

Original article

Aggression in Adolescent Dating Relationships: Prevalence, Justification, and Health Consequences

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Abstract

Purpose: To assess the prevalence of verbally and physically aggressive behaviors in dating relationships in a sample of Spanish adolescents.

Methods: Cross-sectional self-report data were obtained with The Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (MCTS) from a representative sample of 2416 adolescents and young adults of both genders, between ages of 16 and 20 years.

Results: The results showed that a significantly higher percentage of women engaged in verbal aggression (95.3% vs. 92.8%), whereas the males engaged in more severe physical aggression (4.6% vs. 2.0%) and produced worse consequences for their female partners’ health (especially slight cuts/slight bruises, broken nose, black eye, broken bone and requiring medical treatment/hospitalization). Justification for aggression also revealed differential results. Whereas women said they attacked their partners while under the influence of emotional states of intense anger (22.4% vs. 13.9%), the males said they did so in response to aggression received (13.0% vs. 6.6%). The analysis of the group differences as a function of age showed that verbal aggression was very high and was not different across the age groups. In contrast, physical aggression decreased significantly across the age groups, but health consequences became more severe with age (e.g., broken nose, black eye, broken bone, went from 1% at 16 years to 4.5% at 20 years of age).

Conclusions: These differential tendencies of aggression typology for men and women help clinicians to develop preventive interventions for every age, with the aim of diminishing their continuity in future relationships. © 2007 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords:

Verbal aggression; Physical aggression; Dating relationships; Dating violence; Justification of aggression; Health consequences of dating aggression

Dating relationships generally start in adolescence, a transitional developmental stage in which a large amount of affective and/or bodily changes occur. During adolescence, violent behavior can become a habitual way of relating to others, and aggressive and violent behavior can affect the

way that subsequent personal and emotional relationships are established [1,2].

The documentation of violent behaviors in dating relationships among young people has been one of the focal points of many investigators because such aggression often is a precursor to aggression in later, more stable relationships. Many studies have shown that violence usually starts in younger couples [3,4], where both verbal and physical aggression are part of the interpersonal relations [5–8]. Unfortunately, in many cases, these behaviors are considered a “normal” practice within the couple [9].

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Most of the studies carried out to date are from American samples and generally show that psychological aggression (e.g., verbal attacks, hostile attitudes) occurs frequently in adolescent populations. More specifically, as many as 90% of men and women acknowledged having engaged in psychological aggression against their intimate partners [9–12]. Likewise, many studies show that the above data are especially relevant to understand the phenomenon of violence in dating relationships of young couples because these studies have demonstrated that psychological aggression is usually closely related to physical aggression, becoming a very important predictor of subsequent physical abuse [13–17].

Considering the absence of similar studies in the Spanish population, the goal of this study was to determine the prevalence of aggression in dating relationships of a representative sample of adolescents from the Community of Madrid (Spain), and to describe in detail the typology of violent acts of a verbal and physical nature, the gender and age differences, and the consequences of such aggression for health.

Methods

Subjects

The sample was obtained from a pool of 36 high schools from different areas of the Community of Madrid. Of those, 20 accepted to participate in the present study. In the final sample, we assessed adolescents and young adults from all social conditions, with the commitment of applying a prevention program for dating aggression by the research team once the study was completed.

All of the students who participated in the investigation were carrying out studies of: (a) 4th course of compulsory secondary education, (b) the last 2 years of high school, and (c) professional training or formative modules (this modality is taken on by a lesser number of students within the teaching offerings of the high schools, as these studies are oriented toward the working world).

Of those schools that accepted to participate, human subjects' approval was obtained, asking for permission from the school administration after informing the administration of the objectives of the study, and the same was done with the Association of Student's Parents (APA). Once permission was granted, the students in the classes completed the assessment. Completion of the assessment was voluntary and confidential, with less than 1% of the students refusing to fill out the questionnaire.

As a function of the study goals, the inclusion criteria included: (a) persons between 16- and 20-years-old and, (b) being currently in a heterosexual dating relationship. The exclusion criteria was: being married.

The final sample was composed of a total of 2416 adolescents and youths of both genders, between 16- and 20-years-old.

