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Review

Rejection sensitivity as a mechanism linking childhood maltreatment and peer rejection to adolescent dating violence

Rohama Kabeer[1] and Tracy Vaillancourt[1,2]

Adolescent dating violence is a growing public health concern that threatens youth well-being worldwide. Early exposure to invalidating environments, such as parental maltreatment and peer rejection, can foster patterns of violence in later romantic relationships. Drawing on developmental theories of attachment and social learning, we synthesize evidence linking these early adverse experiences to dating violence. Specifically, we examine how maltreatment distorts attachment security and models aggression as a relational tool, and how peer rejection compounds these effects by normalizing hostility and impairing emotion regulation. We propose that rejection sensitivity is a central mechanism linking early invalidating relationships to adolescent dating violence. Findings underscore the need for prevention programs addressing both family and peer contexts of violence.

Addresses
[1] Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Canada
[2] School of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa, Canada

Corresponding author: Vaillancourt, Tracy (tracy.vaillancourt@uottawa.ca)

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period of rapid growth and identity development. It is also when many youth form their first romantic relationships, marking a significant developmental milestone that is not always accompanied by healthy or supportive experiences. Indeed, by adolescence, 24 % of girls have experienced intimate partner violence [1]. Although global data for adolescent boys are limited, emerging evidence suggests comparable rates [2].

Relationship violence encompasses behavior intended to exert power and control over another person, including physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional harm [3]. Adolescent dating violence is a specific manifestation of this broader construct, referring to aggression perpetrated or experienced within a romantic or dating context [4].

Because adolescents spend much of their time with parents, peers, and romantic partners, these relationships are central to their psychosocial adjustment. Experiences of maltreatment or peer rejection can distort relational schemas and increase vulnerability to dating violence. In this narrative review, we examine how negative and abusive treatment by caregivers and peers in childhood and adolescence contribute to the emergence of adolescent dating violence.

Childhood maltreatment

The World Health Organization [5] defines childhood maltreatment as any abuse or neglect of an individual under 18 years of age, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, as well as neglect or negligent treatment that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity within a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power. A global review estimated that at least half of the world's children experience some form of violence each year [6]. Maltreatment is associated with mental health challenges, impaired emotion regulation, and long-term psychological sequelae such as post-traumatic stress disorder and personality dysfunction [5,7].

According to attachment theory [8], individuals possess an intrinsic drive to seek proximity to caregivers as a means of achieving safety and emotional regulation. Responsive caregiving fosters secure attachment, positive self-representations, and adaptive relational patterns, whereas unresponsive or abusive caregiving promotes insecure attachment, low self-esteem, and heightened fear of rejection [7]. Early attachment experiences continue to evolve throughout childhood and adolescence as individuals form internal working models

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of themselves, and others based on interactions with significant caregivers. These cognitive–affective templates serve as prototypes for later relationships. In parallel, social learning theory [9] posits that caregivers can foster aggression in children and adolescents by modelling or reinforcing coercive behavior. Consistent with this framework, the intergenerational transmission hypothesis suggests that children who experience or witness abuse are at elevated risk of exhibiting violence in their own relationships as adults [10].

Childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence

Youth growing up in abusive homes may learn that violence is an acceptable means of maintaining relationships or resolving conflict [11]. Accordingly, exposure to caregiver violence in childhood or adolescence has been linked to perpetrating and experiencing dating violence in later romantic relationships [12]. Witnessing interparental violence or experiencing direct abuse by caregivers is also associated with choosing partners who engage in abusive behavior [11].

Early experiences of maltreatment and exposure to family violence shape adolescents' cognitive–affective scripts about intimacy, power, and conflict, increasing their susceptibility to dating violence once they begin forming romantic attachments. There is broad consensus that the developmental roots of adolescent dating violence lie in early family environments characterized by violence, maltreatment, and instability [13]. Such experiences distort internal working models of relationships in ways that normalize coercion, erode trust, and weaken emotion regulation capacities. These learned patterns are reinforced through social learning processes and beliefs that condone or minimize violence. Adolescents involved in violent dating relationships are more likely to endorse attitudes that justify abuse [14]. This normalization of coercion is particularly harmful for vulnerable youth who are still forming their identities and attachment models. Concerningly, adolescent dating violence often persists into adulthood, with 25–50 % of less severe incidents preceding marital violence [15].

