

# PRE-TEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DATING AND TEEN DATING VIOLENCE:

## A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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(Under the Direction of Shari E. Miller)

### ABSTRACT

Teen dating violence is prevalent, and as youth continue to access technology more frequently and at an earlier age, adolescents become increasingly vulnerable to consequences associated with dating violence. The purpose of this study is to examine pre-teen students' perceptions of teen dating violence and digital violence, and their experiences of pressures to date. Using a qualitative study design and constant comparative thematic analysis, the study revealed two overarching constructs as well as 13 themes. First, pre-teen students exhibited ambivalence towards dating. Second, pre-teen students in this sample perceived dating as taboo. The 13 themes identified in the study were: (a) too young to date, (b) dating is frowned upon, (c) some are ok with it and some are not, (d) dating but not really dating, (e) secrets, (f) definitions of dating, (g) guidelines for dating, (h) good dating behaviors, (i) reasons to date, (j) pressures within dating, (k) trust and mistrust, (l) dating conflict, and (m) bystander helper. Findings from this study suggest there may be a pre-dating stage in the developmental trajectory, which by definition precedes dating, but captures some attitudes and behaviors that are linked to ideas of dating. Implications and recommendations for policy, intervention, and further research are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Teen dating violence, Digital dating violence, Pre-teen perceptions,  
Pressure to date, Parent conversations

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Framing the Context**

Teens and pre-teens face an amalgam of stress-causing issues. Some of these include rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional changes; changing relationships with peers and family members; demands at school; dating and friendships; pressure to look a certain way; pressure to experiment with drugs and sex; family and peer conflict; and crammed schedules (McNeely & Blanchard, 2010). Many of these challenges involve increasing exposure to others within the community and at school, and an increased focus on the perception of others (Moksnes, Espnes, & Haugan, 2014). Among these sources of stress is teen dating violence (TDV), a pervasive problem experienced by as many as 45% of adolescents in the United States (Gray & Foshee, 1997). TDV contributes to serious health and safety consequences for youth (Ball, Kerig, & Rosenbluth, 2009). Additionally, early dating relationships tend to lead to the formation of attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors that adolescents will practice throughout their lives (Bogeanu, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to examine pre-teen students' perceptions of TDV and digital violence, and their experiences of pressures to date. The following sections discuss definitions of TDV, risk factors, prevalence, and consequences of TDV identified in the extant literature. A framework describing the context of the study leads into a description of gaps in the literature related to this topic. This chapter concludes with research objectives, a brief description of the methodology used for the study, and the significance of the study.

### **Definitions of TDV**

According to the Stomp Out Bullying website ([stompoutbullying.org](http://stompoutbullying.org)), TDV is a form of bullying that affects 10% of teen couples. Similar to bullying, TDV often involves one partner gaining and maintaining power and control over the other person. TDV includes patterns of actual or threatened acts of physical, sexual, financial, verbal and/or emotional abuse; sexual and reproductive coercion; social sabotage; and sexual harassment (Georgia Commission on Family Violence, 2015). According to Mulford and Blachman-Demner (2013), teen dating violence captures a range of abusive behaviors experienced by teens in past or present romantic or dating relationships. The same authors added stalking to the list of TDV behaviors and state that TDV may be experienced in person or via technology (Mulford & Blachman-Demner, 2013). For the purposes of this study, teen dating violence is defined as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or threats towards a dating partner, which can include acts in person or through technology (Leen et al., 2013).

### **Risk Factors Associated with TDV**

A variety of factors influence the incidence of partner violence. Intimate partner violence (IPV) between adults has been the focus of empirical studies for many years. There are substantial differences between adult and adolescent intimate relationships (Caselman, Dubriwny, & Curzon, 2014). Adolescents begin dating behaviors around age 10 (Friedlander, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2007), and dating becomes more prevalent at approximately age 12 (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2008). Dating is not an inherently risky behavior, however young adolescents involved in dating behaviors may be particularly vulnerable to TDV because they often date to satisfy a need for closeness and belonging, and to increase their sense of self-worth (Ball et al., 2009). Young teens tend to demonstrate a high expectation for intimacy,

coupled with insecurity, fear of rejection, poor communication and problem solving skills, and immature coping skills (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). These factors can result in conflict, frustration, jealousy, and coerciveness (Ball et al., 2009). Each of these conditions can potentially contribute to the incidence of TDV.

### **Pressure to Date**

In addition to adolescents' limited experience with dating, they are influenced by a variety of external pressures. Studies have demonstrated TDV may be a direct result of young adolescents feeling pressured to date (Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010). Evidence has suggested dating relationships have been initiated by about 25% of 12 year olds (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). If dating occurs before adolescents are emotionally ready, they may experience conflict they are not prepared to handle (Orpinas, Hsieh, Song, Holland, & Nahapetyan, 2013b).

### **Peer Pressure**

The peer group is an important social context that supports the emergence of dating relationships, and the acceptance of dating behaviors (Friedlander et al., 2007). One concern noted by Friedlander and colleagues is children who associate with older youth may be encouraged to date at an earlier age.

Literature has supported that adolescents not only experience pressures to begin dating, but also experience peer pressure to engage in TDV and to remain in violent relationships (Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010). With the added emphasis on a sense of belonging in peer groups, adolescents may embrace early deleterious dating behaviors, and abusive dating behaviors may be more widely accepted by the teen and pre-teen population. Pre-teens are in a unique position because they have not had experiences with dating and therefore may consider deleterious

behaviors to be normal or desired (Ellis, Chung-Hall, & Dumas, 2013), and teens may feel pressure to stay in abusive relationships (Noonan & Charles, 2009).

### **Parenting Influences**

Adolescents are influenced not only by their peers, but also their families, (Orpinas, Murray, & Kelder, 1999). Parenting can be considered either a protective factor (Miller, Gorman-Smith, Sullivan, Orpinas, & Simon, 2009) or a risk factor (Niolon, Kuperminc, & Allen, 2015) for TDV, depending upon the nature of the relationship and the influence of the parent. TDV is related to parental beliefs and attitudes about violence, as well as autonomy between the child and the parent (Miller et al., 2009; Niolon, Kuperminc, et al., 2015; Niolon et al., 2016).

### **Characteristics of Teens At-Risk for TDV**

In addition to the influences of peer pressure to date and relationships with parents, research indicates a variety of risk factors associated violent dating behaviors among teens. These risk factors are violence at home, previous experiences with violence, peer experiences with violence, low self-esteem, alcohol use (boys) and depression (Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004; Friedlander et al., 2007; Noonan & Charles, 2009). Specifically, children who engage in violence among their peers and have experienced violence at home are more vulnerable to TDV.

In summary, there are a variety of influences contributing to the incidence of TDV, including demographics, risk factors, peer influences, and parenting influences.

### **Prevalence of TDV**

As outlined in the introduction, teen dating violence is prevalent in the United States, yet statistics representing the prevalence of TDV vary in the extant literature (Wincentak, Connolly, & Card, 2016).

## **General and Conflicting Statistics**

“TDV is extremely common but rarely discussed” (Laura's House, 2015), but the actual prevalence of TDV is unclear. While teenagers are at higher risk of violence between romantic partners than adults (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011), incidents of adolescent dating violence are typically underreported (Ely, 2004) and the reported prevalence has varied from study to study. Narrow reports indicated 10-20% of teens experience TDV, while broad measures reported 50-60% of teens experience TDV (Bonomi et al., 2012; Calaguas, 2011; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; Cyr, McDuff, & Wright, 2006).

According to Noonan and Charles (2009), rates of IPV peak in adolescence through young adulthood. A recent study indicated as many as 29% of adolescents in the United States reported being victims of some sort of dating aggression (Niolon, Kuperminc, et al., 2015). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), one in five teens is abused while dating. Another source suggested one in four teenagers report some form of abuse by a dating partner, and an additional study estimated that 20-40% of high school students have experienced some form of dating violence (Ball et al., 2009; Caselman et al., 2014; Noonan & Charles, 2009).

In response to the growing level of concern about TDV, LoveIsRespect.org was launched in February 2007 as a project of the National Domestic Violence Hotline with a supporting grant from Liz Claiborne, Inc. This hotline was the first 24-hour resource for teens experiencing dating violence and abuse, and is the only teen helpline serving all of the United States. This website reported that as many as 33% of students experience dating violence (LoveIsRespect.org, n.d.). Despite the suggested prevalence, only 6% of teens reported dating violence to authority figures (Molidor, Tolman, & Kober, 2000).



Some studies have demonstrated girls were as likely as boys to report physical aggression towards their dating partners, and girls reported perpetration of higher incidents of moderate and seriously violent behaviors (Ely, 2004; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Miller et al., 2009). In another study, females were more likely to report more perpetration than males, and were less likely to report severe victimization than were males (Morey, 2002).

Some of the statistics isolate specific types of dating violence. Studies indicated estimated “prevalence rates of up to 76% for psychological violence, 20% to 53% for physical violence, and 3% to 13% for sexual violence.” (Helms, Sullivan, Corona, & Taylor, 2013, p. 3085). O’Leary, Slep, Avery-Leaf, and Cascardi (2008) reported that 85% of boys and 92% of girls engaged in psychological aggression against their partner in their current dating relationships, and over 85% of each reported they were a victim of the same. Cyr et al. (2006) found there was often reciprocity between partners engaging in TDV. Adolescents who reported perpetrating dating violence were likely to perpetrate violence with the same partner again (Noonan & Charles, 2009), indicating adolescents tend to continue to stay in relationships despite violent behaviors of their partners, thus leading to more mental and physical injuries.

## **Populations**

“Dating violence affects teenagers of every race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Caselman et al., 2014, p. 32). Studies have demonstrated discrepancies in the prevalence of TDV among females and males. Males tend to be more likely to report physical dating violence victimization, while females are more likely to report sexual and emotional victimization (Caselman et al., 2014), however these reports have not been consistent in the literature, and may have reflected the likelihood to report instead of the actual incidence of TDV. A variety of studies have been conducted with teens representing different ethnicities and backgrounds,

however it is clear that TDV is pervasive across a wide range of ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Baker & Helm, 2010; Fredland et al., 2005; Prospero, 2006; Teitleman, Tennille, Bohinski, Jemmott, & Jemmott, 2013).

### **Digital Dating Violence**

Though many studies examined only physical dating violence among teens, it is clear from the research that TDV also includes other forms of violence (Goldman, Mulford, & Blachman-Demner, 2015). With the advances in technology in the last few decades, there has been a major shift in the ways adolescents communicate and socialize (Alvarez, 2012). Cybertools (i.e. smart phones, Wi-Fi, IPADs, and Tablets) are the new venue and mechanisms for many dating behaviors among adolescents. Cyberbullying that manifests in dating relationships can be referred to as digital dating violence (DDV). Korchmaros, Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Boyd, and Lenhart (2013) described DDV as psychological dating violence perpetrated through the use of text messaging and the internet or web-based social networking.

As the use of technology continues to increase among adolescents, recent research has begun to examine the prevalence of digital dating violence. As an example, according to Hinduja and Patchin (2011), more than one third of teens say their dating partner checked up on them as many as 30 times per day and 17% reported their partner made them afraid to respond to the partner's cell phone calls, text messages, or emails. Another source indicated that, like other forms of TDV the prevalence of DDV is under-reported (Korchmaros et al., 2013). Ely (2004) suggested perpetrators and victims of DDV do not consider their behavior as unacceptable or violent, many of the behaviors are reciprocal between partners, and the incidence goes underreported. Because of the prevalence of technology use among teens, perceptions of digital

dating behaviors (involving the use of text messaging, internet, and social networking) are included in this study.

In summary, as the research continues to evolve and technology becomes more readily available to youth it is likely the reported prevalence rates of digital dating violence may increase. With clearer definitions, continued development of effective mechanisms for understanding the nature of the issue, and awareness of the problem researchers will be better able to identify victims as well as perpetrators.

### **Consequences of TDV**

The consequences of teen dating violence extend to both perpetrators and victims, and include physical, emotional, developmental, and social outcomes. Adolescents who were victims of TDV were more likely to experience violence in future dating relationships (Orpinas, Nahapetyan, Song, McNicholas, & Reeves, 2012). Besides physical injury, some effects of dating violence are anger, lower attendance and productivity at school, shame and self-blame, depression, suicidal ideation, lower self-esteem, isolation, anxiety, startle responses, nightmares, stagnated adolescent development, and a sense of betrayal (Morey, 2002). Bogueanu (2014) described developmental and emotional consequences for victims as well as perpetrators of TDV, including, depression, eating disorders, poor decision-making, poor school performance, difficulty in creating new friendships and dating relationships, self-harm, and substance abuse. Additional consequences include dropping out of school, future sexual and non-sexual violence, risky sexual behaviors, increased rates of substance abuse, eating disorders, anxiety, depressed mood, suicidal thoughts, lower educational achievement, and poor relationships with parents (Caselman et al., 2014; Edwards & Hinsz, 2014; Ellis et al., 2013; Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b).

### **Context (Georgia)**

The area in which the study took place is a suburban county in Northeast Georgia. The county is among the top 35 most populated counties of the 159 counties in Georgia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), with a population comprised of 74% Caucasian, 11% African American, and 9% Hispanic people. Almost 15% of the residents live below the poverty line. The public school system hosts approximately 14,000 students. The current curriculum in the schools does not address sexual education until students are in middle school. Although the county is located along the most prevalent sexual trafficking corridor, (L. Blechinger, personal conversation, May 4, 2015), sexual abuse and sexualized behaviors are not topics addressed at the elementary school level.

Another area of concern for educators is the way in which discipline is managed. Stein (2011) suggested school administrators dealing with problematic behaviors should include questions about the relationship of the victim to the perpetrator to address dating relationship violence, so they can create more situation specific approaches to discipline and ensuring the safety of students. The Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) Discipline Code does not currently refer explicitly to behaviors involving dating violence. Disciplinary procedures for dating violence behaviors are often classified under bullying or sexual harassment codes, and the GADOE code does not address digital violence (M. Thompson, personal communication, March 13, 2015).

Teen dating violence is described by researchers to be an epidemic in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016), and Georgia has been listed among the states with higher rates of IPV and TDV. According to the Georgia Domestic Violence Fatality Review Project tenth Annual Report (2013), “Georgia’s percentage of teenage girls who self-

report experiencing dating violence is 16.6%, and is a larger percentage than any other of the 43 states,” examined in the CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (GCADV, 2013 p. 20).