Measures and variables

For this study, a specific assessment instrument with two different formats was elaborated:

1. A series of questions with various response possibilities that collected relevant information concerning:
 - Descriptive aspects of the sample (age, sex, nationality, educational center, and sexual orientation);
 - Aspects about the dating relationship (e.g., age of the first relationship, number of boyfriends/girlfriends, number of previous break-ups, duration of the relationships, frequency with which the couple see each other, and perception of the current relationship's future);
 - The typology of injuries derived from physical violence experienced in the dating relationships; and
 - The motives that justify aggression. In this case, an item was elaborated that assessed the reasons alleged by the youths to justify having attacked their partner. Its content is: "Why did you grab, push, slap, kick, hit . . . your partner?" and it has six response options: (a) being jealous, (b) being furious and hitting first, (c) hitting to defend oneself from a received aggression, (d) joking or playing, (e) being in the midst of an argument, and (f) being generally nervous.

2. The Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (MCTS) [18]:

This is a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) [19], validated in adolescent population by Cascardi et al [11], supporting two-factor models for males and females: psychological and physical aggression. It is made up of 18 items, with bidirectional questions (aggressor/victim), and a 5-point Likert-type response format, with frequencies ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). It assesses the way that individuals solve conflicts in the course of an argument with their actual partner. Specifically, it measures physical aggression and verbal aggression.

For the Spanish adaptation of the M-CTS in adolescents and young adults, the following steps were followed: (a) translation into Spanish of the original scale and backwards translation into English by experts in research topics of aggression; and (b) administration of the translated scale to a sample of 110 high school students from the Community of Madrid, in order to detect items that did not work and possible comprehension difficulties due to inadequate translation or expression of the items. The variables analyzed in this study are defined as follows:

1. Verbal aggression. Critical comments (e.g., threats, insults) or intentional silences (e.g., refusal to talk about some topic). Verbal aggression was comprised of the following behaviors: (a) insulting or cursing, (b) refusing to talk about some topic, (c) leaving

angrily, (d) saying something to upset or annoy the partner, and (e) threats of physical aggression.

2. Physical aggression. Physical aggression was divided into minor and severe aggression. Minor physical aggression was defined as throwing an object at the partner; physically holding down the partner; slapping, shoving/grabbing; hitting/kicking. Severe physical aggression was defined as trying to choke, beat up, or threaten with a knife/weapon.
3. Justification of aggression. If a respondent engaged in physical aggression, he/she was asked to indicate the reasons for engaging in the aggression. Those reasons are listed above in the description of this variable.
4. Health consequences. Respondents were asked to indicate the consequences of the physical aggression as follows: (a) slight cuts or bruises; (b) severe cuts and bruises; (c) broken nose, black eye, or broken bones; and (d) to have required medical attention or hospitalization.
5. The statistical analyses used to process the data in this paper were descriptive statistics and χ^2 , and significance level was set at .05. The statistical package used to conduct the analyses was the SPSS, v.13.

Results

Descriptive characteristics of the sample

The initial sample was made of 2890 adolescents who completed the assessment instrument. When the subjects were excluded who did not meet the criteria for the study (474 adolescents), the final sample was made up of a total of 2416 adolescents of both sexes (58.6% women and 41.4% men) of between the ages of 16- and 20-years-old, mean age 17.0 years (SD = 1.13). Of the entire sample, the most represented group was that of youths between 16 and 17 years of age, configuring 70.8% of the total sample.

The sample came from 20 public and private high schools from the Community of Madrid (Spain). Regarding the level of studies, 37.4% of the adolescents were in the 4th course of compulsory secondary education, 24% were studying professional training or formative modules, and 38.3% were studying the last 2 years of high school.

Their mean age at the time of their first dating relationship was around 13.4 years, with the women's age being significantly higher than the men's when they started to date [13.59 vs. 13.11, for men and women, respectively, $t(2132) = 5.32$, $p < .000$], and the men stated that they had had a higher number of dating relationships in comparison to the women [3.59 vs. 3.12, $t(2389) = 3.12$, $p < .001$].

Concerning the duration of these relationships, the mean was 10.4 months (SD = 11.27), with the women maintaining their steady dating relationships for longer periods of time [12.09 vs. 7.93, for women and men, respectively, $t(2121) = 9.03$, $p < .000$].