During adolescence, approximately 50–70 % of youth enter their first romantic relationships [16]. Globally, an estimated 24 % of adolescent girls aged 15–19 years have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime, and 16 % have experienced it in the past 12 months [1]. These rates are alarming given the central role of adolescent romantic relationships in psychosocial adjustment and identity development. Dating violence during these formative years can have profound consequences for mental, physical, sexual, and social well-being. Such effects may emerge immediately and persist into adulthood, and in extreme cases, may even result in death [17,18]. Compared with youth who do not experience dating violence, those who do are at substantially higher risk for long-term negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, aggression, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, and suicidal ideation or attempts [19,17].

Although adolescent dating violence has serious and lasting consequences, understanding its origins requires considering the early environments that shape adolescents' relational development. Early family adversity, however, represents only one aspect of the developmental ecology. As adolescents spend increasing time with peers [20], these relationships become central to their sense of belonging. Peer rejection, in particular, is a powerful and often overlooked risk factor for the emergence of dating violence.

Peer rejection and adolescent dating violence

Adolescence is a time when peer relationships become increasingly salient; young people increase interactions with peers, often with reduced adult supervision, making these relationships a major source of influence on attitudes, activities, and emotional well-being [21]. Similar to parents, peer relationships can function as prototypes for later romantic relationships, serving as a testing ground for managing emotions and resolving conflict within voluntary relationships [22].

Peer rejection refers to being actively disliked by one's peers, and this dislike can be accompanied by varying degrees of victimization, exclusion, or intentional isolation from peer groups and activities [23]. Peer rejection is associated with a variety of maladaptive outcomes, including anxiety, loneliness, social withdrawal, and depression [24]. Approximately 10–15 % of youth are rejected by their peers [25], and this type of interpersonal difficulty tends to be stable across time [26,27]. For example, in one study, almost half of rejected youth were still rejected one year later, and 30 % remained rejected after four years [28].

Peer rejection can reflect pre-existing behavioral problems, but it also serves as an independent predictor of later maladjustment, above other risk factors [29], and may manifest in later interpersonal relationships as violence [24]. Dishion et al. [30] theorized that limited social competence restricts access to positive, reinforcing peer experiences while increasing exposure to negative interactions, making rejected youth more vulnerable across social contexts, particularly within romantic relationships. In this context, being rejected by peers hinder adolescents' ability to navigate interpersonal relationships effectively by reducing opportunities to practice and acquire essential social competencies [14].

If adolescents' peer relationships are punitive, invalidating, or hostile, they may develop maladaptive expectations for what is normal or acceptable in romantic relationships. For example, Arriaga and Foshee [31] found that, after controlling for interparental violence, adolescents who had friends involved in violent relationships, either as perpetrators or victims, were significantly more likely to report both perpetrating and experiencing dating violence themselves, likely because they came to view such behavior as acceptable within romantic relationships. Similarly, youth who endorse positive attitudes toward aggression and associate with peers who hold similar beliefs are more likely to reproduce violence in their romantic relationships [32]. For example, Humphreys and Vaillancourt [33] found that individuals who bullied their peers in childhood or adolescence were more likely to perpetrate dating violence in young adulthood.

Recognizing the relevance of the peer context for adolescents' romantic relationship functioning, researchers have increasingly examined peer risk factors for romantic dysfunction, especially dating aggression. A meta-analysis found that adolescent peer mistreatment (including victimization and rejection) was associated with romantic aggression [34]. Similarly, multiple studies have documented links between peer victimization, peer mistreatment, and dating violence victimization in adolescents [24,35]. This association has also been observed in studies of co-occurring victimization, showing that being rejected and mistreated by peers is strongly associated with experiencing physical dating violence [24,36].

Although existing longitudinal studies have shown that adolescents victimized by their peers are vulnerable to becoming victims of teen dating violence [37], and that those who perpetrate violence against their peers are more likely to perpetrate dating violence in young adulthood [33], there is little research examining the mechanisms linking adolescent dating violence to both family and peer maltreatment and rejection. Given that family and peer relationships provide the foundation for adolescents' sense of social worth and security, repeated exposure to abuse or rejection in these contexts can foster heightened sensitivity to exclusion, increasing vulnerability to dating violence.