At present, GADOE does not provide a standardized program for responding to abusive dating behaviors. Georgia law requires each local Board of Education to develop a program for preventing TDV for grades eight to 12 (GCADV, 2014). According to the superintendent, the school system in which the study was conducted does not currently utilize formal programs to prevent TDV (C. McMichael, personal communication, May 4, 2015). The anti-bullying curriculum being used does not incorporate TDV. The local school system is working to identify a sexual abuse prevention curriculum for use in the schools, however many of those examined do not include dating violence in their topics (M. Thompson, personal communication, March 13, 2015). The Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (GCADV) makes suggestions for TDV prevention curricula to be incorporated into the schools, however these are not only costly, but also time consuming in their implementation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Currently, there are no programs which address the notions of healthy versus unhealthy relationships for preteen and teenage students in the local school system.

This study is an extension of an initiative in Northeast Georgia. The local Domestic Violence Task Force (DVTF), in collaboration with the local domestic violence organization, created a sub-committee charged with addressing TDV in the community. As a result of this committee, TDV Coalition (TDVC) has been formed, creating a multidisciplinary team approach. “TDV is no longer a problem only recognized by sexual assault and domestic violence centers” (Taylor, Stein, & Burden, 2010, p. 94). The TDVC is currently seeking to identify and implement a TDV intervention curriculum for use with adolescents in local schools and civic organizations.

In summary, despite high reports of prevalence of TDV, Georgia has failed to comply with local and national recommendations to implement interventions aimed at reducing the incidence of teen dating violence. While TDV is recognized by the GCADV as an area of vulnerability for Georgia's adolescents, there is a void in policies and procedures to address this growing area of concern.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Little is known about pre-teens' perceptions of teen dating violence, dating pressures, and the effects of interventions with pre-adolescents (Cutbush, Williams, Miller, Gibbs, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2012; Miller et al., 2015). This study seeks to gain further understanding of pre-teen perceptions of teen dating violence, digital dating violence, and experiences with pressures to date. The following section includes a brief rationale for the study based on identified gaps in the literature, as well as limitations associated with empirically established interventions.

### **Gap in Knowledge**

Although the body of knowledge regarding TDV is growing, there remain gaps in current knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Pre-Teens**

According to O'Keeffe, Brockopp, and Chew (1986), teenage relationships have attracted researchers' attention since adolescence was distinguished as a developmental stage separate from childhood and adulthood. Students begin engaging in dating relationships as early as 10 years old, yet most empirically based interventions are aimed at students 12 years old and older (Simon, Miller, Gorman-Smith, Orpinas, & Sullivan, 2010; Wolfe et al., 2009). The literature in this area has described a variety of interventions with students in high school and college, however, it appears there is little research focused on pre-teen students and their perceptions of

TDV. Research assessing TDV among young adolescents is primarily limited to physical dating violence, and often does not include other aspects of TDV such as psychological dating violence or digital dating violence (Miller et al., 2009).

### **Pressure to Date**

As noted earlier in this chapter, a variety of sources influence students to begin dating. As explained by social cognitive theory, developments in behaviors among adolescents are outcomes of continuous interactions between individual factors and socio-contextual factors (Trujillo, Suarez, Lema, & Londono, 2015). Miller et al. (2009) reported the impact of relationships with parents and peers is among the most robust predictors of youth aggression, yet there is little research to demonstrate the influence of these relationship domains. Specifically, the literature does not address the relationship between students' perceptions of pressure to date or their attitudes about TDV as they are influenced by each of these relationship domains (peers and parents).

### **Digital Dating Violence**

When the dynamics of power and control (central to abusive dating relationships) are already occurring within a relationship, the use of cyber tools enhance opportunities to obtain and maintain power. When cyberbullying occurs in the context of a dating relationship, additional factors contribute to harm for the victim, including ease of access to the victim, lack of bystander intervention opportunities, and the potential for a wider audience (Slonje & Smith, 2008). There is a dearth of empirically-based research examining digital abuse within the context of TDV (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011). According to Zweig and Dank (2013), one in four dating teens was abused through text or online experiences, however Korchmaros et al. (2013) indicated the epidemiology of digital dating violence is largely unknown. After a thorough

search of the literature, they were only able to find one quantitative study examining DDV with teens (Korchmaros et al., 2013). Very few studies have examined the incidence of DDV among teens, and this researcher was unable to locate any scholarly studies addressing pre-teens' perceptions of digital dating violent behaviors. "Despite the parallel developments of online dating and cyberbullying, there has been limited research about the effects of technology on intimate partner relationships," (Alvarez, 2012, p. 1206). Specifically, there is a gap in knowledge surrounding DDV among preteens and teens.

### **Gap in Interventions**

Few states address teen dating violence specifically. Rhode Island, for example, has adopted a, "Prohibition against bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, intimidation, TDV and sexual violence" (Weisberg, 2013). The prohibition is part of their strategic plan and school safety plan, and includes definitions of each of the aforementioned items, and reporting requirements for staff, students, volunteers, and parents. Investigation procedures and disciplinary sanctions are included. Oregon has also adopted a similar policy (Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, n.d.).

As stated earlier in this chapter, TDV is prevalent and has far reaching effects, however, no interventions exist in the local school system to address the concern. The CDC supports a program titled "Delta" that provides funding for the implementation of one of four empirically based interventions. This researcher contacted the CDC and was advised the Delta program is not available in Georgia (H. Jones, personal communication, May 4, 2015). Because of reports that TDV is often reciprocal between partners (Noonan & Charles, 2009), interventions aimed at reducing and preventing TDV should not only target "victims" but also perpetrators; as a result,



models of intervention should be restorative. However, based on a review of the literature, most of the prevention interventions are primarily aimed at victimization.

Miller et al. (2009) suggested preventative efforts to reduce partner violence need to be developed and tested in early middle school years, as these behaviors are already present among a sizeable number of young teens. Intervening at a young age may be effective in altering maladaptive behaviors before they become entrenched in the teen's repertoire of coping mechanisms. Therefore, "early adolescents appear to be an appropriate, and strategic, audience for prevention efforts." (Noonan & Charles, 2009, p. 1088).

The above contributions lead to the rationale for the study. Specifically, there is a dearth of research regarding preteen students' perceptions of TDV, and the research does not outline the influence of peers and parents on pre-teen perceptions of TDV or their experiences with pressure to date. Thus, there is a need for research which informs interventions aimed at educating pre-teen students about TDV such that their perceptions of acceptable behaviors are impacted before they begin to engage in dating behaviors, which may contribute to prevention efforts. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine preteen students' perceptions towards TDV, digital dating violence, and experiences with pressure to date.

### **Research Objectives**

To explore pre-teens' perceptions of dating, teen dating violence and digital dating violence, and experiences with pressure to date, the following research questions were examined using a qualitative study design.

- What are the perceptions of teen dating violence (TDV) and digital dating violence (DDV) among preteen students?
  - How do pre-teen students define dating?

- How do pre-teen students describe healthy relationships?
- How do pre-teen students describe unhealthy relationships?
- How do pre-teen students describe digital dating behaviors?
- What is the pressure to date among this population?
  - What is the relationship between sibling group placement and perceptions of pressure to date
  - What is the relationship between gender and feelings of pressure to date?
  - What is the relationship between the gender of the closest parent and perceptions of pressure to date?
  - What is the relationship between the presence of parenting statements about dating and perceptions of pressure to date?

### **Brief Methodology**

The methods utilized in the study are presented in detail in Chapter 3. The study employs a qualitative design to address the aforementioned questions. The researcher gathered qualitative data from interviews with fifth grade students to explore perceptions of pressures to date and teen dating violence with an additional focus on digital dating behaviors. Themes were extracted from the data gathered from the interviews.

### **Significance of the Study**

Indicators of the significance of the study are woven throughout this chapter, specifically as they relate to gaps identified in the literature. Additionally, this study has the potential to lead to contributions to policy development and social work practice.

### **Potential Contributions to Policy**

Although TDV is often compared to adult domestic violence, there are differences regarding a teen's barriers to safety. In 2010, Break the Cycle, a national nonprofit agency working to end TDV issued grades for states based on their dating violence laws. Georgia, and eight other states, received an "F". Georgia has no provision for teens to file temporary protective orders against other teens. Additionally, as school administrators formulate responses to the recommendations to extend anti-bullying interventions, insight into the experiences of preteens and young adolescents has the potential to contribute to knowledge needed to build efficacious policies and programs. Options for legal recourse for adolescents in GA experiencing TDV are limited, therefore, prevention may be the best place to see and initiate change.

### **Potential Contributions to Social Work Practice**

Teen dating violence is of concern to school social workers as they seek to assist students in overcoming non-academic barriers to learning. One consequence of TDV is poor academic achievement and high school dropout (Caselman et al., 2014). This study has the potential to contribute to local efforts to ameliorate teen dating violence as informed by the interviews conducted with pre-teen students. Lastly, studies show that the use of technology empowers youth, and girls and young women tend to become more social and confident through digital technology (Alvarez, 2012), as it provides a venue for them to speak their minds, create ideal versions of themselves, and to take action when they otherwise might not. With guidance and support, youth can utilize cybertools as a positive mechanism. When students receive intervention aimed at refocusing the use of digital resources, their potential to prevent and respond to TDV has the potential to increase, thus ameliorating negative effects of TDV.

### **Chapter Summary**

Many adolescents begin dating between 10-12 years old. Young adolescents are vulnerable to different forms of TDV, including DDV. A variety of factors impact young dating relationships, including pressure among peers, parenting influence, and exposure to violence. Reports of the prevalence of TDV among adolescents are varied, and can range from 10 to 60% of teens experience TDV. Additionally, there appear to be gender differences among reports of perpetration and victimization, with girls reporting more perpetration of physical and emotional than males. Boys report fewer incidents of perpetration of physical violence but report more victimization of physical and emotional violence. Despite the prevalence of TDV and the negative outcomes associated with TDV, Georgia currently has no statewide curriculum used to prevent TDV. Additionally, there is a dearth of research addressing pre-adolescents' perceptions of TDV and DDV and pressures to date. Interventions aimed at reducing TDV typically target older populations, thus leaving pre-adolescents more vulnerable to TDV. Employing a qualitative design, this study gathered the perceptions from pre-teens to fill gaps in knowledge, inform potential interventions, and inform professionals working with pre-teen students.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

Dating violence affects both adolescents and adults however adolescents do not necessarily adhere to the same patterns or perceptions as adults (Fredland et al., 2005). This study originated as a result of a local initiative to implement an intervention to reduce TDV. This chapter includes a brief discussion of social cognitive theory, which informed the design of this study, as well as a review of the literature pertaining to teen dating violence. The chapter presents literature that described antecedents and consequences of teen dating violence. Additional sections of this chapter explore literature related to prevalence of TDV and reciprocity in TDV. These sections are followed by a description of literature related to the use of technology in teen dating. Studies which examined risk factors and experiences with pressure to date among teens are presented, followed by a brief section describing ways in which researchers have measured TDV. Next, the reader will find a presentation of qualitative TDV studies which used methods similar to this project and an illustration of some of the most widely cited interventions aimed at reducing TDV. The chapter concludes with an overall summary synthesizing the literature and gaps in knowledge that have led to the development of this study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A myriad of theoretical perspectives have been presented in the literature to help explain TDV, including feminist, empowerment, social constructivist, conflict theory, developmental models, and rape culture theory (Exner-Cortens, 2014; Kervin & Obinna, 2010; Miller et al., 2009; Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b). Perhaps the most pervasive and pragmatic theory presented

in the TDV literature is Bandura's social cognitive theory (Ellis et al., 2013; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Social cognitive theory bridges the gap between behaviorism and cognitivism, and includes the influence of the context of behavior as well as the perceptions of the person (Bandura, 2008). It should be noted that extant TDV literature often presents social learning theory and social cognitive theory interchangeably. Bandura (1971) suggested that human functioning is, "best understood in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between behavior and its controlling conditions." (p. 2). Learning is a consequence of one's personal experience as well as observation of the experiences of others.

To help explain domestic violence, Bandura (1971) stated:

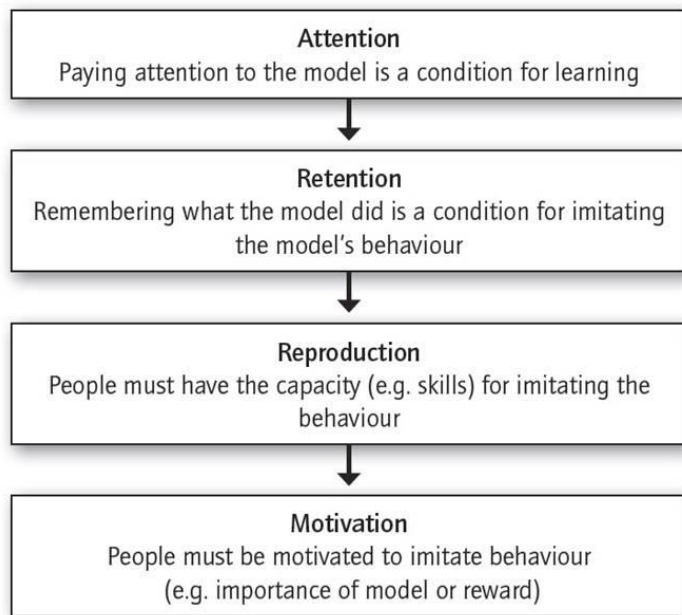
Interpersonal difficulties are most likely to arise when a person has developed a narrow range of effective behaviors and must thereby rely on coercive methods to force desired actions from others. Nagging complaints, aggressiveness, thinly veiled threats, helplessness, sick-role behavior, and emotional expressions of rejection, suffering, and distress are compelling means of controlling others. (p. 41).

Bandura described social cognitive theory not as a model of cognitive development, but rather as knowledge acquisition through cognitive processes that are synthesized from cognitive functioning and social and environmental regulations of action (Bandura, 2005). Bandura identified four key principles of social cognitive theory outlined below and in Figure 1:

1. **Attention:** Learning requires focus. Individuals cannot learn if not focused on the task. If one sees something as being novel or different in some way, one is more likely to make it the focus of one's attention. Social contexts help to reinforce these perceptions.

2. **Retention:** People learn by internalizing information in memories. People recall that information later when required to respond to a situation that is similar to the situation within which one first learned the information.
3. **Reproduction:** Individuals reproduce previously learned information (behavior, skills, knowledge) when required. However, practice through mental and physical rehearsal often improves responses.
4. **Motivation:** People need to be motivated to do anything. Often that motivation originates from observation of someone else being rewarded or punished for something they have done or said. This observation usually motivates people later to do, or avoid doing, the same thing.

Four important factors in social learning  
(observational learning)



*Figure 1.* Social learning factors.

