Antai, 2011; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003). In a qualitative study of seven girls, ages 11 to 14, who witnessed intimate violence, Hays et al. (2011) found that youth were reluctant to report dating violence (which is a way of help-seeking), but were able to distinguish between healthy dating relationships and unhealthy ones, as well as develop personal strategies they may use to address victimization such as hitting back or leaving the relationship. Literature on how victims of controlling behaviors respond is still scarce, therefore more research in this area is needed.

Early Adolescent Development

Early adolescence, usually 11 to 14 years old (sixth to ninth grade), is marked by many biological, psychological, and social changes (Blakemore, 2008). It is a time when adolescents develop their capacity to think abstractly, experience puberty, and demonstrate emotional intensity and fluctuation in their reactions (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010). Early adolescence also begins the complex process of identity formation. Part of an adolescent's sense of self comes from knowledge of one's membership in a social group (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008), and thus, they become peer-focused. Kegan's (1982) theory of early adolescence emphasizes the importance of group membership, group acceptance, and group identity. Peer pressure is most influential on adolescents from the sixth to ninth grade (Schneider, 2000) and the most important determinant if a young adolescent begins to date is if their friends are dating (Cobb, 2010). It is through interactions with peers that adolescents learn about dating and

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sexual relations, conflict, mutual problem-solving, and what they want and do not want in their relationships (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010).

Young adolescents are preoccupied with perfect and idealized relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). They tend to exaggerate gender-specific roles and accept mythical notions about romance that makes them vulnerable to violence and unhealthy interactions in their relationships (Prothrow-Stith, 1991). For example, studies have found that youth accept controlling behaviors and violence in their dating relationships as a form of love (James, West, Deters, & Armijo, 2000; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Much research also suggests that adherence to gender-role stereotypes is an important contributor to dating violence and unhealthy relationships (Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004; Shen, Chiu, & Gao, 2012).

We know that the frontal lobe of the adolescent brain is still developing during adolescence, and that it is the frontal lobe of the brain that is responsible for planning and impulse control (S. Johnson, Blum, & Giedd, 2009). Based on the stage of an adolescent's brain development, they are less likely to think before they act, pause to consider the potential consequences of their actions, and modify their dangerous or inappropriate behaviors (The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2012). Adolescents may also misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions, get into accidents of all kinds, get involved in fights, and engage in dangerous or risky behaviors. These behaviors are likely to add risk to the development of unhealthy relationships and the use of controlling behaviors.

Research Questions

This exploratory study addresses six research questions.

Research Question 1: How often are youth victims or perpetrators of the various kinds of controlling behaviors (emotional/verbal or dominance/isolation) in their dating relationships?
Research Question 2: What types of controlling behaviors are youth victims or perpetrators of in their dating relationships?
Research Question 3: How does gender and grade level influence the type of controlling behaviors that youth are victims and perpetrators of in their dating relationships?
Research Question 4: How do youth react when they perpetrate or are victimized by controlling behaviors in their dating relationships?
Research Question 5: How does gender and grade level influence youth's reactions when they perpetrate or are victimized by controlling behaviors in their dating relationships?

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Research Question 6: How does victimization or perpetration of different types of controlling behaviors influence an adolescent's reaction to controlling behaviors?

Method

Participants

From 2002-2006, students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades ($N = 422$) completed surveys on their experiences with controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Out of the 422 students surveyed, 380 reported having a dating partner in the past and were included in the analysis for this study. Nearly all the participants were African Americans (99%) and were equally distributed by gender (boys, $n = 188$, 49%; girls, $n = 192$, 51%). The sample consists of sixth graders ($n = 33$, 9%), seventh graders ($n = 134$, 35%), and eighth graders ($n = 213$, 56%).