Rejection sensitivity and adolescent dating violence

The need to belong is universal across all stages of development [38]. When this need for inclusion is unmet through family or peer mistreatment, rejection can lead to social withdrawal, loneliness, and depression [39]. To explain the connection between rejection in important relationships and the social–cognitive difficulties that often follow, Downey et al. [40] introduced the concept of rejection sensitivity, defined as "the disposition to anxiously or angrily expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection" [40].

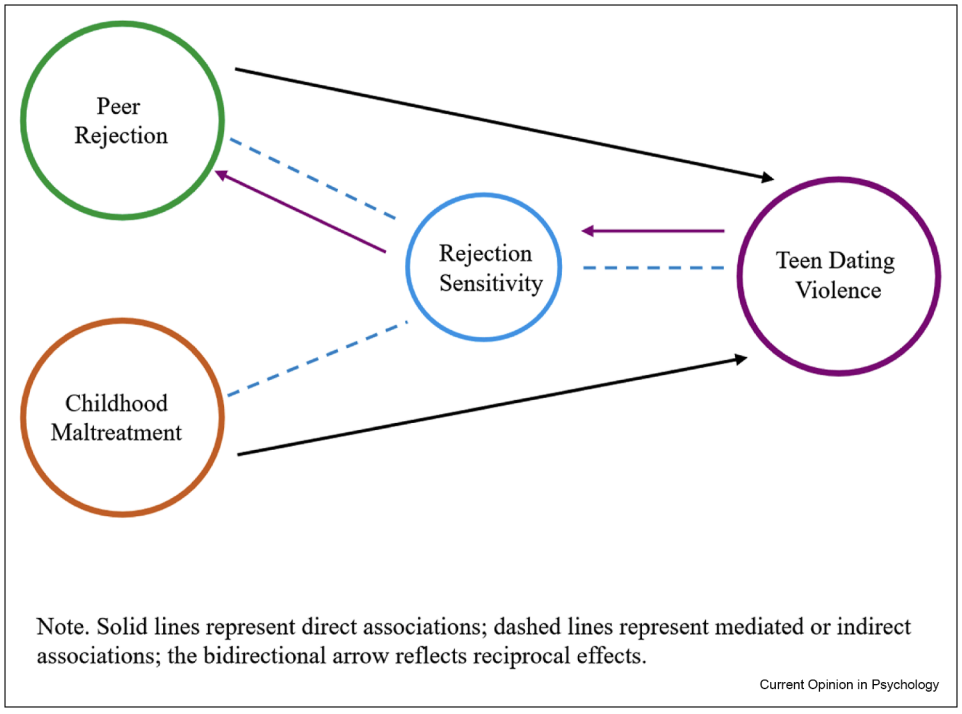
Drawing from attachment, social–cognitive, and interpersonal theories, the rejection sensitivity model posits that this tendency develops when children's emotional needs are repeatedly met with rejection by caregivers or other significant figures [41]. Everyone experiences rejection to some degree, but individuals high in rejection sensitivity differ in their interpretation of social cues and in the intensity of their emotional and behavioral responses [41]. Rejection sensitivity can be activated by parents [42] and peers [43] and is heightened among adolescents who also perceive low parental acceptance [44].

As a result of these heightened expectations and hypervigilance, adolescents come to anticipate rejection in social interactions and may overreact to ambiguous cues of exclusion. Such maladaptive strategies can undermine their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships, as well as their capacity to benefit from positive social experiences [45]. Over time, these patterns contribute to increased vulnerability to internalizing problems and to the development of aggression and violence in adolescent romantic relationships.