(<http://www.apppsychology.com/IB%20Psych/IBcontent/SLA/SLA6.htm>)

In short, social cognitive theory, when applied to TDV, connects attitudes and behavior to personal experiences and exposure to the influence of family, peer, and cultural norms (Debnam, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2016; Edelen, McCaffrey, Marshall, & Jaycox, 2009). This connection creates a triadic reciprocal relationship between cognitive, environmental, and behavioral factors as illustrated in Figure 2. Specifically, students learn dating behaviors and form ideas about acceptable dating behaviors from their experiences and perceptions in their environment and through the experiences of others. “Because adolescents are new to dating relationships, they may not yet be aware of acceptable behavior in this context and they are likely to learn how to interact with dating partners by observing peers,” (Ellis et al., 2013, p. 488).

An additional environmental influence is the exposure to media. As an example, studies have examined the influence of media on adolescent perceptions of body image, sexuality, gender roles, mental health, and aggressive behaviors have been demonstrated in the literature (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005). Furthermore, social cognitive theory posits that adolescents exposed to aggressive behaviors in their environment are likely to believe these behaviors to be normative and permissible unless they are otherwise informed (O’Keefe, 1997). These notions are influenced by peers, parents, teachers, and others, and are addressed through the utilization of a multi-dimensional intervention approach (O’Keefe, 2005).

Social cognitive theory is often cited in the literature to provide a perspective on how interventions can lead to reduction in the prevalence of TDV (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008). The tenets of the theory support the efficacy of interventions developed to change adolescents’ perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating behaviors. As an example, acceptance of dating aggression is considered one of the strongest risk factors for dating violence (O’Keefe, 1997). Based on the perspective gained from social cognitive theory, interventions aimed at leading



teens to reject dating aggression have the potential to be an effective means to ameliorating TDV.

Self-efficacy is a construct that emerged from social cognitive theory. Self efficacy refers to “beliefs about one’s capabilities to organize and execute action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Interventions potentially provide an opportunity to enhance self-efficacy beliefs by empowering participants to engage in healthy and protective behaviors.

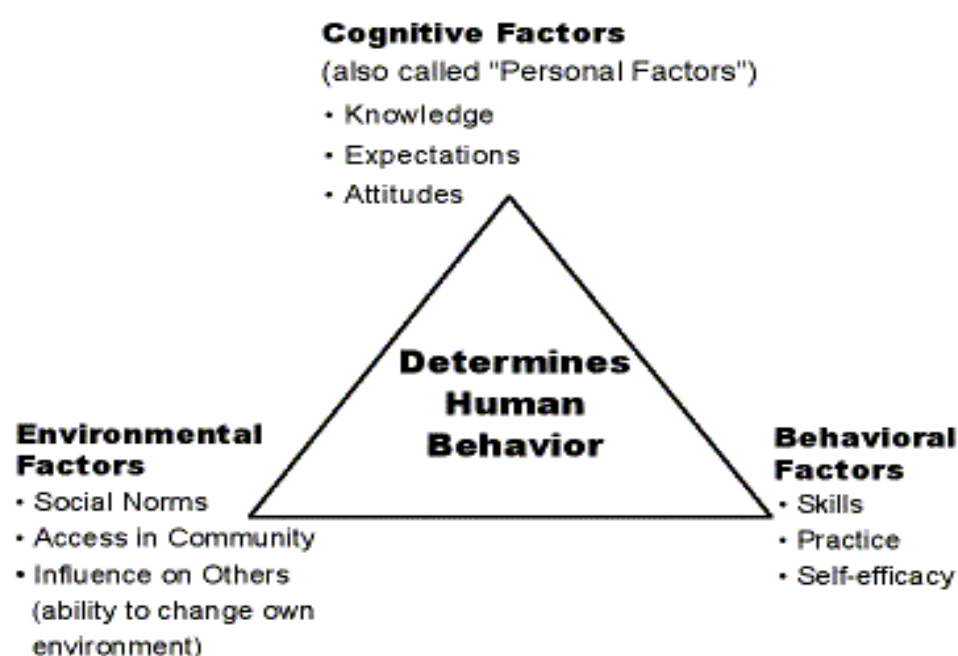


Figure 2. Social cognitive theory behavior determinants.

<http://recapp.etr.org/recapp/index.cfm?fuseaction=pages.TheoriesDetail&PageID=380>

Social cognitive theory provides a lens through which potential interventions can be identified and developed. Interventions aimed at reinforcing knowledge and skills around healthy relationships have the potential to be effective. Simply stated, the exposure of pre-teen students to notions of healthy and unhealthy relationships enables them to gain influence over the new experiences of dating through the shaping and modeling influences from others.

### **Adolescents and Dating**

Dating among adolescents is prevalent. Almost 75% of adolescents ages 13-16 in the United States reported they are dating or have experiences dating (Stonard, Bowen, Walker, & Price, 2015). Extant literature illustrated adolescent dating through terms and descriptions provided by the adults conducting the research. Because of the trends in technology and media influences on teens, relying solely upon adult interpretations and definitions of dating and dating violence may lead to gaps in understanding of this phenomenon.

To address that gap, Goldman, Mulford, and Blachman-Demnar (2015) conducted a qualitative study aimed at illustrating how teens and young adults (ages 14 to 22) conceptualized adolescent dating relationships. The researchers conducted focus groups with participants (N = 147) and used concept mapping to capture teens' perceptions of dating. The researchers prompted the focus group discussions with phrases which participants were asked to complete. An example prompts is, "A thought, action, feeling, or behavior that teens in dating relationships might have or do is...." The outcomes of their study included nine clusters of concepts (n = 228) created by the participants: (a) positive communication and connection, (b) early stage of a relationship, (c) signs of commitment, (d) social concerns and consequences, (e) insecurities, (f) intense focus on the relationship, (g) warning signs, (h) dependency, and (i) abuse. The students distinguished between healthy and unhealthy relationships in similar ways, thus allowing for positive and negative descriptions to merge into the same cluster (example: spending time together merged with ignoring each other). Also, technology and social media were described as pervasive and "ingrained aspects of teen dating," (p. 8). The researchers then facilitated similar discussions with adults who were university researchers, youth outreach and advocacy organization professionals, healthcare professionals, school district representatives, legal

professionals, and representatives from “relevant federal offices.” (p. 3). The researchers compared the responses from the youth to the responses of the professionals.

Findings of the study indicate the “professional” understanding of teen dating relationships generally aligns with teen and young adult perspectives (Goldman, Mulford, & Blachman-Demnar, 2015). A limitation of the study involves the use of broad prompts that did not specifically elicit ideas about healthy or unhealthy dating. Another limitation of the study was the exclusion of youth younger than 14. Additionally, youth were recruited from participants in youth-serving organizations (not listed in the study). As a result, it is unclear if these youth have already received TDV intervention from their organization.

Very few studies have examined pre-adolescent dating behaviors. Martin et al. (2007) conducted a study with females ( $N = 80$ ), ages 11-14 in Kentucky, to identify the implications of dating at an early age. In this study, early dating was found to be associated with nicotine and alcohol use, sensation seeking, aggressive behaviors, and early onset of menses. Additionally, Connolly, Nguyen, Pepler, Craig, and Jiang (2013) concluded that adolescents began dating around 11.6 years of age. In this study, the researchers identified three trajectories of dating during adolescence. The first trajectory indicated that 20% of adolescents began dating behaviors between the ages of 10 and 12. The second trajectory demonstrated that 55% began between ages 12 to 14. In the third trajectory, 25% began dating after their 14th birthday. Adolescents who began dating before 12 years old were found to be at risk for reduced emotional well-being and increased depressive symptoms. Both studies linked young adolescent dating behaviors with violence, however characteristics of early dating were not presented.

## **Stages of Dating**

Researchers have explored dating progression among adolescents and young adults. Many researchers have hypothesized that dating activities are apparent in a developmental sequence through which romantic relationships progress (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Following is a review of three stage models developed to help explicate the emergence of dating relationships.

Brown (1999) explained that “the development of romantic relationships throughout adolescence follows a four phase sequence,” (p. 320) including the initiation phase, the status phase, the affection phase, and the bonding phase. The initiation phase typically begins between the ages of 11 and 13, and is characterized by becoming acquainted with the other gender. The focus of the individual is on the self rather than on the relationship or the other person. In this phase attraction and desire are the key feelings though contact between the partners is limited. In the status phase (ages 14 to 16) adolescents focus on their peers, and engage in relationships with the other gender. Adolescents in this stage experience peer pressure to engage in relationships with someone who is considered a good match, as defined by their peers. The affection phase (ages 17 to 20) involves a shift of focus from peers to the romantic relationship itself. Adolescents in this phase often engage with smaller circles of friends from both genders. The final phase is the bonding phase (ages 21 and up), which exhibits a shift in focus from the relationship to the partner, and involves the idea of remaining together with one person for life.

Over the course of time Connolly and colleagues (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Connolly et al., 2013) explicated a normative trajectory model of dating that includes three phases, affiliation with mixed-gender groups (early adolescence), exploring romantic relationships in the form of group dating (mid adolescence),

and establishing exclusive stable romantic partnerships (later adolescence). According to the researchers mixed gender peer groups play an important role in the development of dating as they allow young adolescents the opportunity increase social interactions with the other gender in a social environment in which they are comfortable. These peer groups allow for new relationships to form alongside pre-existing relationships. The researchers conducted group discussions in which participants were asked to share information about early adolescent social experiences with same gender groups and mixed gender groups. The questions did not include questions about dating (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). From the data obtained in the discussion groups, the researchers developed and later utilized the Dating Questionnaire to examine adolescents' romantic interests (Connolly et al., 2004; Connolly et al., 2013). The Dating Questionnaire focused primarily on spending time with someone of opposite gender outside of school to illustrate "the progression from same-gender friendships to dyadic romantic relationships" (Connolly et al., 2004, p. 185). Participants in the sixth grade indicated increased mixed-gender affiliations, but no dating. Participants in the seventh grade indicated increases in dating and mixed-gender affiliation. Additional outcomes of their study, included the designation of "early starters" and "late bloomers", relative to the norms set forth by the age groups. Early starters were defined as adolescents or pre-adolescents who engaged in intimate romantic activities at an age earlier than their peers. The researchers surmised that early starters were more likely to demonstrate socio-emotional problems and both the early starters and late bloomers were at a greater risk for maladjustment (Connolly et al., 2013).

In each of these studies, early dating behaviors were characterized solely by the affiliation of mixed-gender groups. Christopher, McKenney, and Poulsen (2016) examined ways in which adolescents begin relationships, and included a conceptual model of first romantic

encounters (for adults) by Bredow, Cate, and Huston (2008). The researchers incorporated a qualitative study design implementing focus groups with sixth and eighth graders (N = 44). Research questions sought input on how participants defined a boyfriend and girlfriend relationship as different from a friendship, how dating relationships begins, and how peers impact the process. Consistent with the conceptual model by Bredow et al. (2008), they concluded that in the sixth grade relationships begin with play-like behaviors including physically pushing friends towards someone of the opposite gender, and texting to see whether another person might be interested in them. Findings of the study indicated that adolescents use technology to reduce uncertainty when pursuing romantic interests. Their findings lent support to Bredow and colleagues' (2008) model, suggesting that while it was designed to capture first romantic encounters among adults, it is also reflective of the process among adolescents. First, young adolescents decide whether they are attracted to someone physically. Next, they decide to make an overture and this involves determining the likelihood of success in their pursuit by engaging in information seeking activities. Peers play a significant role in gathering information in this process. Third, the adolescent devises a strategy for self-presentation to offset their uncertainties. The last phase of initiation is building rapport with the person, including being attentive to them. Christopher et al. (2016) determined that this is particularly challenging for the young adolescent, and this is a reason that texting is used so often. The researchers further purported that early adolescents develop their first infatuation with the onset of puberty. According to Collins, Welsh, and Furman (2009) puberty specifically refers to the process of gonadarche in which testosterone is released in males, and estrogen is released in females. They indicate that infatuations start earlier though, during the adrenarche phase when there is

increased activity in the adrenal glands, and may occur as early as eight years old in girls and nine years old in boys (Collins et al., 2009).

Christopher et al. (2016) added two phases to Bredow and colleagues' (2008) model to reflect the initiation stages of adolescent dating, emphasizing the impact of the social environment on dating. The first phase they added is described as getting noticed by the person using playful behaviors. Study participants also described their friends as playing a key role in facilitating dating behaviors during this phase. This phase is followed by "crushing," during which young adolescents reported that they were trying to determine if romantic interests were reciprocated. They characterized the relationships as somewhere between being friends and classifying themselves as boyfriend and girlfriend. The participants also referred to rumors that are spread about them, and the role of their peers in keeping or sharing secrets about the dating interests of their friends.

In summary, each of the aforementioned studies utilized a different lens to describe progression of behaviors that contribute to dating among adolescents. Brown (1999) classified the different phases of dating relationships in terms of identity attainment and peer group influence. Building on Bredow and colleagues' (2008) model Connolly and Goldberg (1999) developed a developmental-interactional (contextual) model in which dating relationships contributed to the consolidation of adolescent identity and self-esteem. Christopher et al. (2016) added the use of technology, and the influence of peers in the initiation of dating relationships. Each of these approaches suggested a series of phases starting with the initial encounters and infatuation. Together, these researchers present a progression through the casual relationships which arise in mixed-sex peer groups in the middle years of adolescence and ending in more mature, consolidated dating relationships marked by strong emotional ties with and commitment

towards the other person. Furthermore, Collins et al. (2009) pointed out that physical maturation can also be dependent upon a variety of factors including closeness to parents, and hereditary factors.

There are a few limitations in extant literature addressing stages of dating. Specifically, in Brown's model, there is a lack of attention to input from others in the environment and no allowance for teens who do not fall within the sequence of stages presented by the researchers. Additionally Connolly's study utilized of the Dating Questionnaire, which focused primarily on spending time with someone from the opposite gender outside of school, and the study did not account for the use of technology. Though Christopher et al. (2016) included the roles of peers and the use of technology, the study did not describe what happened after the students initiate dating. The aforementioned studies neglect to include children ages 11 and younger who have not yet begun to initiate contact with opposite gender peers. Additionally the researchers did not describe specific dating behaviors nor at what age they were initiated. The studies did not describe the actual relationships of those who are initiating dating or the cognitive processes associated with the exploration of the notion of dating. Additionally because the studies were conducted with a heteronormative perspective with a specific focus on dating the "opposite gender" only, a significant limitation of each study is the lack of cultural competence and application to the more fluid gender identity and sexual preferences represented in modern culture.