Procedures

One of the authors conducted a dating violence and sexual assault prevention program at two urban middle schools in a midwestern city during the school years of 2002 to 2006, from which the data from this study derives. Both schools had approximately 700 students; 76% of whom participated in the free lunch program. The settings also had rampant problems with fighting, absenteeism, suspensions, and less than 25% of students in both schools met the state's educational attainment standards. Students in Life Skills classes and Health classes were recruited to participate in the program or serve as a comparison group. Students received a $5 McDonalds gift certificate as a thank you for their participation. About 75% to 80% of the eligible students assented to and received parental consent to participate in the study. This study received university human subject approval. Only those students who assented and received parental consent participated in the study. Only baseline data from the study are presented here.

Measures

Students completed several measures in a survey that were developed for this study. The survey contains various items related to dating violence. This paper discusses the results related to participants' use of two types of controlling behaviors (emotional/verbal or dominance/isolation) in their dating relationships and their help-seeking behaviors and reactions. Reactions toward

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controlling behavior among the participants were measured using one question with 13 answer choices that asked students what they did when they had hurtful problems with their dating partners. Students were able to select multiple choices. The answer options included, "I talked to a friend," "I talked to my mother," "I talked to a teacher or counselor," "I called a hotline number," "I talked to my father," "I talked to my sister or brother," "I talked to my aunt, uncle, or another relative," "I talked to my minister," "I talked it out with my dating partner," "I got friends to help me fight back," "I fought back," and "I broke up with my dating partner." There was an "other" answer choice, but only a few students chose this option. Their responses included comments such as "I told her I loved her" or "no."

The Controlling Behavior Scale measured youth's perpetration and victimization of controlling behaviors in dating relationships. The controlling behaviors scale was developed based on the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI; Tolman, 1989) that has an established internal consistency reliability (Emotional/Verbal subscale, $\alpha = .93$, Dominance/Isolation subscale, $\alpha = .95$). The questions were reworded in order to make them applicable to a younger population (without altering the constructs of the original instrument). The new scale was a shorter version of the original scale and included two eight-item subscales: Emotional/Verbal and Dominance/Isolation. The new scale also included questions that addressed victimization and perpetration of controlling behaviors. For example, an item aimed at perpetration is "I blamed my dating partner for our fights" and an item aimed at victimization is "My dating partner blamed me for our fights." With the current sample, the new scales both had good internal consistency reliability (Emotional/Verbal subscale, $\alpha = .79$, Dominance/Isolation subscale, $\alpha = .80$). A factor analysis using the 16 items demonstrated acceptable consistency between the new scale factor structure and prior work on the factor structure of the larger PMWI (Tolman, 1989). The emotional/verbal and dominance/isolation factors emerged on the victimization and perpetration scales. The emotional/verbal factor includes items dealing with verbal attacks, behavior that demeans women, and withholding of emotional resources. The Emotional/Verbal subscale includes questions such as, "My dating partner blamed me for our fights" and "My dating partner destroyed or threatened to destroy something I like." The dominance/isolation factor includes items dealing with isolation from resources, demands for subservience, and rigid observation of traditional sex roles. The Dominance/Isolation subscale includes questions such as, "My dating partner was jealous of my friends" and "My dating partner made me tell him or her where I was." Items on the scale are measured using a 5-point

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Likert-type scale with ratings ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*), in regard to how often they perpetrated or were victims of those particular controlling behaviors. One of the researchers pilot tested the instrument questions with 40 boys and girls who were beginning eighth grade at a nearby public middle school prior to its implementation. Revisions were made following the pilot test to ensure grade level readability.

Data Analyses

We conducted basic descriptive statistics to determine the frequency of controlling behavior victimization and perpetration among the participants, and what reactions and help sources they utilized when they perpetrated or were victimized by controlling behaviors. Chi-square tests of significance examined gender and grade level differences in the types of controlling behaviors they perpetrated or were victimized by along with their reactions to these controlling behaviors.

We conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with a Varimax rotation to reduce the dimensionality of the reactions into meaningful categories of reaction sources. Since only 3% of the 380 students included in this study stated they would contact a hotline for help, the variable "contacting a hotline" was removed prior to conducting the factor analysis. Three orthogonal factors emerged among the responses to controlling behaviors. The four items loading on the first factor represent help-seeking behaviors with adults (HS-adults) and include seeking help from a mother, teacher/counselor, father, or minister. The four items loading on the second factor represent help-seeking with peers (HS-peers) and include seeking help from a friend, sister/brother, dating partner, or relative. The three items loading on the third factor represent taking action to address controlling behaviors and include getting friends to help fight back, fighting back by oneself, or breaking up with a dating partner. These three factors accounted for 52.3% of the total variance that emerged.

We also conducted logistic regression analyses to predict which reaction factor (HS-adults, HS-peers, or taking action) was utilized by the participants when they perpetrated or were victims of the two types of controlling behaviors. We evaluated the logistic regressions separately for each controlling behavior (emotional/verbal or dominance/isolation) and for victimization and perpetration of controlling behaviors. These regression models show the combined effects of gender, grade level, and the controlling behavior variables on youth's likelihood to react on their own or seek help from other sources.

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Table 1. Subscales of Controlling Behaviors by Gender and Grade as a Percentage of the Sample.

	Gender		Grade			
Subscales	% Girls (n = 192)	% Boys (n = 188)	% 6th (n = 33)	% 7th (n = 134)	% 8th (n = 213)	Total (n = 380)
Victimization						
Emotional/Verbal	49	51	32	49	53	49
Dominance/Isolation	64	62	47	62	66	62
Perpetration						
Emotional/Verbal	69**	47**	41	59	60	57
Dominance/Isolation	65	59	44*	59	66*	61

Note. Respondents were able to select multiple options, so total percent does not equal 100%.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

Results

Prevalence of Controlling Behaviors

Youth in this study were victimized by and perpetrated both types of controlling behaviors. Overall, about 79% of students reported that they were victimized by or perpetrated at least one type of controlling behavior. About 49% of youth reported they had been victimized by emotional/verbal controlling behaviors and about 62% stated they had been victimized by dominance/isolation controlling behaviors. While, about 57% of youth stated they had perpetrated emotional/verbal controlling behaviors and 61% reported that they had perpetrated dominance/isolation controlling behaviors.

Controlling Behaviors Subscales

Table 1 shows the overall level of victimization and perpetration of each of the controlling behaviors subscales: emotional/verbal and dominance/isolation. Youth perpetrated and were victimized by dominance/isolation controlling behaviors more often than emotional/verbal controlling behaviors. Gender and grade level differences emerged. Significantly more girls than boys, $\chi^2(1, n = 224) = 22.26$, $p < .001$, perpetrated emotional/verbal controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Significantly more eighth graders than sixth graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 157) = 6.25$, $p < .05$, perpetrated dominance/isolation controlling behaviors in their dating relationships.

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Table 2. Controlling Behaviors Victimization by Gender and Grade as a Percentage of the Sample.

	Gender		Grade			
My dating partner . . .	% Girls (n = 192)	% Boys (n = 188)	% 6th (n = 33)	% 7th (n = 134)	% 8th (n = 213)	Total (n = 380)
Emotional/verbal						
Blamed me for our fights	25	33	11*	25	34*	29
Destroyed something that I liked	9	8	21^{*}_{ab}	7^{*}_{a}	8^{*}_{b}	9
Gave me the silent treatment	35	40	21	39	39	38
Tried to make me afraid on purpose	12	10	18	8	12	11
Dominance/isolation						
Was jealous of my friends	31	27	25	26	31	29
Checked up on me	45	45	39	43	47	45
Made me tell him or her where I was	25	24	11	23	28	25
Accused me of seeing another boy/girl	32	36	18	30	39	34

Note. Respondents were able to select multiple options, so total percent does not equal 100%. Percentages with the same subscripts within rows are significantly different at the indicated level.
*$p < .05$.