Table 1

Type of current relationship, frequency of contact, and prediction of the future of the relationship (N = 2416)

	% Women (N = 1416)	% Men (N = 1000)	χ^2
Type of current relationship			
New	14.3	24.1	21.24*
Casual	15.4	15.1	
Stable	32.4	33.1	
Serious	32.9	22.6	
Formal engagement	.7	1.2	
Contact frequency			
Less than once a month	3.2	2.2	n.s.
Once a month	3.3	2.8	
Once every two weeks	3.5	2.2	
Once a week	4.9	6.8	
Several times a week	34.2	32.9	
Every day	41.3	39.8	
More than once a day	9.7	13.4	
Future of the current relationship			
We will get married	24.1	15.1	18.43*
We will stay together	62.4	68.9	
I will break it off	11.2	9.9	
My partner will break it off	2.4	6.1	

n.s. = Not significant.

* $p < .000$.

At the time of this study, more than one half of the female sample had a steady dating relationship, whereas approximately 38% of males reported that they were in a steady dating relationship. The most relevant data of these relations are displayed in Table 1.

Of the whole sample, approximately 30% of the youths of both genders classified their current relationship as stable and/or serious. Around 32% usually saw their partner several times a week and/or every day and almost 65% foresaw a continuity of the relationship in the near future (as can be observed, the percentage of men was higher than that of the women).

Aggression typology as a function of sex

Of the two types of aggression herein considered, verbal aggression was the most prevalent in the sample of adolescents under study, being reported much more frequently than physical aggression.

When focusing on the analysis of the responses of the adolescents who admitted having attacked their partners (Table 2), it can be observed that all the forms of verbal aggression were extensively used by more than 90% of the youths of both sexes. The majority of the women and men used this kind of behaviors to deal with interpersonal conflicts with their partners. Thus, 82.3% of the women admitted that they often said something to upset their boyfriends and 66.9% of the men also acknowledged that they often refused to speak, to annoy their girlfriends.

Regarding physical aggression, in comparison with verbal aggression, the percentages of aggressors was consider-

Table 2
Aggression typology as a function of sex (aggressors' and victims' report)

	Aggressors		Victims	
	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)
Verbal aggression				
Insulted/Swore	61.4	49.4***	50.1	51.8
Refused to talk	72.0	66.9***	71.0	72.3
Going off angrily	66.5	63.0*	51.1	45.2***
Did/Said something to spite	82.3	76.3***	79.9	73.7***
Threatened to hit/throw at partner	17.1	11.9***	15.2	20.8***
Any verbal aggression	95.3	92.8***	93.7	92.3
Physical aggression				
Mild physical aggression				
Holding down	21.0	21.2	21.3	18.3
Throwing an object	8.9	5.7***	7.2	8.0
Hitting/kicking	13.4	5.3***	16.4	9.8***
Shoving/grabbing	22.5	11.9***	17.9	12.7**
Slapping	12.4	3.1***	4.5	10.9***
Severe Physical Aggression				
Trying to choke/strangle	.8	2.0***	.6	1.9***
Beating up	.5	1.1	.3	1.4***
Threatening with a knife/weapon	.7	1.5*	.6	1.4*
Any physical aggression (referring to all forms of physical aggression)	41.9	31.7***	37.4	31.3***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

ably lower, with minor physical aggression being the most common. Of all the kinds of minor physical aggression analyzed, around 18% of the adolescents stated they had grabbed, hit, or kicked and/or shoved their partner in their current or past relationships.

Similar to the case of verbal aggression, a significantly higher percentage of women than men admitted attacking or having attacked their boyfriends, especially in the case of shoving or grabbing, and in the case of slapping, the women's percentage was four times as high as the men's.

The most severe acts were practically non-existent and their presence did not exceed 2.0% in the sample studied. In this case, the results revealed that this kind of violent behavior was emitted more often by men, as the percentage of male aggressors was twice that of the women, especially in the cases of trying to choke or strangle and using weapons to threaten the partner.

Table 2 also displays the data of the adolescents who admitted being the victim of aggression by their partner. It was observed that the percentage of women who stated they were victims of verbal and physical violence by their partners was significantly higher than that of the men in four of the behaviors measured.

Concretely, they said that their boyfriends had said something to annoy them, had tried to hit/kick them, and had shoved or grabbed them. In the opposite direction, in

five of the violent acts analyzed, the percentage of male victims of aggression was significantly higher: these men said their girlfriends had threatened to attack them and had slapped them. Moreover, these male victims also said that their girlfriends had tried to choke them, had beaten them up, and had threatened them with weapons.

Sex differences were also observed in the analysis of the motives that led these youths to attack their partners (Table 3). A significantly higher percentage of women than men said that they had initiated the attack on their partners because they were furious with them, whereas the men stated that they had attacked their girlfriends in response to the aggression initiated by them.