### **Consequences of Early Dating**

Studies have identified negative outcomes for children who date at an earlier age. Though early dating is defined in a variety of ways, the majority of these studies begin with participants in the sixth grade or older. Martin et al. (2007) and Aikins, Simon, and Prinstein (2010) reported



that young adolescent girls who date are more likely to engage in alcohol and tobacco use, and in delinquent or aggressive behaviors. Children who are considered early daters are more likely to have lower academic success and higher risk for social emotional problems (Javdani, Rodriguez, Nichols, Emerson, & Donenberg, 2014). Based on the Healthy Teens Longitudinal Study, Orpinas, Horne, Song, Reeves, and Hsieh (2013) indicated that slightly more than half of their sixth grade participants reported dating. From this study, the researchers developed four trajectories of dating throughout adolescence including, low dating, increasing dating, high middle school dating, and frequent dating. Adolescents in the low dating group demonstrated low amounts of dating with only a slight decline in dating behaviors over time. The increased dating group was characterized by low amounts of dating behaviors followed by a sharp increase in dating behaviors from the sixth to twelfth grades. The high middle school dating group reported high numbers of dating behaviors in the sixth grade followed by decreased dating behaviors in the seventh and eighth grades, then increased dating behaviors in high school. The frequent dating group reported high dating frequencies during each year and contained the largest number of participants. The outcomes of the study indicated that children in the frequent dating group and high middle school dating group reportedly had the worst study skills and the highest dropout rates, and reported higher rates of drug use. The researchers concluded that adolescents who start dating early also tend to exhibit other high-risk behaviors.

Based on the literature that examines adolescents and dating, social cognitive theory provides a backdrop for understanding teen dating and teen dating violence. Studies indicate a progression of dating behaviors in conjunction with physical and cognitive development, and the influence of peers on dating behaviors and decisions. Studies indicate that many pre-teens begin dating before age 12, and early dating is often accompanied by higher risk behaviors and

emotional problems. Furthermore adolescents identify both positive and negative dating behaviors consistent with professional opinions. Though researchers have reported stages of dating development, little is known about the nature of early dating relationships. Limitations of these studies include a gap in understanding of pre-teen's perceptions of dating, and the interaction of pressure to date and parental influence on pre-teen dating.

### **TDV Literature**

The earliest study of teen dating violence in the United States involved high school students in the early 1980s (Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983). This study set the stage for defining and identifying violence within teen dating "courtship" relationships. To further our understanding to TDV, Wekerle and Wolfe (1999) added that adolescents lack pro-social strategies to resolve conflict therefore they tended to rely on coercive, controlling, and violent behaviors. They further noted gender-based patterns of abuse appeared to be less differentiated among teens than among adults (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Findings indicated dating violence among teens was less divided along gender lines, and was mutually perpetrated. While traditional domestic violence literature often emphasizes the role of gender (Barner & Carney, 2011), teen dating violence literature presents a more gender-neutral perspective.

In the following sections, several local studies are presented, followed by a brief description of a published literature review. Literature related to antecedents, consequences, definitions, and descriptions of TDV are presented, followed by studies that explored risk factors, peer pressure, and parenting influences. This section concludes with examples of studies that demonstrated different methods of measuring teen dating violence, as well as a brief description of empirically based interventions.

## **Local Studies of TDV**

The most recent ground-breaking research originating in this region resulted from a longitudinal study conducted in Northeast Georgia titled the Healthy Teens Longitudinal Study (Orpinas, Hsieh, Song, Holland, & Nahapetyan, 2013a). Sixth grade students were randomly selected from nine schools in Northeast Georgia. For seven years, the researchers annually investigated the development of violence among students until they graduated from high school. Significant ethnic and racial diversity was represented across the total sample of 588 participants. The project was an extension of the Multi-site Violence Prevention Project with a total sample of 2,824 participants, funded by the Centers for Disease Control. The larger project consisted primarily of quantitative inquiries. Multiple research articles have resulted from this project and cover the following topics:

1. Parent and peer predictors of physical dating violence, and the significance of drug use and delinquent activities among teens who engage in TDV (Miller et al., 2009),
2. Physical dating violence norms among sixth grade students (Simon et al., 2010),
3. Dating violence and norms among ninth graders (Reeves & Orpinas, 2012),
4. Psychological dating violence victimization and perpetration trajectories (Orpinas et al., 2012),
5. Gender differences in dating violence and aggression (Orpinas, McNicholas, & Nahapetyan, 2015),
6. Trajectories of relationship violence with relationship quality and acceptability of aggression (Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b).

Findings of these studies included:

1. More parental support tended to be related to reduced female perpetration of dating violence and increased parental monitoring was related to lower rates of male perpetration of dating violence among sixth graders (Miller et al., 2009),
2. Over half of the sixth graders reported that girls hitting their boyfriend was an acceptable behavior under certain circumstances, and more than one in four reported acceptance of boys hitting their girlfriends; and one third of girls and more than one fourth of boys reported being physically aggressive to a dating partner (Simon et al., 2010),
3. Young adolescents (ninth graders) were more likely to condone female violence toward male partners than to condone male violence toward female dating partners (Reeves & Orpinas, 2012).
4. Eighty-five percent of students (grades 6 -12) reported reciprocity of psychological dating violence (Orpinas et al., 2012).
5. Boys (grades 6 -12) reported victimization of physical dating violence; while girls the same age reported perpetration of physical dating violence, and girls who have a low acceptance of dating violence also report low perpetration and victimization of dating violence (Orpinas et al., 2015).
6. Both victimization and perpetration of dating violence among teens (grades 6-12) were associated with perceptions of less caring relationships (Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013a), and
7. Acceptance, perpetration, and victimization of dating aggression decreased with age for both girls and boys from the sixth to twelfth grades (Orpinas, Horne, et al., 2013; Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b; Orpinas et al., 2015),

Reeves and Orpinas (2012) added a qualitative component to the project by conducting 12 focus groups with ninety students when they were in the ninth grade. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand how students viewed dating, and how they learned about appropriate and inappropriate dating behaviors. The researchers probed for gender-based beliefs and perceptions of aggression. The insights gained from the focus groups highlighted the perceptions that male to female physical aggression was unacceptable, female to male physical aggression was less offensive, and all forms of dating aggression were negative. The results of the study indicated youth were more likely to condone female violence toward male partners than to condone male violence toward female dating partners (Reeves & Orpinas, 2012).

From these studies, the researcher surmised that teen dating violence was prevalent, often reciprocal, and less divided among gender lines than adult violence. While female to male aggression was more acceptable to teens than male to female aggression, aggression was viewed negatively by both genders, and boys were less likely to report aggression. One limitation of these studies was the lack of explanation for the decrease in acceptability of aggression as the teens get older, and the primary focus on physical violence when emotional violence appeared to be more pervasive among this population. Another limitation of these studies was only students who reported that they were dating were included in the questions about dating violence, therefore it is unclear if study reports adequately reflect all of the students' perceptions.

### **Antecedents**

Antecedents exist prior to an event or situation. While antecedents may be considered different than risk factors for TDV, many are similar or related. As a result, this section potentially foreshadows the risk factors identified in a subsequent section. Several studies have highlighted antecedents to TDV. Researchers tended to focus on one of three perspectives:

situation or event perspective, relationship characteristics perspective, or participant characteristics perspective.

### **Relationship Characteristics**

From a *relationship characteristics perspective*, compared to adult relationships, adolescent relationships were typically characterized by shorter duration, less commitment, greater peer influence, less experience and knowledge, and less skills needed to resolve conflicts that commonly occurred in dating relationships (Caselman et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Adolescents (seventh, ninth, and eleventh grades) perpetrating TDV also reported jealousy, verbal conflict, and cheating, yet levels of love, intimate self-disclosure, and perceived partner caring did not correlate with TDV (Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2010). Violent relationships tended to be characterized by more frequent contact, longer duration, sexual activity, and imbalance of power (Mulford & Giordano, 2008).

### **Participant Characteristics**

From a *participant characteristic perspective*, risky lifestyle behaviors among early adolescents including getting drunk, having “deviant” friends and siblings, frequent use of social networking websites, and having sex were correlated with higher rates of TDV victimization among African American and Latino adolescents (ages 13-18) (East & Hokoda, 2015). Deviant behaviors were characterized by alcohol use, engaging in sexual behaviors, and “fist-fighting” others. Reuter, Sharp, Temple, and Babcock (2015) reported that borderline personality features among teens are correlated with both victimization and perpetration of TDV among high school students. Additionally, alcohol use predicted TDV perpetration for boys, and weapon carrying and emotional “symptoms” (e.g. depression, externalizing problems) predicted TDV perpetration for girls (Niolon, Vivolo-Kantor, et al., 2015).

## **Event Characteristics**

From an *event perspective*, TDV involved antecedents which often included one or more partner pulling away, demanding obedience, discovering involvement with a rival, defining the relationship, and demonstrating disrespect (Stephenson, Martsof, & Draucker, 2011).

Perceptions of a violent event were also associated with the participant's definition of violence (Baker & Helm, 2010). Additionally, as students made the transition to middle school, and moved away from same sex peer interaction to interactions with the opposite sex, interaction changed, bullying increased, and then the aggression rates declined after students were able to establish dominance in their newly found roles (Pellegrini, 2001).

From the above studies, it can be surmised that there researchers have begun to uncover a variety of antecedents to TDV, yet there remain gaps in the literature. As an example, this researcher was unable to identify studies that link feelings of pressure to date with TDV. Many teens are not equipped to resolve the conflicts that often accompany dating relationships, and teen dating is characterized by shorter duration, less commitment, and greater peer influence. In contrast, TDV tends to occur when there is more frequent contact, longer duration, and sexual behaviors. The research does not appear to address this inconsistency, particularly from the perspective of pre-teens.

## **Consequences**

Reports of domestic violence have referred to TDV as a precursor to marital violence (Ely, 2004). According to the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2013), "the majority of victims (51%) began their relationship with the person who eventually killed them when they were between the ages of 13 and 24." (p.19). Additional negative outcomes associated with TDV included psychological distress, STDs, academic struggles, substance abuse, trauma

symptoms, decreased self-esteem, DV in adulthood, and suicidal ideation (Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Stephenson et al., 2011).

## **Prevalence**

In the literature, the prevalence of TDV appeared to be consistent with that of bullying (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). Prevalence rates were typically measured among high school students with some studies including middle school students. Many sources identified prevalence of TDV beginning at age 12 (Youth Law Center et al., 2000), however this researcher was unable to identify TDV prevalence rates for children under 12. In their meta-analysis of articles addressing rates of prevalence among children ages 13 to 18, Wincentak et al. (2016) determined that higher rates of TDV were reported among older teens, girls who identified as from a minority culture, and teens from lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. Additionally, females tended to use more “relational aggression” while males tended to use more physical aggression (Ellis et al., 2013). Rates of dating violence tended to decline from high school to college for both females and males (Bennett et al., 2011). In the United States, various federal organizations have provided prevalence statistics. The CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016) reported that 21% of females and 10% of males in grades nine to twelve reported being a victim of physical violence or sexual violence perpetrated by a partner during the last 12 months. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001), demonstrated that 30% of adolescents in grades seven through 12 experienced psychological abuse. The National Institute of Justice funded an extensive study in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania with students grades seven to twelve (n= 5,647), and learned that reports of psychological dating violence were most prevalent (47%), followed by physical dating violence (30%), digital dating violence (26%), and sexual coercion (13%)



(Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). A similar study in the Midwestern United States with high school students (n=1162) indicated that approximately 35% of students reported experiencing physical violence, approximately 70% of students reported experiencing at least one incident of verbal/emotional abuse, and 25% of girls and 14% of boys report sexual coercion in their dating relationship (Espelage, Low, Anderson, & De La Ru, 2014).

In summary, large scale quantitative studies describing TDV have emerged in the literature. Multiple studies indicated that psychological violence appeared to be the most prevalent, and sexual violence tended to increase with age. Reported prevalence rates varied depending upon the definitions of TDV, measurement instruments, and self-report by teens. The aforementioned studies relied on quantitative data and analysis, and were thus unable to provide insight into individual experiences and perceptions. As a result, little is known about the process of emergence of TDV behaviors. There remains a gap in knowledge surrounding the prevalence and consequences of TDV among pre-teens, and how these may differ from older adolescents.

### **Descriptions of TDV**

As stated in Chapter 1, the literature provided a variety of definitions of TDV. According to the CDC website, TDV is defined as “the physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional violence within a dating relationship, including stalking. It can occur in person or electronically and might occur between a current or former dating partner.”

([www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teen\\_dating\\_violence.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teen_dating_violence.html)).

There are four primary types of dating violence: physical, sexual, emotional/verbal, and threatening behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; Wolfe et al., 2014). These acts include physical violence, coercion, threats, harassment, intimidation, emotional and verbal abuse, stealing online identity, controlling behaviors, sexual abuse and cyberstalking

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Signs of TDV include: showing jealousy when the partner talks with others, constantly checking up on the partner, threatening to kill oneself, intimidating or threatening the partner, placing restrictions on dress or appearance, calling the partner names or criticizing them, forcing sexual behaviors, pushing, hitting, displaying forceful physical behaviors, and throwing things at a partner, (STOMPOutBullying.org, 2016)

### **Reciprocity**

As indicated by Orpinas et al. (2012) studies suggested TDV was often reciprocal, thus blurring the lines between identifying and defining victims and perpetrators (Cyr et al., 2006). Cyr et al. (2006) surveyed 126 females from 13-17 years old; more than 45% of the respondents reported physical violence in their dating relationships and 90% of the respondents reported reciprocal psychological violence. Reciprocity was most notable in psychological dating violence, physical dating violence, and digital dating violence (Ely, 2004; Giordano et al., 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Stephenson et al., 2011; Yahner, Dank, Zweig, & Lachman, 2015; Zweig et al., 2013).

### **Digital Dating Violence**

The explosion of electronic technology has created a new milieu for social interaction, particularly among teens. Technology, specifically texting, permeates most communication among dating teens (Goldman et al., 2015). Electric communication technology (ECT) includes the use of cell phones, text messaging, instant messaging, email, gaming, and social networking websites. ECT is used by 95% of adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2010; Stonard et al., 2015), and is used by dating partners (ages 11-24) to establish, maintain, and end relationships (Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Zweig & Dank, 2013). Over 80% of youth have access to social networking

websites (Lenhart et al., 2010) and online relationships are considered by youth to be equally as important as “real” life relationships (Stonard et al., 2015) .

Electric communication technology. ECT creates both opportunities and risk for adolescents (Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2014). In dating relationships ECT is used for eight basic purposes (a) establishing a relationship with a partner, (b) day to day communication with partner, (c) arguing with partner, (d) monitoring or controlling the activities and location of the partner, (e) perpetrating emotional or verbal aggression against a partner, (f) seeking help during a violent episode, (g) limiting the partner’s access to oneself, and (h) reconnecting with a partner after a break-up or violent episode (Draucker & Martsof, 2010). ECT plays an important role in relationship issues including privacy, fidelity, intimacy, autonomy, control, and conflict resolution. While the research did not indicate that ECT increased the prevalence or frequency of TDV, the research did suggest that ECT influenced the dynamics of dating violence by providing, “fertile ground for conflict and abuse.” (Draucker & Martsof, 2010, p. 141).