Controlling Behaviors Victimization

Table 2 reports the level of victimization of each specific type of controlling behavior, such as "my dating partner blamed for our fights" or "my dating partner was jealous of my friends." As shown in Table 2, "My dating partner checked up on me" (45%) or "accused me of seeing another boy/girl" (34%) were the most common ways youth were victimized by domination/isolation controlling behaviors. The most common emotional/verbal controlling behaviors that youth were victimized by were that they were blamed for fights (29%) and they were given the silent treatment (38%). No significant differences by gender were found when examining the specific items on the controlling behavior subscales that youth were victimized by in their dating relationships.

Grade level differences. Grade level differences emerged when evaluating the types of controlling behaviors youth were victimized by. Differences by grade level were found on two items of the Emotional/Verbal controlling behavior subscale. Significantly more eighth graders than sixth graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 71) = 6.07$, $p < .05$, stated they were blamed for the fights in their dating

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relationships. Significantly more sixth graders than both seventh, $\chi^2(1, n = 15) = 5.80$, $p < .05$, and eighth graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 22) = 5.13$, $p < .05$, stated that their dating partner destroyed something that they liked.

Controlling Behaviors Perpetration

Table 3 reports the level of perpetration of each specific type of controlling behavior, such as "I blamed my dating partner for our fights" or "I was jealous of my dating partner's friends." As shown in Table 3, the most common emotional/verbal controlling behaviors that were perpetrated by youth were giving the silent treatment (51%) and blaming their partner for fights (25%). The most common domination/isolation controlling behaviors perpetrated by youth were checking up on their partner (46%) or accusing their partner of seeing another boy or girl (32%). No significant differences by grade level were found when examining the specific items on the controlling behavior subscales that youth perpetrated in their dating relationships.

Gender differences. Gender differences emerged when evaluating the types of controlling behaviors youth perpetrated. Differences by gender were found when youth perpetrated emotional/verbal controlling behaviors. Girls perpetrated the emotional/verbal controlling behavior of giving their dating partner the silent treatment significantly more often than boys, $\chi^2(1, n = 184) = 21.00$, $p < .001$.

Reaction Sources

Table 4 shows the reaction sources (help-seeking-adults, help-seeking-peers, or taking action) and youth's willingness to turn to those reaction sources to address controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. No gender differences were noted; however, grade level differences emerged. Significantly more sixth graders than seventh, $\chi^2(1, n = 142) = 4.22$, $p < .05$, and eighth graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 215) = 8.86$, $p < .05$, stated they sought help from an adult. Significantly more sixth, $\chi^2(1, n = 195) = 6.67$, $p < .05$, and seventh graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 273) = 4.41$, $p < .05$, than eighth graders reported they sought help from their peers. Significantly more sixth graders than seventh, $\chi^2(1, n = 140) = 5.29$, $p < .05$, and eighth graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 209) = 8.22$, $p < .05$, stated they took action on their own.

Reactions to Controlling Behaviors

Table 5 reports how youth in the study would react when faced with controlling behaviors in a dating relationship. Youth reacted to controlling behaviors

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Table 3. Controlling Behaviors Perpetration by Gender and Grade as a Percentage of the Sample.

	Gender		Grade			
	% Girls (n = 192)	% Boys (n = 188)	% 6th (n = 33)	% 7th (n = 134)	% 8th (n = 213)	Total (n = 380)
Emotional/verbal						
I blamed my dating partner for our fights	27	22	7	25	27	25
I destroyed something my dating partner liked	11	10	7	7	14	11
I gave my dating partner the silent treatment	63**	39**	36	50	54	51
I tried to make my dating partner afraid on purpose	15	10	18	11	12	12
Dominance/isolation						
I was jealous of my dating partner's friends	16	18	11	14	19	17
I checked up on my dating partner	49	43	39	45	48	46
I made my dating partner tell me where he or she was	36	27	29	31	32	29
I accused my dating partner of seeing another boy/girl	31	33	29	29	34	32

Note. Respondents were able to select multiple options, so total percent does not equal 100%.
**$p < .001$.

in one of two ways: seeking help or taking action. Youth stated they would either seek help from different help sources (e.g., mother, sibling, relative, friend) or they would take action on their own (e.g., breaking up with their partner or fighting back). About 90% of youth stated they would seek help and/or take action on their own.