It is also very noteworthy that, although the differences are not statistically significant, a very high percentage of young men and women—more than 36% of the total sample—justified their violent acts within a playful or joking context.

Lastly, with regard to the health consequences of aggression (Table 3), the data are conclusive. The percentage of men who were unharmed by violent acts within the couple was higher than that of the women. The women suffered more injuries from the violent acts than the men. Specifically, around 17% of the female sample acknowledged having had slight cuts or bruises from the aggressions received from their boyfriends and around 3% reported having had a broken nose, a black eyes, or a broken bone.

Aggression typology as a function of age

The analysis of the prevalence of verbal and physical aggression over the age ranges showed two different and notable tendencies (Table 4). Thus, whereas the percentage of youths who physically assaulted their partners dropped among individuals between 16 and 20 years, verbal aggression was very prevalent and relatively stable in this sample (93–95%). The percentage of individuals who were verbally aggressive did not differ statistically across the age groups.

Table 3
Motives and consequences of physical aggression

	Sex	
	Women (%)	Men (%)
Motives of physical aggression		
I was jealous	24.0	22.2
I was furious and I attacked first	22.4	13.9*
My partner attacked me first and I responded	6.6	13.0*
We were playing/joking	38.0	34.0
We were arguing	12.2	6.6
I was nervous	8.9	8.5
Consequences of physical aggression		
Slight cuts/slight bruises	17.0	9.5***
Severe cuts/severe bruises	1.9	.4
Broken nose, black eye, broken bone	3.0	.4**
Requiring medical treatment/hospitalization	2.3	2.0

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Prevalence of verbal and physical aggression and consequences of physical aggression as a function of age

	Age (years) %					χ^2
	16	17	18	19	20	
Prevalence of verbal and physical aggression						
Verbal aggression	93.8	93.9	95.2	95.7	94.9	n.s.
Physical aggression	33.6	42.3	38.6	41.8	32.3	16.27*
Consequences of physical aggression						
Slight cuts/bruises	18.2	13.7	15.5	11.6	12.4	n.s.
Severe cuts/bruises	0.5	0	5.2	2.9	3.6	14.56*
Broken bone/black eye	1.0	2.2	1.9	2.2	4.5	n.s.
Hospitalization	2.0	2.2	1.9	2.2	2.7	n.s.
Any severe consequences	3.5	4.4	9.0	7.3	10.8	41.22*

n.s. = Not significant.

* $p < .001$.

The results of the analysis of the motives alleged by the youths to justify attacks on their partners also revealed the existence of interesting and significant age differences. The most frequent motives at the age of 16 years were joking or playing, or jealousy (alleged by 33.8% and 15.8% of the sample, for playing/joking and jealousy, respectively) but over the next 4 years, such justifications were less frequent, especially playing/joking [$\chi^2(1) = 17.91$, $p < .001$]. An opposite tendency was observed with other justifications and motives, which, at the age of 16, were not highly represented in the sample but, in later years, were much more prevalent. Such was the case of emotional states; at the age of 20, between 20% and 35% of the youths stated that their aggressive acts toward their partners were carried out within a context of over-excitement, either because they were furious at them [27.6%; $\chi^2(1) = 15.12$, $p < .00$] or because they were generally nervous [15.8%; $\chi^2(1) = 9.27$, $p < .05$].

Lastly, important differences were also found in regard to the health consequences of aggression when comparing the age groups (Table 4). The percentage of physical aggression diminished with age and the consequences on health became worse across the age groups. Whereas the percentage of victims who suffered slight cuts or bruises tended to decrease with age (by practically 6 points), the percentages referring to other more severe consequences clearly and significantly increased, becoming four times higher in the case of broken bones at the age of 20, though, of these motives, only severe cuts/bruises was significant. When considering together the three kinds of severe consequences for health across age groups, we found a significant increase, indicating that the percentage of youths who suffered severe health problems as a consequence of aggression rose from 3.5% at the age of 16 to 10.8% at the age of 20. Additionally, a trend analysis was performed with a

polynomial contrast, and the results showed a significant linear trend that increased through age groups ($p = .022$).