ECT is seen by the majority of teens as a positive communication tool however, 20% of youth reported that their peers were unkind in their use of ECT, and 88% reported that they have observed another teen being mean or cruel through ECT (Lenhart et al., 2010). ECT also facilitates interactions among estranged couples that often lead to more violence. Reported rates of TDV victimization through ECT ranged from 15% to 40% among young adolescents (Tokunaga, 2010), and appeared to be rising rapidly with a 50% increase in reports of online harassment among youth (Draucker & Martsof, 2010).

Similar to teen dating violence, a variety of terms have been utilized in the literature to represent TDV when it is occurring via technology. Terms used have included cyberbullying (Zweig & Dank, 2013), electronic aggression (Draucker & Martsof, 2010), cyberdating abuse

(Yahner et al., 2015), technology assisted adolescent domestic violence (Alvarez, 2012; Stonard et al., 2015), and digital dating violence (DDV) (Korchmaros et al., 2013). For the purposes of this study, DDV is utilized.

Categories of digital dating violence. The research has pointed to four categories of DDV behaviors: direct hostility (i.e. threatening comments sent to the victim); intrusiveness (i.e. demanding the victim's social media passwords); public humiliation (i.e. posting lewd pictures of the victim on the internet); and, exclusion (i.e. blocking the victim's communication with others) (Bennett et al., 2011). A few specific examples of DDV have included controlling a partner's cell phone usage (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011), creating a "hate" website about a former partner (Draucker & Martsof, 2010), being asked to engage in or discuss sexual behaviors (Picard, 2007), threats of physical abuse (Cutbush et al., 2012), and hacking into a partner's social media website to share private pictures or videos (Zweig et al., 2013).

Sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Justice, Zweig and Dank (2013) compared DDV with other TDV experiences among middle school and high school youth (seventh through twelfth grade,  $n = 5,647$ ) in the Northeastern United States. Outcomes demonstrated strong correlations between DDV, TDV, and bullying. DDV was found to be largely reciprocal among partners (Yahner et al., 2015; Zweig et al., 2013; Zweig et al., 2014). The most frequently reported form of DDV was the romantic partner's use of a youth's social networking account without permission. The correlates of DDV perpetration were highest among females, LGBTQT students; and students who reported higher number of hours on the computer and cell phone, drug use, delinquent behaviors, sexual activity, depression, anger/hostility, anxiety, and fewer pro-social activities. DDV was prevalent among teens, and associated with more traditional forms of TDV including physical, psychological, and sexual violence (Zweig & Dank, 2013).

Consequences of digital dating violence. Researchers have examined the effects of technology use on adolescent development (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008b). Because electronic communication can occur at any time, and with rapid-fire intensity, electronic victimization can be pernicious. Digital dating violence has the potential to, “exponentially increase the bystander audience,” (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012, p. 24), with negative effects including fear, embarrassment, and stress-related symptoms such as avoiding the internet, being unable to stop thinking about the incident, feeling jumpy or irritable, and losing interest in things (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). In one study, DDV victims reportedly had lower self-esteem, felt more isolated and helpless, and had higher rates of depression (Alvarez, 2012). ECT can be used to perpetrate abusive behaviors, but also to gain resiliency and power for victims. The use of technology has both positive and negative contributions to dating relationships.

In summary, DDV has been linked to negative psychosocial correlates such as poor parent/child relationships, substance abuse, delinquency, depressive symptoms, social anxiety, social and behavioral problems, and school problems (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). DDV victimization rates have ranged from 35-55%, and perpetration ranged from 20-70%. Examples have included partners checking messages without permission, checking the whereabouts of a partner, demanding passwords to online accounts, deleting or unfriending ex partners, using information posted online against a partner, pressuring partners to engage in sexual acts, insults, putdowns, spreading rumors about a partner on the internet, threatening a partner, sharing private or embarrassing images or videos of a partner, making a partner feel afraid not to respond to contact, and restricting a partner’s use of ECT (Barter, McCarry, Berridge, & Evans, 2009; Cutbush, Ashley, Kan, Hampton, & Hall, 2010; Cutbush et al., 2012; Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Fox, Corr, Gadd, & Butler, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin,

2011; Korchmaros et al., 2013; Picard, 2007; Press & MTV, 2009; Thompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013; Zweig et al., 2013). ECT provides prominent opportunities for unhealthy dating behaviors, including harassment, monitoring, and controlling behaviors within romantic relationships. Because DDV is more easily shared with others, and has greater visibility, it may facilitate opportunities for re-victimization. Males primarily reported instigating sexual DDV, and females reported instigating non sexual DDV (Stonard et al., 2015). As a result of the above, one might conclude that DDV among teens is common, and perpetration is associated with psychological dating violence perpetration, physical dating violence perpetration, and sexual harassment perpetration. DDV victimization has been associated with psychological perpetration and victimization, physical perpetration, and sexual harassment victimization (Cutbush et al., 2012). A limitation of this literature is that, based on this author's review of the literature, only one study to date included participants under the age of 12 (Korchmaros et al., 2013). The longitudinal study began with students ages 10-15; however, the indicators of dating violence were not explored until the youth were 14 years old and older. As a result, there is a notable gap in the literature related to DDV and youth under the 14 years of age. Additionally, may be no differentiation in the studies between violence perpetrated through public venues such as social media, and private venues such as texting and email.

### **Risk Factors for Teen Dating Violence**

Commonly identified risky behaviors among adolescents also place teens at risk for TDV. Martin et al. (2007) examined pre and early adolescent females, ages 11-14, and learned that early dating was often accompanied by nicotine and alcohol use, aggressive behavior, and early onset of menses in adolescent females. Additional risk factors included exposure to domestic violence and child abuse, witnessing community violence, drug use, friends who

practice violence in their relationships, early dating behaviors, poor coping and social skills, behavior problems, lack of information on violence among partners, accepting attitudes towards violence, rough childhood, lack of education, and lack of parental supervision (Bogeanu, 2014; Connolly et al., 2013; Hamby, Finkelhor, & Turner, 2012; Reidy et al., 2016; Simon et al., 2010; Stephenson et al., 2011). Jealousy and possessive behaviors were also identified as at-risk factors for TDV (Bogeanu, 2014). Perceptions of acceptability of violent behaviors, and membership with more violent peer groups correlated with both victimization and perpetration of violence for adolescents (Ellis et al., 2013; Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b).

Using social learning and social control theories, Foshee et al. (2011) examined risk and protective factors for TDV along five domains (a) individual attributes and behaviors, (b) peer contexts, (c) family contexts, (d) school contexts, and (e) neighborhood contexts. Individual risk factors associated with perpetrating partner violence were family conflict, anger, anxiety, depression, alcohol use, marijuana use, friends perpetrating violence, deviant behaviors at school, and neighborhood models of deviant behavior. Protective factors include higher levels of social bonding, and parental monitoring. Surprisingly, for boys, involvement in extracurricular activities was positively associated with perpetrating dating violence. Students who displayed other types of violence were more likely to engage in perpetrating dating violence, particularly male students. Both male and female students who were exposed to violence at home, in their neighborhoods, and at school among their peers were more likely to perpetrate violence (Foshee et al., 2011). Regarding the school context, research demonstrated that 40% of the TDV incidents happened at school (Ball et al., 2009).

## **Peer and Parenting Influences**

Research indicates that peer influence and parent influence are associated with TDV behaviors. Friedlander et al. (2007), in their study of students (grades five through seven), learned that pubertal maturation, peer delinquency, and peer dating explained early dating behaviors. Early maturing adolescents who face peer pressure to date were more vulnerable to early dating behaviors and TDV, and therefore required higher parental monitoring to regulate dating behaviors. Their findings also demonstrated multiple influences of biological, familial, and peer group variables on dating. Between the ages of 10 to 13, youth were more likely to initiate dating when they were simultaneously experiencing pubertal development, peer influences for dating and misbehavior, and a reduction in parental monitoring (for boys) (Friedlander et al., 2007).

## **Peer Pressure**

Literature also demonstrates an impact of peers on early dating behaviors. “Peer pressure ....in early adolescence predicts unfavorable consequences for individuals’ later romantic relationships,” (Schad, Szewedo, Antonishak, Hare, & Allen, 2008, p. 348). As an example, Weiss (2013) reported teens (12-18 years old) responded to TDV with an ambivalent attitude, trivializing the incidents as unimportant and normal or minor. The researcher stated teens have ambiguous definitions of TDV and use indifference as coping mechanisms to avoid reporting their peers’ TDV behaviors (Weiss, 2013). Peer pressure has been demonstrated in the literature to have an effect on early sexualized behaviors (van de Bongardt, Reitz, Sandfort, & Deković, 2015). As a result, younger dating teens may be at higher risk for TDV, particularly when they are pressured by peers to begin dating behaviors. Although dating is a normal developmental



behavior in adolescence “some young adolescents may feel pressured to start dating before they are emotionally ready” (Orpinas, Horne, et al., 2013).

After conducting multiple searches utilizing the University of Georgia’s Galileo, ProQuest, and EBSCOHost databases, this researcher was unable to identify scholarly articles that address perceptions of pressure to date among pre-adolescent children and how this pressure is related to TDV. Additionally, using the same search engines, this researcher was unable to find scholarly articles related to reasons that adolescents date. Although one study examined older adolescents’ perceptions of pressure to date when their peers were older, the authors focused primarily on peer groups, and did not include sibling relationships or sibling placement within their families (Friedlander et al., 2007). According to Ellis et al. (2013), peer influence on dating violence in adolescence (grades 9, 10, and 11) appeared to have a “peak period,” and likely diminished as a person grew out of adolescence. This study, however, did not include younger adolescent participants. Schad et al. (2008) conducted a study with teens ages 15-18. The researchers explored potential links in adolescents who reported having experienced relational aggression and victimization in pre-adolescence (10-12 years old) and their experiences of relational aggression during late adolescence (15-18 years old). The researchers learned that older teens who reported peer pressure during early adolescence reported victimization in subsequent teen dating relationships. One limitation of the study is the specific context and ways peer pressure occurred was not presented, and it is unclear how the peer pressure affected decisions about dating before the students were 15 years old.

Stephenson, Martsolf, and Draucker (2011) utilized a qualitative design to examine the influence of peers on adolescent dating violence. The researchers interviewed young adults from 18-21 years old (n=88) and asked them to reflect on “aggressive” dating relationships that they

experienced as teens in middle and high school. The researchers concluded that peer involvement in TDV often fueled the violence instead of disrupting the violence. “Peer involvement can influence the trajectory of dating violence and have a strong effect on how the violence unfolds.” (p. 210). Both of the above studies relied on self-reported reflections from older adolescents to gather information related to their experiences when they were younger.

### **Parenting Influence**

Studies have demonstrated that family-level variables play a key role in both the perpetration and victimization of violence, and parental influence on dating violence behaviors extends past mere exposure to family violence (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi, & Hops, 2000; Black, Weisz, Preble, & Sharma, 2015; Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010; Niolon, Kuperminc, et al., 2015; Orpinas et al., 1999). One study examined the influences of parenting on aggressive teen behaviors indicating that parents’ attitudes shaped students’ attitudes about aggression, and were linked to aggressive behaviors in children (Orpinas & Murray, 1999). Black et al. (2015) examined parents’ awareness of TDV and learned that mothers were more aware than fathers of TDV and were more likely to urge their children to seek formal help.

This researcher did not find any studies in peer reviewed journals which focused specifically on parental conversations with adolescents about dating behaviors or parental influences on adolescents’ feelings of pressure to date. Shaffer (2013) completed her dissertation by conducting a qualitative study examining Latina adolescents’ perspectives (14-17 years old) and their mothers’ perspectives on dating violence. In her study, she learned that when the parent/child relationship is characterized by trust and considered a close relationship by the teen, adolescents are more likely to seek help from a parent. The researcher deduced that adolescents

who do not think their parents can effectively facilitate conversations about dating do not seek help from their parents (Shaffer, 2013).

One study supports the notion that parents can intervene to prevent TDV. As an extension to the SafeDates intervention, Foshee et al. (2015) developed and evaluated a program in which moms who experienced domestic violence completed a workbook with their teen (ages 12-16) in an effort to prevent recidivism and TDV. The workbook facilitated parent/child discussions about dating and dating violence. The program demonstrated favorable TDV prevention outcomes for teens who had been exposed to more severe domestic violence, and was reported to improve the parent/child relationship between the mother and her teen (Foshee et al., 2015).

Several studies connected teen dating violence with parenting styles and levels of involvement with their teen (Andrews et al., 2000; Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003; Ellis et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2009). As an example, East and Hokoda (2015) learned that strict, conservative parenting served as a protective function against subsequent TDV victimization. In each of these studies, the parents were exclusively mothers thus leaving the contribution of the adolescents' fathers as a gap in the research. Additionally, little is known about the effects of parent conversations with their pre-teens about dating, relationships, and dating violence on the attitudes of pre-teen students as they are related to TDV and DDV.

In summary, there are a variety of risk factors associated with TDV. Specifically, those who have been exposed to adult domestic violence and/or peer violence are predisposed to perpetrating TDV. Additionally, the literature does not address reasons that pre-teens date. There is gap in knowledge surrounding parents' conversations about dating with pre-teens and pre-teens' perceptions of pressure to date, and how these are related to TDV. Studies involving

parents relates primarily to mothers, therefore little is known about the influence of fathers on TDV.

### **Measuring TDV**

Measuring TDV is dependent upon several things, thus one reason the prevalence statistics tend to vary among studies is the way in which TDV is defined, measured, and reported. According to Wouters (2014), “taboo” is a term that has been used throughout history in reference to the topic of teenage sexuality and dating. While physical violence is the most commonly reported form of TDV (Hamby & Turner, 2013), a variety of instruments have been developed by researchers to assist in identifying, describing, and measuring the prevalence of TDV.

Instruments used to measure TDV typically fall into two categories, those that measure attitudes or perceptions of violent behaviors, and those that measure reports of acts of aggression. These two types of measures offer very different information thus leading to differences in reported rates of prevalence. Attitude and perception measures illuminate personal viewpoints about mental representations of dating aggression (Caselman et al., 2014). Instruments that measure behaviors are often self-report and may be conservative in their estimation of actual TDV incidents (Hamby & Turner, 2013). Cascardi and Muzyczyn (2016) showed a significant connection between attitudes and behaviors associated with dating violence.

Most of the recent data regarding TDV behaviors and incidents have come from items embedded in larger youth health surveys such as the CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) (Centers for Disease, Prevention, Stevens, & Griffin, 2001). In addition to the YRBS, there are several instruments that continue to demonstrate empirically-sound data regarding attitudes that contribute to TDV. These include the Conflict Tactics Scale (Cascardi &

Muzyczyn, 2016; Straus & et al., 1996), the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (Karlsson, Temple, Weston, & Le, 2016; Wolfe et al., 2001), and the Attitudes about Aggression in Dating Situations (Slep, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001). These instruments tend to be self-report measures, but are considered valid measures of attitudes and perceptions of TDV (Caselman et al., 2014).