Help-seeking. Many youth stated they were willing to seek help if they perpetrated or were victims of controlling behaviors in dating relationships. About 89% of youth stated they would seek help to address controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Boys (90%), girls (89%), seventh graders (90%), and eighth graders (91%) almost equally responded that they would seek help from a number of help sources, such as peers or adults. However, only 79% of sixth graders reported they would seek help from adults and peers. Overall, youth reported that they were willing to seek help from a friend (64%), siblings (50%), or to talk out the problem with their dating partner (58%). When

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Table 4. Reaction Sources by Gender and Grade as a Percentage of the Sample.

	Gender		Grade			
Factors of reaction sources	% Girls (n = 192)	% Boys (n = 188)	% 6th (n = 33)	% 7th (n = 134)	% 8th (n = 213)	Total (n = 380)
Help-seeking adults	86	86	71**$_{ab}$	86*$_{b}$	89**$_{a}$	86
Help-seeking peers	76	76	62*$_{a}$	72*$_{b}$	81*$_{ab}$	75
Taking action	82	87	68**$_{ab}$	85*$_{b}$	87**$_{a}$	84

Note. Respondents were able to select multiple options, so total percent does not equal 100%. Percentages with the same subscripts within rows are significantly different at the indicated level.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

experiencing or perpetrating controlling behaviors in a dating relationship, youth were somewhat willing to talk to a relative, such as their mother (41%), father (31%), or another relative (34%). Few youth were willing to talk with an adult they did not know well with 17% of students stating they talked with a teacher or counselor and 13% stating they talked to their minister.

Taking action. Many youth stated they would take action in response to the use of controlling behaviors by a dating partner. About 84% of youth stated they would take action (e.g., fight back or break up with their partner) to address controlling behaviors in a dating relationship. About 34% of youth stated they broke up with their dating partner, 17% stated they got their friends to help them fight back, and 30% fought back on their own.

Gender differences. Gender differences were noted when evaluating youth's reactions to controlling behaviors, as shown in Table 5. Girls and boys differed significantly when identifying how they would react when they perpetrated or were victims of controlling behaviors. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to talk to a friend, $\chi^2(1, n = 223) = 6.82$, $p < .001$. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to talk to their father, $\chi^2(1, n = 106) = 17.44$, $p < .001$. Significantly more girls than boys reported that they fought back on their own, $\chi^2(1, n = 92) = 23.99$, $p < .001$ or broke up with their partner, $\chi^2(1, n = 120) = 6.20$, $p < .05$.

Grade level differences. Grade level differences also emerged when evaluating youth's reactions to controlling behaviors in their dating relationships as

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Table 5. Reactions to Controlling Behaviors by Gender and Grade as a Percentage of the Sample.

	Gender		Grade			
Reactions	% Girls (n = 192)	% Boys (n = 188)	% 6th (n = 33)	% 7th (n = 134)	% 8th (n = 213)	Total (n = 380)
Help-seeking						
Friend	69*	59*	68	62	65	64
Mother	41	40	70^{**}_{ac}	45^{*}_{ab}	34^{**}_{bc}	41
Father	21**	41**	33	38	26	31
Sister/brother	55	46	64	50	49	50
Relative	37	30	54^{**}_{a}	41^{**}_{b}	26^{**}_{ab}	34
Teacher/ counselor	16	18	32	16	15	17
Minister	11	15	18	14	11	13
Talked with dating partner	57	59	46	63	56	58
Taking action						
Broke up with partner	41*	29*	54*	38	30*	34
I fought back	42**	17**	47	32	26	30
Friends fought back	18	15	10	18	16	17