Discussion

This study, like similar research in the United States, showed that physical aggression is present in Spanish adolescents' dating relationships. Approximately 90% of the adolescents surveyed admitted having attacked their partners verbally, and approximately 40% said that they engaged in physically aggressive behaviors against their partners. Such percentages of physical aggression are higher than those obtained with American samples [8,20,21], and higher than the one found in the only work carried out recently in Spain [13]. Our results show that verbal aggression is more habitual than physical aggression in adolescents' dating relationships, confirming the data found in similar samples [6,11,22,23].

The importance of the data becomes clearer when taking into account that 32% of the sample considers that their current dating relationship is stable/serious despite acknowledging at the same time the presence of violent behaviors within the relationship [11,20,23–25], which indicates the acceptance of aggression as a normalized and "integrated" behavioral pattern within young people's emotional relationships [9,13,25,26].

When analyzing the gender differences found, the results point in a different direction from many previous studies. In our sample, the percentage of women who verbally attacked and carried out minor physical aggressions in their relationships was higher than the percentage of men. Only in the case of severe physical aggression did this tendency reverse, despite the fact that, in this case, the men also acknowledged being mostly the victims of the same type of aggression by their female partners. This reveals the importance of social desirability biases in the responses to the questionnaires in this kind of population because such responses may be mediated by social or personal acceptance of the participants' own behavior, leading them to intentionally minimize or exaggerate their responses [27,28]. This differential gender tendency has not been observed in some works with similar populations [9,13,29,30], and other works have reported a more notable presence of female aggressors in adolescence and at the beginning of adulthood [12,31–33].

In our study, these data are completed with two variables that offer interesting lines of analysis. Firstly, when analyzing the motives alleged by the group of aggressors, that is, the context in which the aggression occurred, the results indicate that aggressive behaviors, in the case of the men, are triggered in response to received aggression (self-defense) whereas, in the case of women, they are usually set off in emotional moments of intense anger or fury [25,35]. Secondly, when including the data from the appraisal of the consequences of aggression, the analysis suggests that, despite the fact that the aggressive males' representation is

small and that the alleged motives seem to be related to self-defense, the health consequences were much more severe and negative for women [25,29,35–37]. This is particularly related to the fact that, although in lower percentages, the emission of severe physical aggression (e.g., trying to choke) is more prevalent in the male sex.

Focusing on the results obtained from the analysis of the various ages under study, we observe that the tendencies are different depending on the aggression typology. Thus, whereas the percentage of youths who acknowledged attacking their partners verbally increased with age (reaching 95% at the age of 20), the percentage of young people who admitted using physical aggression in their relationships decreased, dropping at the age of 20. Despite the decrease in the prevalence of physical aggression, when analyzing the consequences of aggression, the more severe consequences also increase with age, doubling in the case of severe cuts or bruises, and with the a fourfold increase of the percentage of youths who admitted having broken their partner's bones.

Lastly, it also seems very noteworthy that a high percentage of the physical aggression occurred in the context of joking or playing. More than 30% of the adolescents stated that their aggression occurred in a context of joking or playing, and this was the most frequent motive to justify aggression at all ages, with no sex differences. The importance of this fact is that adolescents very probably perceive certain aggressive violent behaviors (e.g., shoving, provoking, threatening) as a normalized and acceptable interactive style of solving conflicts that crop up within the relationship, and which maintain the other member's attention and interest [38,39]. These findings exemplify the importance of and need for partner aggression to be approached from an idiographic or situational perspective, to gain an understanding of the context in which the "aggression" occurs, as was pointed out by Fritz [40], showing that situational and/or contextual factors are important in understanding the occurrence of partner aggression. In addition, these results show the need for more sensitive measures of partner aggression. They also demonstrate the need for additional inquiries to be made regarding the context, meaning, and perceived motivation of aggression to separate joking aggression from "true" aggression. Because very little is known about "aggression" that occurs in contexts of joking or playing around, additional studies focused on this topic need to be conducted. In addition, future research is needed to further delineate the differences between joking aggression and "true" aggression.

Despite this, when analyzing the tendencies of the motives alleged by the youths of different ages, it can be observed that, as they grow older, the percentage of aggressors who admit that their aggression is triggered as a game or because of jealousy tends to decrease, whereas the percentage of aggressors who say they are aggressive due to emotional motives increases notably, especially when they are furious, nervous, or in the midst of an argument.

These differential tendencies of aggression typology, along with the disparate patterns of men and women, suggest an interesting line of research, not only of the presence of aggressive behaviors in dating relationships from early ages, but also their continuity in future relationships. These tendencies observed may extend research and orient it toward a better, more preventive and interventional approach to aggression.

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