### **Qualitative Studies in TDV Literature**

Many of the research studies designed to analyze TDV focused on intervention/prevention program evaluations and outcomes (Foshee et al., 2015), prevalence among populations (Wincentak et al., 2016), and correlations with other forms of violence or deleterious behaviors among youth (Niolon, Vivolo-Kantor, et al., 2015). Researchers have utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to further illuminate the phenomenon. Many of the studies already presented in this chapter incorporated quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. In this section, examples of qualitative studies contributing to the knowledge regarding TDV are described in detail. Each of the studies presented below were selected based on their similarity to the aims of the current study and on the extensive methodological details that were included in their report. The reader will find that the studies demonstrated some of the strategies that were utilized for the present study.

Numerous qualitative studies have been conducted with middle, high school, and college students to further illuminate the phenomenon of TDV. Stonard et al. (2015) conducted an exploratory qualitative study implementing semi-structured focus groups to examine perceptions of DDV among 12-18 year old students. The researchers surmised ECT provided an additional avenue for unhealthy harassment, monitoring, and controlling behaviors within romantic relationships. Outcomes of the study included themes representing the general patterns of

adolescents' perceptions, awareness, and experience of ECT use in romantic relationships, and experiences with DDV. The first theme identified was related to adolescents' perceptions of healthy or unhealthy communication (specifically referring to frequency and feelings). The second theme was in regards to perceived monitoring and controlling communication. The third theme was the perceived impact of technology-assisted violence compared with that of in-person violence. Respondents believed that DDV has less impact than in-person TDV because there is more opportunity to stop and ignore DDV. Alternatively, the participants suggested DDV may have more impact because they always find a way to get to the victim. The researchers also concluded ECT provided unique opportunities for DDV due to the ability to see when a partner has read or received a text or online message. The researchers suggested future research should explore whether DDV is a unique form of abuse creating new victims, or a new avenue for control and abuse in relationships that are already unhealthy. Contributions to the current study include the themes reflecting participants' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy digital dating, and the exploration of ECT as a venue for TDV.

Similarly, Noonan and Charles (2009) explored the notions of healthy and unhealthy dating relationships and included perceptions of the role of bystanders. The researchers partnered with the CDC to interview teenage boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 14 in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Twelve focus groups were conducted with sixth, seventh and eighth graders to explore prevailing behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes regarding dating relationships among early adolescents. Findings were categorized in major themes including: (a) characteristics of middle school dating relationships, (b) characteristics of healthy relationships, (c) perceived relationship norms, (d) characteristics of unhealthy relationships, (e) incidents of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, (f) ways teens intervene in abusive situations, and

(g) ways teens access trusted sources of information about dating. Because many of the study participants indicated that they would not intervene in dating violence, the researchers suggested that prevention efforts should focus on skill building for bystanders to encourage youth to recognize and respond to all types of abusive behaviors. The researchers also recommended research on dating violence must be tailored to subsets of children, in regards to race/ethnicity, age, and gender.

Fredland et al. (2005) conducted focus groups with middle school urban African-American students ages 11 to 13 (n=54) to gain an understanding of youth perspectives of dating and dating violence. They used two questions to guide their inquiry into dating and dating violence: What are young adolescents' perspectives related to dating and the use of violence in relationships? and What are the "situated possibilities" cultural norms, and "lived experiential meanings" that constitute young adolescents' perspectives of dating, including healthy and unhealthy intimate relationships (p. 97). Examples of inquiries made included:

1. We would like to know about how boys and girls your age get along with one another; and what words you use to describe that?
2. When someone your age says that they are "dating" or whatever word they use, what do they mean? What are they doing?
3. At what age do youth start to date?
4. How many of the students your age date?
5. Is there pressure on girls and boys your age to date? (p. 100).

The researchers used probes to gain more in-depth explanations. Codes were assigned to meaningful quotations, and were organized into five cluster code families: (a) dating norms, (b) ecological factors, (c) healthy relations, (d) unhealthy relations, and (e) prevention strategies.

Students identified that dating begins from ages 9-18 with males and 10-24 with females. The most influential force described was peer pressure to date. Girls seemed to be more susceptible to this.

Healthy relationships were explored, and both genders described respect, sharing interests, and having fun as characteristics of healthy relationships. Girls valued remaining faithful and problem solving skills. Boys talked about respect, bonding, sharing housework, and buying things for their girlfriend. Both sexes wanted to be treated with respect. Girls were more concerned with trust and having long term relationships. The researchers also explored the notion of unhealthy relationships. Respondents indicated examples of cheating, fussing, jealousy, lacking respect, lacking trust, being physically abusive, being ignored, and acting differently towards the date in front of other people. Self-defense is considered an acceptable option for girls. Most boys felt it was not OK for boys to hit girls.

Through their study, four themes emerged: (a) respect versus disrespect, (b) influence of friends, (c) costs and benefits of sexual activity, and (d) violence as an acceptable response. One limitation of the study is a result of the purposeful sampling, thus limiting the applicability of the findings to urban African-American youth. The researchers only explored male-female interactions. The researchers also did not examine parental influence on pressure to date.

The above studies contributed knowledge to the current study by highlighting young adolescents' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating, digital dating, and influences from peers and parents. All three studies incorporated focus groups, thus potentially reducing the opportunity for individualized input from participants. Additionally, the studies neglected to include inquiries into participants' perceptions of influence on pressure to date from older



siblings. While the studies mimic some of the results of quantitative studies, the qualitative studies provided a framework for the development of inquiries of this study.

### **TDV Interventions**

The literature points to a variety of empirically-based interventions which have been explored in the teen dating violence literature. 1 provides a brief overview of some of the most recent and most widely researched programs. The majority of the interventions that show empirical support are aimed at students in middle school and high school. To this date, this researcher has been unable to identify interventions that are deemed efficacious with students below grade six.

Table 1

#### *Interventions to Prevent Teen Dating Violence*

Title of Program	Author(s)	Description/Method Age of Child	Outcomes/Efficacy
Teen Choices	Levesque, et al. (2016)	Computerized, Stages of change using 5 healthy relationship Skills, grades 9-11 (N = 2,605).	Reduced emotional and physical perpetration and victimization
Shifting Boundaries	Taylor, Mulford, & Stein (2016)	Six Classroom sessions, emphasizing law, consequences, and establishing boundaries for grades 6 – 7 (N = 2655).	Reduced sexual dating violence incidents, and the frequency of total dating violence perpetration and victimization
Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships	Miller et al. (2015)	Community based, promotes healthy relationships grades 6-8, 11-14 years old	Stronger Parent-child communication, and dating relationship satisfaction. Reduced

			acceptance of tdv, reduced electronic victimization.
Fourth R	Cissner & Ayoub (2014)	School-based. Focuses on relationship building problem-solving, decision- making. grades 7-9 (n = 1,722)	Reduces physical dating violence. reduced violence among maltreated youth.
Safe Dates	Foshee, Bauman, et al. (2004)	School based, 10 sessions includes a parent/teen component, and support groups. grades 8-10 (N = 957)	Long-term effects include reduced physical, sexual, and psychological tdv perpetration.

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### Chapter Summary

In summary, there is a growing body of literature examining the prevalence, consequences, interventions, and risks factors associated with teen dating violence. TDV is often characterized by reciprocity, particularly in psychological dating violence. Studies have highlighted adolescents' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating. Peer pressure has been demonstrated to influence early dating behaviors as well as dating violence among high school students. Additionally, parenting influences have been shown to impact adolescents' attitudes about aggression. New attention has been given to electronic communication technology and its role in teen dating violence. Studies have found that teen dating violence, including DDV, was often reciprocal among teens, and the acceptability and trajectory of physical aggression among dating teens decreased as the teens grew older. DDV perpetration has been associated with psychological dating violence, physical dating violence, and sexual harassment, and was linked to negative psychosocial correlates for teens. Additionally, few models explaining the progression of adolescent dating behaviors have been presented in the literature. Although early

dating is linked to other risky behaviors among young adolescents, these models do not describe many of the nuances of pre-teens' exploration of the notion of dating.

There were several overarching limitations in the extant literature. First, the majority of TDV studies incorporated quantitative data gathered from self-reports of middle, high school, and college students. Quantitative and qualitative studies did not include participants under 12 years old. Second, pre-teen perceptions of pressure to date, influences of siblings, and parent conversations about dating were largely unexplored in the literature. Third, studies analyzing the influences of parents on TDV only included mothers, therefore little is known about the influence of fathers. Fourth, studies lacked an explanation for the heightened acceptability of aggression among pre-teens compared to that of their older counterparts. Fifth, there appeared to be no differentiation between DDV perpetrated through public venues such as social media, and private venues such as texting and email. Finally, the qualitative studies examining adolescents' perceptions of TDV and DDV incorporated focus groups as a primary method of data collection, thus potentially losing some of the individualized input from each participant.

As a result of the above, there remains a gap in knowledge related to the emergence of pre-teen behaviors associated with dating and TDV. Little is known about the perceptions, prevalence, and consequences of dating and TDV among pre-teens, and how these may differ from results of studies with older adolescents. There is also a notable gap in the literature related to DDV among youth under the 14 years of age. Furthermore, there is gap in knowledge surrounding sibling influences, parents' conversations with pre-teens about dating, and pre-teens' perceptions of pressure to date.

This study seeks implement a qualitative research design incorporating interviews of pre-teens to contribute to the understanding of pre-teens' perceptions of dating. Specifically, the

researcher seeks to address some of the aforementioned gaps in knowledge about dating and TDV through the exploration of pre-teens ideas around descriptions of dating, dating violence, unhealthy and healthy dating, digital dating, and the influences of peers and parents on perceptions of pressures to date.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to examine pre-teen students' perceptions of teen dating violence and digital violence, and their experiences of pressures to date. This chapter details the research methodology used in this study, and includes the following sections: 1) research design, 2) study participants, 3) procedures for the study, 4) data collection, 5) data analysis, 6) credibility, reliability, and ethical considerations, and 7) strengths and limitations of the study. As described in Chapter 2, this study was informed by extant research as well as social cognitive theory, relying on the notion that social context reinforces and shapes behaviors and perceptions.

#### **Research Design**

The study applied a phenomenological qualitative study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to understand dating and dating violence from the perspective of young adolescents. Qualitative research involves an inductive inquiry process to build an intricately woven description of social phenomenon through words and observations that represent experiences of informants within their natural setting (Creswell, 2015); this type of inquiry is particularly salient when little is known about a phenomenon (Padgett, 2008). Through a detail-rich view of an issue, extensive data collection, and comprehensive data analysis, qualitative researchers investigate human conditions to provide insight into things like behavior, motivations, perceptions, and attitudes. Additionally, qualitative research methods are conducive to exploring young people's attitudes, perceptions and experiences because the research is not confined to prescriptive and predetermined response sets; it allows the researcher to capture insight from participants while

being malleable to trends in terminology, perceptions, and expressions (Macnab, 2010).

This qualitative study is both a phenomenological study and a descriptive study because the researcher was seeking a description of perspectives and shared experiences among fifth graders, “based on the assumption that there is an essence to shared experience,” (Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). Findings included a mix of description and analysis, and resulted in the identification of recurring patterns. This study incorporated the development of themes as they related to preteens’ perceptions of dating and dating violence (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Research Questions**

This study examined pre-teen students’ perceptions of dating, teen dating violence, digital dating violence, and perceptions of pressures to date. Research questions were:

- How do pre-teen students define and describe dating?
- What are the perceptions of TDV and DDV among preteen students?
  - How do perceptions of TDV and DDV differ between pre-teen girls, and pre-teen boys?
  - How do pre-teen students describe healthy relationships?
  - How do pre-teen students describe unhealthy relationships?
  - How do pre-teen students describe digital dating behaviors?
  - What are some reasons people who are dating experience conflict?
- Do pre-teen students experience pressure to date? (Friedlander et al., 2007)
  - What is the relationship between sibling group placement and perceptions of pressure to date?
  - What is the relationship between gender and perceptions of pressure to date?

- What is the relationship between the gender of the closest parent and perceptions of pressure to date?
- What is the relationship between the presence of parenting statements about dating and perceptions of pressure to date?

The sites for the research were three elementary schools in Northeast Georgia. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards from both the University of Georgia and the local school system.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher plays a critical and unique role in qualitative research, serving as a human instrument required to provide the context for the data recovered. Qualitative studies incorporate a collaborative process to make meaning of the data, therefore it should be noted that biases, values, and judgment of the researcher are a part of the research design and data analysis (Creswell, 2015). As a result, the process of self-reflection was a critical element of this study to ensure that the meanings conveyed in the study belonged to the participants.

According to Creswell (2015), researchers should state their own assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. These assumptions were evident in the design of the study, as well as through the application of social cognitive theory to the study. The following narrative was designed to enable the reader to distinguish between the researcher's and participants' perceptions as they contribute to meanings described in the study.

I am the mother of two teenage students. As a social worker who has been employed in child welfare for over 20 years, I have had numerous conversations with my children about safety, relationships, dating, and violence. I have observed a shift of locus of influences with my children, moving from primarily parental influence to primarily peer influence. Additionally, I

have been working directly with domestic violence task forces for over 10 years, and have observed many of the deleterious effects of domestic violence on victims of all ages. My personal and professional experiences come together to inform my interest in this research, but also to contribute to my assumptions and biases. The following are some of these assumptions:

1. Adolescents whose parents do not address with them the topics of dating and violence tend to develop perceptions of normalized dating behaviors from peers. As a result, adolescents may not be aware of potentially deleterious dating behaviors.
2. Through exposure to media, adolescents are desensitized to the negative effects of controlling partner behaviors as they relate to digital dating behaviors.
3. Pre-teen students are aware of, and focusing on dating behaviors much earlier than identified in the literature and often feel pressures to date before they believe themselves to be ready.
4. Intervention strategies with students prior to onset of dating behaviors have the potential to be efficacious in the prevention of TDV.

To offset a portion of the impact of these assumptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012), and in keeping with the tenets of qualitative research, this researcher maintained a journal in which these assumptions were further explored as needed. This strategy potentially helped minimize the interference of the assumptions on the meanings that the participants offer regarding dating, pressure to date, and dating violence.