Note. Respondents were able to select multiple options, so total percent does not equal 100%. Percentages with the same subscripts within rows are significantly different at the indicated level.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

shown in Table 5. Significantly more sixth graders than seventh, $\chi^2(1, n = 76) = 5.62$, $p < .05$, and eighth graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 85) = 13.39$, $p < .001$, reported they talked with their mother. Also, significantly more seventh graders than eighth graders reported they talked to their mother, $\chi^2(1, n = 123) = 4.20$, $p < .05$. Significantly more sixth, $\chi^2(1, n = 65) = 9.25$, $p < .05$, and seventh graders, $\chi^2(1, n = 102) = 8.32$, $p < .05$, than eighth graders reported they talked with a relative. Significantly more sixth graders than eighth graders stated they broke up with their partner, $\chi^2(1, n = 73) = 6.12$, $p < .05$.

Prediction of Reactions to Controlling Behaviors

Table 6 shows the results of the logistic regression analyses to predict the impact of gender, grade level, and type of controlling behavior youth

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Table 6. Logistic Regressions for Factors of Reaction Sources.

Controlling behavior variable	*B*	Exp (*B*)	*p*
Overall reaction			
Dominance/isolation victimization	1.37	3.94	.01
Dominance/isolation perpetration	1.65	5.20	.00
Help-seeking adults			
Dominance/isolation victimization	1.20	3.33	.00
Dominance/isolation perpetration	1.21	3.37	.00
Grade level: 6th	−0.96	0.38	.05
Help-seeking peers			
Dominance/isolation victimization	0.53	1.69	.05
Grade level: 6th	−0.88	0.41	.03
Grade level: 7th	−0.55	0.58	.04
Taking action			
Dominance/isolation victimization	0.90	2.46	.03
Dominance/isolation perpetration	0.77	2.15	.01

perpetrated or were victimized by on which reaction source (HS-adults, HS-peers, or taking action) they utilized. When looking at the results on how adolescents reacted to controlling behaviors, the logistic regression analyses show that being a victim of dominance/isolation controlling behaviors significantly increased the odds of an adolescent's reaction (e.g.: reporting to adults, seeking help from peers, or taking action) by 3.94 times. Perpetrating dominance/isolation controlling behaviors significantly increased the odds of an adolescent's reaction by 5.20 times. Being a victim of dominance/isolation controlling behaviors significantly increased the odds of an adolescent seeking help from an adult by 3.33 times. Perpetrating dominance/isolation controlling behaviors significantly increased the odds of an adolescent seeking help from an adult by 3.37 times. Grade level contributed significantly to the likelihood of a participant choosing to seek help from an adult and from his or her peers. Sixth graders were 62% more likely to seek help from an adult and 59% more likely to seek help from his or her peers than seventh or eighth graders. Seventh graders were 42% more likely to seek help from his or her peers compared with eighth graders. Being a victim of dominance/isolation controlling behaviors significantly increased the odds of an adolescent seeking help from his or her peers by 1.69 times and taking action by 2.46 times. Perpetrating dominance/isolation controlling behaviors significantly increased the odds of an adolescent taking action by 2.15 times.

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Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that over three fourths of the participants perpetrated and were victimized by controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. These high rates of controlling behaviors are comparable with those found in other studies (Antai, 2011; Catallozzi et al., 2011) with older adolescents and young adult samples. However, the findings are quite astounding, considering the young age of the participants in this study. It appears that the use of unhealthy interactions begins early in relationships.

This study found that youth used emotional/verbal and dominance/isolation forms of controlling behaviors. Youth perpetrated both types of controlling behaviors about equally. However, more youth were victimized by domination/isolation controlling behaviors than emotional/verbal controlling behaviors. The controlling behavior, "checking up" on one's partner, embedded in the domination/isolation control factor, seems to stand out. Similar to the findings of Catallozzi et al. (2011), this study found that "checking up" on one's partner was the most common form of controlling behavior and was experienced by about 45% of all youth.