A growing body of research links rejection sensitivity to aggression and victimization [46,47]. For example, Ayduk et al. [48] found that individuals high in rejection sensitivity displayed greater aggression toward perceived rejectors than those low in rejection sensitivity (see also [46]). Similarly, Erozkan [49] found that among late adolescents, rejection sensitivity was positively associated with multiple forms of childhood trauma, including physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. A recent meta-analysis further confirmed that heightened rejection sensitivity was positively associated with both aggression perpetration and victimization across interpersonal contexts [46]. These dynamics may be especially pronounced within romantic relationships where perceived threats of rejection are most salient. Accordingly, rejection sensitivity may function as a key mechanism linking childhood maltreatment and peer rejection to adolescent dating violence.

Building on evidence that rejection sensitivity mediates these early relational risks, researchers have sought to clarify how it contributes to the emergence and maintenance of dating violence. One explanation, grounded in attachment theory, proposes that youth from abusive homes may seek romantic relationships to obtain the acceptance and security missing from their caregivers [3], and they do so before they are developmentally or emotionally ready for such intimacy [3]. This urgency to form romantic attachments can lead rejection-sensitive

Figure 1



Proposed mechanism linking early adversity to adolescent dating violence.

youth to overvalue partners who offer attention or rapid commitment [41], increasing their susceptibility to coercive dynamics and making them more likely to remain in abusive relationships due to their heightened need for acceptance and connection [11]. Empirical support for these processes is mixed. Brendgen et al. [50] found that rejection sensitivity mediated the association between parent-to-child aggression and dating violence in a longitudinal sample, although this effect was observed only among boys and did not differentiate between perpetration and victimization. In contrast, Volz and Kerig [11] found rejection sensitivity significantly predicted dating violence perpetration but not victimization. As Downey et al. [51] argued, inconsistencies like these may stem from the fact that perceived rejection can elicit anger and aggressive responses in some individuals, while prompting withdrawal or appeasement in others.

Conclusion

Adolescent dating violence emerges from a complex interplay of early relational experiences that model and reinforce patterns of control and aggression. Childhood maltreatment can distort attachment security and normalize coercion as a means of regulating closeness, while peer rejection compounds these vulnerabilities by undermining belonging and reinforcing hostile social expectations (see Figure 1). These experiences can foster heightened rejection sensitivity. Viewed developmentally, adolescent dating violence reflects relational patterns rooted in early invalidating experiences rather than in isolated individual behavior. Effective preventive efforts must therefore address the family and peer systems that contribute to its emergence.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During manuscript preparation, the authors used ChatGPT to improve writing clarity and verify references. The authors take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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Data availability
No data were used for the research described in the article.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

1. * Sardinha et al. (2024) examined the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among adolescent girls across regions and countries, revealing substantial global variability. The study identified key country-level factors such as economic conditions and cultural norms that influence IPV rates.

4. ** Paradis et al. (2024) used latent class analysis to identify distinct patterns of adolescent dating violence and their associations with daily conflict management. Adolescents belonging to profiles characterized by higher levels of violence reported more frequent conflicts and poorer conflict resolution strategies.

18. * Lee et al. (2024) conducted a prospective cohort study in Burkina Faso examining the mental health consequences of sexual and peer victimization among adolescents. The findings revealed that both forms of victimization were strongly associated with adverse mental health outcomes, underscoring that peer victimization is a universal concern transcending cultural boundaries.

19. ** Piolanti et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review examining the long-term consequences of teen dating violence (TDV). The review found that adolescents who experience TDV are at increased risk for later intimate partner violence, poor mental health, and engagement in high-risk behaviour such as substance use. Notably, the review identified gender differences, with females reporting TDV showing a heightened vulnerability to adverse outcomes compared to males.

21. * Shah et al. (2024) examined how adolescent peer experiences predict well-being in young adulthood. Their findings highlight that both self-perceived social acceptance in early adolescence and the quality of close friendships in late adolescence uniquely contribute to later well-being.

22. * Gorla et al. (2024) examined adolescents' relationships with parents and romantic partners across eight countries to explore cultural and contextual influences on relational dynamics. They found both universal and culture-specific patterns, revealing that supportive parent–adolescent relationships were consistently associated with healthier and more positive romantic relationships.

36. ** Paradis et al. (2024) used latent class analysis to identify distinct patterns of adolescent dating violence and their associations with daily conflict management. Adolescents belonging to profiles characterized by higher levels of violence reported more frequent conflicts and poorer conflict resolution strategies.