### **Methodology Rationale**

Meaning is socially constructed, yet positivistic research tends to de-contextualize the phenomenon and remove participants from their immediate experiences and the concerns that have meaning for them to measure and statistically analyze associations among variables



(Fredland et al., 2005). This descriptive study utilized an phenomenological design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) aimed at studying pre-teen perceptions of teen dating violence through a qualitative process. The merit of qualitative research is substantive as it provides rich descriptions often gained through summarizing patterns, themes, perspectives, and perceptions (RAND, 2009). Specifically, extant studies point to the need for qualitative studies to improve understanding of TDV. Very few studies examine TDV from the perspectives of pre-teens. With the increased use of technology as a primary tool for communication among teens, and with evolving terminology utilized by teens and preteens, a qualitative study with this population demonstrates merit. Fredland et al. (2005) advised that qualitative studies enable the researcher to capture terms and meanings that adolescents assign to dating relationships, thus enhancing the effectiveness of intervention approaches targeted for this age group. According to Prospero (2006) qualitative forms of inquiry offer appropriate approaches to gain a more in-depth analysis of the myriad of influences on TDV. As indicated in chapter 2, more research is needed to explore dating among pre-adolescents, and to better understand teens' perceptions of violence. (Baker & Helm, 2010; Martin et al., 2007).

In qualitative studies, conducting interviews is a common method of data collection, with a variety of benefits. Interviews allow the respondents the opportunity to speak from their own perspective, allow researchers to delve into socially constructed meanings that participants ascribe by probing participants' responses, and they allow researchers the opportunity to understand the complexity of an issue from the perspective of participants (McCarry, 2007; Whitaker & Savage, 2015). Additionally, it is important that research with children include efforts to protect their vulnerability, and confidentiality. Interviews with children should begin

with open ended questions followed by more closed ended questions to gain clarity (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). The utilization of a semi-structured interview guide facilitates this process.

In this study, the researcher utilized the constant comparison method throughout the data analysis process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While constant comparison analysis (CCA) is often almost synonymous with grounded theory qualitative studies (Fram, 2013), CCA can be adapted to support most qualitative methods. CCA is an inductive process that, “begins with open coding to develop categories from the first round of data reduction and further reducing and recoding allows possible core categories to emerge” (Fram, 2013, p. 3). Data analysis methods used are discussed in more detail in the following sections. Because this study was embedded in a larger community initiative to construct and implement a TDV prevention effort, this study was timely.

### **Study Participants**

According to Whitaker and Savage (2015), qualitative studies should involve the carefully planned recruitment of participants with similar characteristics. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, teens begin dating behaviors around 11 or 12 years old (*Bright Futures: Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents*, 2008). The targeted population for this study was boys and girls in fifth grade, ages 10 to 12 years old.

In qualitative research, participant interviews tend to generate emergent data while allowing for participant subjectivity and collective meaning-making (Morgan, 1998). The researcher conducted individual interviews with male and female students in each of the three schools elementary schools, lending a sample of 28 participants.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

To identify potential participants, the researcher introduced the study to each of the fifth grade classes in each school. A detailed description of the study and parent consent forms were

sent home with each fifth grade student. Names of students who returned signed consent forms on which parents provided permission for participation were entered into an Excel worksheet. Excel was utilized to select a random sample of six girls and six boys for each school. Students selected for the study were ages 10 to 12 years old, and in the fifth grade at one of three schools. The exclusion criteria were students who were currently being served by the domestic violence shelter, and students who did not provide consent by parent permission to participate. It should be noted that there was no requirement for participants to have experienced a dating relationship or to have experienced dating violence.

### **Procedures for the Study**

The following section describes the steps taken to implement the study. This researcher supervised Master of Social Work (MSW) student interns via their field placement learning opportunity. One MSW intern assigned to this researcher expressed interest in teen dating violence and participated in the local TDVC meetings. As result, the intern assisted with classroom presentations, organized data collection, and observed and participated in interviews of participants.

### **Approval to Conduct Research**

Both the local school system's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted permission to proceed with data collection for this study. The MSW intern was listed as a co-researcher participating in the project as she had already completed the required training for research with human subjects prior to her internship.

## **Semi-Structured Interviews**

This project utilized semi-structured interviews as the method by which data were gathered. According to Whitaker and Savage (2015), qualitative interviews should involve question prompts posed in sequence by the researcher. In semi structured interviews, the questions are flexibly worded and can include a mix of more or less structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). “Most of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time.” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that the semi structured interview allows the novice researcher to respond to the participants and new ideas presented, while providing a guide for the researcher. While enabling the interviewer to have some discretion about the order in which questions are asked, the structure allows for guided conversations and is often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic to understand thoroughly the answers provided (RAND, 2009). For this study, the interviews were semi-structured, utilizing a guide that included open-ended questions (Appendix A).

## **Data Collection**

The researcher received permission from each school principal to speak briefly with each fifth grade homeroom to provide the students with a detailed description of the study and parent permission forms. Students were encouraged to return the parent permission forms by the subsequent Friday. The permission forms were maintained in a folder provided for each class at each school. The researcher neglected to leave a place on the form for the child’s name, yet many of the teachers wrote the children’s names on the forms. The MSW Intern utilized the school’s online database to search the remaining parents’ names and identify the students. Two

parent permission forms were removed from the sample, due to the inability to locate the parent's name in the database and identify the child.

The researcher entered each parent permission form into an Excel database and included the child's name, gender, school, teacher, and whether permission was provided. Using the Excel function, random numbers were assigned to each student for whom parents provided permission to participate in the study. The researcher then sorted the students by school, gender, and the randomly assigned number (in descending order). Four males and four females ( $n = 26$ ) with the highest randomly assigned number were selected for each school. Additionally, the researcher identified two alternate females and two alternate males from each school using the same process. Two of the alternate students were included in the study to ensure saturation of the data, and one student decided not to participate, therefore 27 students participated in the study ( $N = 27$ ). The researcher sought information from the director of student services to determine that none of the students selected for the study were being served by the local domestic violence shelter.

The researcher contacted each student's homeroom teacher and guidance counselor to advise which students had been selected for the study and to request non-instructional times during which they could be interviewed. After receiving responses from all of the teachers and counselors, the researcher and MSW Intern scheduled the interviews to ensure that they were conducted during non-instructional time and prior to the implementation of standardized testing. A schedule of the interviews was provided to the school counselors and to the front desk clerk. The MSW Intern followed up with the front desk clerks to schedule the use of the conference rooms. Each of the participants was present on their scheduled day. One student decided not to participate in the study.

In an effort to enhance the study, prior to conducting the interviews, a pilot of the interview guide was conducted with two 10 year old students not involved in the study. The purpose of the pilot was to fine-tune the questions and format of the interview guide. After the interview guide was finalized and parental permission was obtained, interviews were conducted once at the students' schools, for 30 to 40 minutes, during non-instructional school hours.

### **Location**

The interviews were held in conference rooms in each school. Each of the rooms contained a table around which chairs are placed. Each room had child-created artwork, and age appropriate seating. The researcher was seated at the table with the participants.

### **Interview Activities**

The interviews began with an informed assent discussion about the purpose and the voluntary nature of the study. Students were asked to sign the assent form to participate further. The participants selected a name from a basket that contained names of superheroes. The participant-selected fictitious name was used throughout the interview process. The researcher checked each recording device, and began the interview by asking the student to identify their fictitious name. The researcher then obtained the participant's demographic information such as age, gender, sibling group placement, and gender of the parent with whom the child spends the most time. Students were asked to respond to questions regarding their perceptions of healthy relationships, dating, pressure to date, healthy and unhealthy dating, and digital dating. Open ended questions were followed by probing questions to gain clarification from participants. The researcher utilized a prepared interview guide developed for this task (Appendix A). The interview guide was developed in conjunction with input from the chairperson of the local

Domestic Violence Task Force (N. Tobias, personal conversation, December 2, 2015).

Specifically, the guide included seven open ended questions:

- Please describe a healthy friendship.
- What does “dating” mean?
- How do people communicate with dating partners using technology? What are some examples of technology used? What are some positive ways they use technology? What are some negative ways they use technology?
- What does a healthy dating relationship look like?
- What does an unhealthy dating relationship look like?
- What are some reasons people who are dating experience conflict?
- Are children your age expected to date? If so, who expects them to date? How do you know?
- What do parents of kids your age say about dating?

After conducting the pilot interviews, three additional questions were included on the interview guide.

- Do kids your age date?
- What are other words that kids your age use instead of “dating”?
- What would be most helpful to kids your age to help them develop healthy relationships?

The researcher asked clarifying questions, or probes, based on individual responses to the primary questions. If needed, the researcher engaged students who were reluctant to participate, however, student participation for each question was voluntary. One student stated an unwillingness to participate and was then immediately returned to class. During the interviews

the researcher engaged each participant in an adapted version of the member checking process that included asking clarifying questions and paraphrasing and reflecting back participant statements to check for the researcher's clarity of understanding. Participants were encouraged to correct and clarify when the information was dissimilar to the participants' thoughts and ideas.

The researcher and intern recorded notes on the interview guide to capture tacit knowledge demonstrated by the participants and initial impressions that the researcher developed. These anecdotal field notes were recorded during and after each interview such that initial impressions and insights into possible emerging themes could be captured during the interview process. The researcher identified additional questions to be asked in subsequent interviews. The assent forms and interview guides were maintained in a file folder for each school.

Interviews were audio taped utilizing two small digital audio recording devices. The researcher turned on each device simultaneously to reduce the likelihood of equipment failure. These recordings were secured in an MP3 format. Each file was saved to a USB storage device that was stored in a locked cabinet at the home office of the researcher, accessible only to this researcher. Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, with select samples of three interviews reviewed by the subject-matter expert. The researcher reviewed each recording and transcript and edited each for accuracy. The transcriptions were saved to a USB storage drive that was stored in the aforementioned locked cabinet. The computers utilized for transcription and data analysis were password protected, with passwords developed and utilized solely by this researcher.

As recommended by RAND (2009), the researcher maintained a spreadsheet to monitor the research process for each individual interview. The spreadsheet included columns to record



steps such as classroom recruitment, receipt of parent permission, the dates of the interviews, completion of transcription, and the review of the transcriptions. On all documents, except the parent permission, participants were identified by the fictitious names selected by each participant.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study developed out of a local initiative to inform efforts towards teen dating violence prevention in Northeast Georgia. The researcher sought verbal support from the principal for each school. By obtaining parental permission and assent from the students, the researcher established clear agreements with the participants. The researcher fully disclosed to the students and the parents the nature, purpose, requirements, and, upon requests, results of the research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Following each interview, each participant was encouraged to talk with their school counselor, parent, this social worker, or an alternative school social worker if the discussion caused them to have negative feelings or thoughts. Additionally, participants received a brochure (Appendix C) that highlights tips for maintaining healthy relationships, and websites that provide additional information aimed at preventing teen dating violence.

Students who were residing at the local domestic violence shelter were not included in the sample. Because of their exposure to trauma and the need for intensive treatment, they had already been invited to participate in an alternative program sponsored by the local domestic violence agency.

There were additional ethical considerations in the design of the research being conducted. In social work research, dismantling the imbalanced hierarchies of power between the researcher and the researched is a central principle (Das, 2010). One technique that can be

employed to offset the imbalance of power is the use of a semi-structured interview format. In quantitative research, “Limiting participants to a prescribed list of questions has curtailed valuable opportunities to hear young people’s perspectives and new ideas that may not already have been considered, confining the data to what is already known.” (Macnab, 2010, p. 157). Instead, Macnab recommended that the researchers ask the participants for ideas that they feel are important related to the topic or if they have any suggestions of further avenues for the study to investigate. For this study, at the conclusion of the interview, the researcher asked the participants for advice regarding potential ways to intervene to reduce TDV. This transferred the power and expertise to the participants, a hallmark to the qualitative research process. Another strategy employed by the researcher was to hold the interviews in conference rooms at the school. Because of the authoritarian nature of classroom design (teacher standing at the front while students sit at their desks), the researcher conducted the interviews seated at a table with the students in a room located in the school.

Additional ethical considerations involved the imbalance of power in the data analysis (Das, 2010). The researcher has sole control over the analysis, and can interpret views of the participants through whichever lens they choose: the ultimate power of editorship. As previously stated this power was minimized through the use of individual member-checking during each interview and consultation with the dissertation committee and subject-matter experts. Another strategy employed was the use of Atlas.ti.7.5.11 (Scientific Software Development, 2016), a computerized data analysis program.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis traditionally involves the simultaneous and ongoing collection and analysis of data. During and after each interview, anecdotal notes were recorded, including

immediate impressions. These impressions became somewhat saturated around certain concepts after approximately half of the participants had been interviewed (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Initial Analysis**

In this study, the researcher utilized the constant comparison method throughout the data analysis process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

“It is through the process of comparing concept to incident that the researcher can check to see if further incidents fit with the newly developed concepts and, in so doing, ensure that the concepts are capable of accounting for all related incidents in the data” (Elliott & Jordan, 2010, p. 35).

Identifying and refining important concepts was essential to the study. The anecdotal notes, dissertation journal, and interview transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher to aid in developing conceptualizations of themes that appeared to potentially contribute to the understanding of preteen students’ perceptions of dating. While transcribing the interviews, the researcher repeatedly listened to the audio recordings to become immersed in the data and to generate a list of preliminary codes. As the transcripts were completed a sampling was shared with the MSW Intern to check for accuracy.

The researcher created domains to represent each of the a priori codes that were initially used to build the research questions. These domains included: (a) definitions of dating, (b) beliefs and descriptions of healthy dating, (c) beliefs and descriptions of unhealthy dating, (d) what parents say about dating, (e) reasons and pressures to date, (f) technology used by people who are dating, (g) unhealthy use of technology in dating, (h) reasons for conflict, and (i) helping someone in an unsafe relationship. It should be noted that each transcript was reviewed within the context of the domains from which the data emerged, however, codes and themes, as

described below, were developed independent of the domains. This activity provided the researcher an opportunity to identify codes and themes as they emerged across domains, instead of within domains. Following are the three steps employed to organize the outcomes of the study.

**Step 1: Identifying codes.** In practical terms, coding refers to the process of assigning categories, concepts, or “codes” to segments of information that are of interest to your research objectives (Frieze, 2016). During the first level of coding, the researcher began by reviewing all of the transcripts and anecdotal notes. Post-it notes were created with each participant’s answer to each question, and the corresponding anecdotal notes from the interview guides. These notes were placed on a dry erase board and grouped according to the domains listed above.

The transcriptions were uploaded in to the coding software, Atlas.ti.7.5.11 (2016). Codes were then assigned to text segments, and were facilitated and managed by the coding software. Text segments often represented multiple codes, therefore the codes and text segments are not mutually exclusive. Codes included repetitions across participants, and shifts in content that indicated relevant themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

**Step 2: Merging codes into themes.** After generating the first level of codes, the researcher began merging codes through an iterative process. First, grouping occurred utilizing a second dry-erase board and a technique similar to concept mapping. Common codes were grouped to identify separate themes and to merge similar themes. Themes are abstract constructs that represent groups of codes. A variety of sources influenced themes, including literature reviews, the researchers’ subjective experiences, the social cognitive theory lens, and the data collected. The researcher then reviewed the notes that were recorded by the researcher after each

interview and in the research journal. Ideas that the researcher initially believed to be patterns were compared to the frequencies of codes in the data.