Although gender differences were not found when looking at the type of controlling behaviors that youth were victimized by, gender differences emerged when evaluating the type of controlling behaviors youth perpetrated. Girls perpetrated emotional/verbal controlling behaviors, such as giving their partner the silent treatment more often than boys. This gender difference is also similar to findings reported by Antai (2011), Catallozzi et al. (2011), Gage and Hutchinson (2006), and Graham-Kevan and Archer (2003). The finding that girls tend to perpetrate the emotional/verbal controlling behaviors more often than boys could be related to the fact that traditional gender roles remain strong among young adolescents (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010). Young girls may realize they have greater verbal communication skills than boys (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010), and use those skills in a relationship to gain control and achieve their desired outcomes. Girls may also perceive that they are responsible for maintaining a relationship and assess the use of emotional/verbal controlling behaviors is the safest and most effective way for them to fulfill that role.

Results of this study suggest that age may also play a part in the type of controlling behaviors youth perpetrated and were victimized by in their dating relationships. For instance, eighth graders were victimized by the emotional/verbal controlling behavior of being blamed for fights more than sixth graders. Sixth graders, more than seventh and eighth graders, were victimized by the emotional/verbal controlling behavior of having their dating partner destroy something they like. Also, eighth graders perpetrated dominance/

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isolation behaviors, such as making their dating partner tell them where he or she was and jealousy, more often than the sixth graders. It may be that victimization by emotional/verbal controlling behaviors varies by age depending on the specific type of emotional/verbal controlling behavior being used. Also, since there is a developmental difference between sixth graders and seventh and eighth graders (Blakemore, 2008), it may be that some types of controlling behaviors are perpetrated more often as youth get older. It may be that as adolescents get older, they begin to lose some of the idealized views of relationships with boys learning to get what they want in a relationship using more blatant controlling behaviors and girls learning less obvious ways to be in control. These differences may be related to differences in how boys and girls are raised (Ryle, 2012).

Reactions to Controlling Behaviors

Findings from the study indicate that youth react to the use of controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. The large majority of youth (89%) in this study were willing to seek help from others when confronted with controlling behaviors. In contrast to much of the literature on adolescent help-seeking (Black et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2000; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001), few gender differences emerged in terms of who youth were willing to turn to for help when confronted with controlling behaviors. Girls were more likely than boys to talk to a friend and boys were more likely than girls to talk to their fathers. The gender differences in the current study may be related to ethnicity. Some studies suggest that African American youth may differ from European American youth in their help-seeking behaviors. For example, Watson et al.'s (2001) study of high school students found that girls were significantly more likely than boys to talk to friends about dating violence they experienced, whereas boys were significantly more likely to do nothing. However, when only looking at the African American adolescents, the authors found that the gender differences disappeared. However, Black and Weisz (2003) found gender differences in the help-seeking intentions among African American middle school youth, with girls seeking help more often from their friends, mothers, and grandmothers than boys.

Grade level differences were also noted in youth's help-seeking behaviors when they experience controlling behaviors. More sixth graders than seventh and eighth graders reported they would seek help from their mothers. Also, more seventh graders than eighth graders reported they would seek help from their mother. More sixth and seventh graders than eighth graders reported they would seek help from a relative. The sixth graders were more willing to

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talk with an adult, such as their parents, than were the seventh and eighth graders. The sixth graders and seventh graders were more willing to seek help from their peers than the eighth graders. This is consistent with adolescent literature (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010) and help-seeking literature (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Tishby et al., 2001) that shows that youth tend to seek help less often as they get older, which suggests the importance of reaching youth as early as possible to arrest unhealthy interactions. Also, similar to findings in other studies (Black & Weisz, 2003) on dating violence and help-seeking, youth in this study rarely sought help from formal help-giving sources (agencies, churches, schools) and instead turned to their peers for help most often.

Over three-fourths of the youth in this study took some form of action (fought back, broke up, or talked to their partner) to respond to the use of controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Girls were more likely to take action than boys. Specifically, girls were more likely than boys to fight back and to break up with their partners. This finding suggests that youth may be socialized to believe that it is more acceptable for girls than boys to fight back or take action to defend themselves. Similarly, youth may also learn that it is less acceptable for boys to hit or fight than it is for girls (Black & Weisz, 2004). Another reason that may account for this finding is that prevention messages are still targeted more at girls than boys. As such, girls may receive messages more often than boys about how to keep themselves safe by breaking off an unhealthy relationship. In addition, the increased likelihood for African American girls in controlling and abusive relationships to fight back compared with their European American peers may be explained by African American women's historical need to physically defend themselves to survive in a society with few systems to protect them (Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997). Or, perhaps girls today are simply more willing to use violence and fight back than previously (Luke, 2008; Straus, 2004).

Grade level differences were also noted in regard to taking action to address controlling behaviors. Sixth graders took action on their own more than seventh and eighth graders.

Specifically, sixth graders were significantly more likely to break up with their partner than were eighth graders. The pressure to have a relationship, regardless of how healthy, appears to increase when moving from middle to late adolescence (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003; Van Roosmalen, 2000).

The type of controlling behavior experienced by youth appears to influence their willingness to take action or seek help. Youth were more willing to seek help from someone else (adults or peers) or take action when they perpetrated or were victimized by dominance/isolation controlling behaviors than emotional/verbal controlling behaviors. Youth were more willing to seek

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help from adults, peers, or take action on their own when they perpetrated or were victimized by dominance/isolation controlling behaviors. Although emotional/verbal controlling behaviors may hurt more than dominance/isolation controlling behaviors (Black et al., 2008), it may be more acceptable to talk about dominance/isolation controlling behaviors than emotional/verbal controlling behaviors.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that restrict its generalizability. First, findings from this study should be interpreted with care because the sample from which the data derives is nonrandomized. Also, the sample did not include equal numbers of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students, so this may have adversely affected the results based on grade level. The sample also consisted of almost all African American youth from an urban community. As such, the representativeness or generalizability of the findings is limited. Second, measurement error may have resulted from participants' social desirability bias as well as the author's reliance on self-report for measuring the study variables. Third, the use of controlling behaviors in dating relationships is a sensitive topic, so youth may have underreported their experiences with controlling behaviors. Fourth, the measures on the survey used questions that have forced choices (or unexhausted choice categories). For example, questions about participants' reactions and help-seeking behaviors only permitted yes/no responses, and thus did not capture the numbers of times adolescents reacted to the controlling behaviors. Therefore, we do not know if a participant sought help from an adult or friend once or many times. Open-ended questions would have provided additional information about the context of adolescents' reactions to controlling behaviors and of their help-seeking activities. A final limitation may be that the participants (middle school youth) may have rushed through the questions without paying close attention to each question and the possible responses to complete the survey faster.

For these reasons, further studies are needed to examine controlling behaviors across different ethnic and racial groups and to ensure the development of culturally relevant programming. Also, future research using in-depth interviews may allow for more information about the context of youth's use of controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. Another area of future research could be to focus on the positive attributes in dating relationships to see if youth are exposed to any supportive behaviors as well as controlling behaviors.

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Conclusion

Early adolescence is a critical stage for the development of healthy relationships, and yet, we know that youth perpetrate and are victimized by many controlling behaviors. More understanding of the types of controlling behaviors used and the impact of gender and age differences on youth's reactions and help-seeking behaviors in responding to controlling behaviors may assist in the development of effective interventions to address these unhealthy behaviors in relationships before they turn into actual dating violence. Specifically, since youth turn to their peers for help more often, programs can teach boys and girls how to help others that may be experiencing controlling behaviors or dating violence. Also, since youth are willing to stand up for themselves, programs can teach them how to safely do so when they experience controlling behaviors in their dating relationships. It is crucial to empower both genders to stand up for themselves when they experience controlling behaviors in their relationships. We must also attempt to break down barriers to accessing support, so that youth are able to get the help they need to stop controlling behaviors in their dating relationships.

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