**Step 3: Describing themes and identifying patterns.** Once the themes were developed, Atlas.ti.7 was used to retrieve all instances in the text for each theme. Each text corresponding with the theme was reviewed by the researcher. The researcher selected typical examples of each theme, with emphasis on a consistent distribution across participants. The researcher utilized the same software to examine patterns within groups, across groups, and between groups. After the codes were grouped in themes, the themes were then examined across domains to identify potential relationships between the domains and themes therein. Finally, the themes were examined across demographics to identify potential trends and relationships between the themes and demographics.

Additionally, in the data collection phase of the study, the researcher observed what appeared to be two overarching trends. These were later captured and supported through the data analysis. These overarching trends are identified as Constructs and are supported by the themes and codes. It should be noted that the constructs, themes, and codes were not domain-specific, and often occurred across domains.

### **Participant Profile Data**

After each interview, participant profile, pseudonyms, and question-specific responses were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to manage the data. Once all of the data were entered, descriptive analysis in the form of frequencies, means, and percentages were used to provide an aggregated description of the participants. The information was then compiled into a brief participant summary.

## Coding Software

To manage the data and aid in the data analysis process, the Atlas.ti.7.5.11 (2016) Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) software was used. Qualitative researchers identify a variety of advantages of using CAQDA (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, the benefits of using Atlas.ti.7.5.11 (2016) include (a) organized storage of all of the data associated with the study, (b) the ability to create and record codes, (c) easy retrieval of segments of data, (d) the ability to compare across the data set, and (e) the ability to categorize the data (Friese, 2016). Transcripts and anecdotal notes were uploaded into Atlas.ti.7.5.11 (2016) to systematically extract codes, themes, and patterns of text passages.

Codes reflected categories of recurring and related ideas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the coding software provided frequency comparisons among codes. Themes are “segments of texts that each contain a main idea” (Schutt, 2011, p. 325) and were used to organize groups of codes that reflected a larger concept. Later, several of the themes were grouped according to two overarching constructs. The software was used to analyze theme frequencies and relationships. From the data analysis of all of the transcripts, a matrix was developed to organize the categories and themes that emerged from the transcripts. This matrix was used to condense the data into themes, and domains, and enabled the researcher to examine potential relationships among the themes and between domains.

As themes evolved during the project, additional codes and themes emerged inductively. Once the themes were organized, each was named to reflect the “essence” of the theme, using actual data from the transcripts. With the coding program, direct quotes were extracted to impart some of the flavor of each theme in-vivo terms.

One goal of the data analysis process is saturation of the data. When no new codes or categories emerge from the analysis it can be assumed that saturation occurred (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Additionally, a subject-matter expert on domestic violence reviewed randomly selected transcripts to compare their impressions regarding the themes developed from the data to boost the reliability of the study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Several strategies are recommended to increase the rigor and accuracy of qualitative research. Because the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in this study, it was imperative that the study was conducted in a trustworthy manner. In qualitative research, reliability and validity are defined differently than in quantitative research studies (Golafshani, 2003). Additionally, qualitative researchers seek to describe phenomenon from a constructivist, emic perspective (insider perspective), thus there is no benchmark to take repeated measures and establish validity and reliability as there is in quantitative approaches to research. “A good qualitative study can help us understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing,” (Golafshani, 2003). Reliability in qualitative research is concerned with whether the results, “make sense” and that they are consistent with the data that is collected not with whether the findings will be found again when the research is replicated.

One measure of a strong qualitative study is the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The two key components of trustworthiness are credibility (the appropriateness and accuracy of the data sources and interpretation) and consistency (the reliability of the study procedures and data analysis). The researcher employed several strategies to boost trustworthiness as outlined by (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) to include the adapted individual member checking, and peer debriefing; as well as recording procedures, and group selection.

## **Consistency**

Also termed “dependability,” consistency in qualitative research is reflected in whether the results are consistent with the data that was collected. The researcher is not seeking to suggest that duplicated studies will yield the same results, but rather that the results of this study make sense, given the data that has been collected. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), strategies that can be used to enhance consistency are triangulation, peer examination, investigator’s position, and audit trail. To achieve consistency, the researcher utilized a dissertation journal as an example of an audit trail. In the journal, the researcher wrote memos and musings, notes on how data were collected, questions pondered, reflections on the data, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In qualitative research, triangulation of data is employed to contribute to the dependability of the study by incorporating the use of three or more sources of data to enhance the validity of research findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Due to the sensitive nature of the study, and the procedures approved by the Institutional Review Boards of both the University and the school system, the researcher incorporated the use of two sources of data only, transcripts, and anecdotal notes. Sometimes data gained through multiple sources can be contradicting (Macnab, 2010), however that does not mean that the study is biased. Instead, the instruments likely have different focus and shed further light on the phenomenon from a different angle. Through the use of the journal, the researcher explored some of the contradicting data.

## **Credibility**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) define credibility as, “whether the participant’s perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them.” (p. 77). In quantitative studies, credibility



often depends on the instrument used to gather data. In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2015), thus the credibility of the study is dependent upon the ability and efforts of the researcher. As an indication of the credibility of the outcomes of the study, there were instances in the data analysis that the data disconfirmed the researcher's expectations (Boomberg & Volpe, 2016). As an example, a variety of studies have provided insight into gender differences in TDV (Orpinas et al., 2015), therefore, this researcher analyzed the data and reported that there were very few differences between genders in this study.

As stated previously, the researcher maintained a dual role throughout the study. The researcher is also the school social worker assigned to each school participating in the study, is an active member of the local domestic violence task force, and is intricately involved in the development and disbursement of the teen dating violence prevention curricula. Therefore, it was important that the researcher remain cognizant of these positions, and the privileges, standpoints, and trajectories throughout the data collection and analysis process. Through continued reading of methods used in other qualitative studies, journaling, and ongoing conversations with the dissertation committee, local school administration, and fellow social workers trustworthiness for the study was boosted. The researcher spoke with the MSW intern at the close of each day during the interviews to debrief and discuss observations, trends, and improvements to the methods. The researcher also consulted with the director of the local domestic violence shelter for feedback. During the interviews, the researcher often checked with the participants by paraphrasing and reflecting back their responses, and then checking to determine if the researcher's understanding was accurate to ensure that the researcher captured the essence of the information being shared by the participants. Participants were invited to correct the researcher, and did so on a few occasions. This was utilized as an adaptation of member checking to boost the credibility of the

study. The researcher also relied on her experience in social work with this population, conducted a moderate number of interviews, and engaged subject matter experts in a review of the data.

To further enhance credibility, the researcher remained immersed in the data throughout the data analysis by listening to the recordings of the transcripts while coding the data. Additionally, the researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times while creating the Post-it notes, entering the data into the CAQDA, and reading through the data for each overarching research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Also, the data analysis incorporated rich descriptions of participant beliefs about experiences of their peers to illustrate the essence of the data and themes identified therein.

The researcher checked in with the MSW Intern regarding some of the preliminary findings, and attempted to intentionally identify ways in which researcher bias may lead to negative or discrepant information about the data. As a result of these efforts, the researcher offered an alternative explanation for some of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

An additional indicator of credibility is internal validity. In qualitative studies, internal validity can be strong because the researcher is closer to the data and to the people who give the data, which helps to capture what is really in the data (Patton, 2015). Additionally, the number of interviews conducted may improve the credibility of the study. A larger number of participants and amount of data provides greater opportunity for themes to emerge from data. Saturation is reached when no new themes emerge when new data is added, and as such, the results of the study may be more credible. During this study, the researcher observed that saturation was reached about half-way into the interviews.

In summary, throughout the different phases of the study, various procedures were utilized to ensure the integrity of the qualitative methodology and to establish credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2010).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strength of this study lies in the themes that were developed from individual interviews with pre-teens, as well as the adaptations to the probing questions that occurred during the study. An additional strength of the study is the use of coding software to extract codes and themes, and to compare data across participant groups.

This study has some limitations. Because this author was the sole researcher for the project there was a risk that the interpretations of the data were grounded in only one perspective, and outcomes were heavily dependent on the skills of the researcher. The researcher was unable to obtain additional sources of data for the study, thus potentially limiting the trustworthiness of the study. Additionally, this study was developed as a result of a community effort to create an intervention aimed at preventing teen dating violence; therefore there was an increased focus on gathering information that potentially informs an intervention. This study was situated in a primarily Caucasian, suburban/rural community, therefore recommendations for future research may focus on a similar study engaging other populations.

Another limitation of the study involved the participants selected. Young people often are at risk to suggestibility by adults. As a result, the outcomes of this study rely heavily on the interaction between participants and the adult researcher. Participants may provide answers that they believe are acceptable by adult standards, and shy participants may feel uncomfortable participating (Macnab, 2010). Additional limitations included those associated with the wording of research questions and interpretation bias (Whitaker & Savage, 2015). While the research

questions were worded in a variety of ways with respondents, based on their previous answers, the data were dependent upon the questions asked in the semi structured interview. The data analysis was also dependent upon the interpretation of the researcher.

### **Chapter Summary**

Utilizing a qualitative research design, the goal this study was to enhance understanding of pre-adolescent perceptions of healthy dating and unhealthy dating relationships, digital dating behaviors, and pressures to date. The study incorporated semi structured interviews with fifth graders from three elementary schools in Northeast Georgia. From the recorded interviews, transcripts were created, and utilized to identify codes and aggregate themes around each topic discussed. Themes included subcategories, or codes, of information, thus demonstrating the outcomes of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Research Findings**

This chapter provides a detailed description of the findings gathered during interviews with 27 fifth grade participants in Northeast Georgia. The purpose of this study was to examine pre-teen participants' perceptions of teen dating violence and digital violence, and their experiences of pressures to date. The research questions that guided this study were:

- How do pre-teen participants define and describe dating?
- What are the perceptions of TDV and DDV among preteen participants?
  - How do perceptions of TDV and DDV differ between pre-teen girls, and pre-teen boys?
  - How do pre-teen participants describe healthy relationships?
  - How do pre-teen participants describe unhealthy relationships?
  - How do pre-teen participants describe digital dating behaviors?
  - What are some reasons people who are dating experience conflict?
- Do pre-teen participants experience pressure to date? (Friedlander et al., 2007)
  - What is the relationship between sibling group placement and perceptions of pressure to date?
  - What is the relationship between gender and perceptions of pressure to date?
  - What is the relationship between the gender of the closest parent and perceptions of pressure to date?

- What is the relationship between the presence of parenting statements about dating and perceptions of pressure to date?

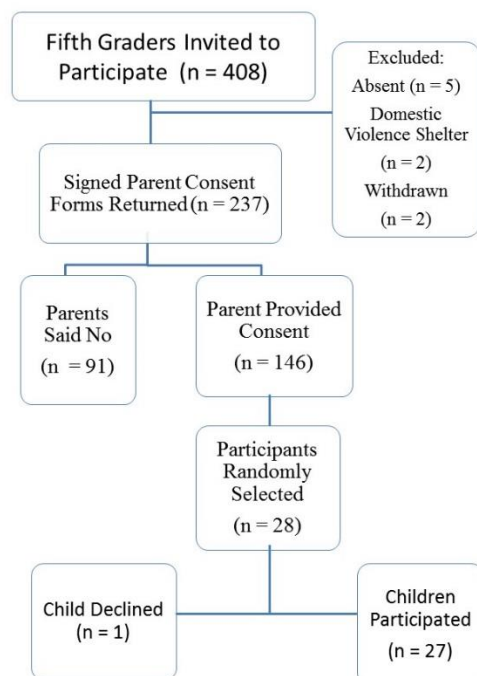
The research questions were transformed into interview questions. As described in Chapter 3, the question topics were converted into domains for the purpose of data analysis. Codes (112) themes (13) and constructs (2) emerged from these domains. Table 5, which appears on pages 90 to 92, provides a list of themes, corresponding codes, and domains which elicited each theme. Codes with only one source, codes representing synonyms to dating and dating partners, and codes corresponding solely with types of technology are not included in Table 5. A total of 13 themes emerged, and were identified by at least 26% of participants with a range of seven to 27 participant sources per theme.

Following the reader will find a description of the participants, and an overview of thematic categories. Examples of specific data extracted from the interviews provide a detailed description to support each theme. The number of quotes corresponding to the theme or code is provided in parenthesis, and the number of contributing participants is designated as (*n* = number of sources). Quotes are followed by the pseudonym, gender, and age of the participant. This section is followed by a discussion of comparisons of thematic outcomes with demographic variables. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings of the study.

### **Description of the Participants**

Twenty eight fifth grade participants were recruited from three elementary schools in Northeast Georgia. Figure 3 illustrates the consort process utilized to recruit and select participants for the study. It should be noted that three of the 91 parent consent forms that were returned to the researcher indicating denial of participation also included unsolicited comments written by the parents such as, “Do not interview my child” and “I do not feel this is the

appropriate grade level for this.” No written comments were recorded on consent forms granting permission for the child to participate in the study.



*Figure 3.* Process for the recruitment of participants.

One participant opted out of the study. The final sample included 12 males and 15 females ( $N = 27$ ), with one participant self-identifying as “something else, in the middle.” This participant was dressed in female clothes, chose a pseudonym from the group of female superheroes, and is categorized as a female in the school system. For the purposes of this study, this participant was classified as a female so that her data could be captured in the overall analysis. As depicted in Table 2, the participants were somewhat representative of the population of students in the local school system, with the minority populations slightly underrepresented in this study. In local school system, 4.7% of students are multiracial, 62.4% are white, 15.3% are Hispanic, and 12.6% are black (Barrow at a Glance, 2016). As presented in Table 3, participants ranged in age from 10 to 12 years old. The mean age was 10.74 years old.

Table 2

*Description of Ethnicity of Study Population by Gender*

Gender	Ethnicity				
	Multiracial	White	Hispanic	Black	Other
Male	2	7	1	1	1
Female	0	13	1	1	0
Percentage	7%	74%	7%	7%	4%

The researcher asked the participants about their family configuration and living arrangements (Table 3). When asked if they had any siblings, every participant reported having at least one. Participants were grouped in three categories based on their placement in their sibling group: youngest child, middle child, and oldest child. It should be noted that several participants described not only having siblings, but also having cousins who reside in the home with them. These cousins were also considered “siblings” for the purpose of this study due to the similarity in the socialization that occurs between cousins and siblings who live in the same home (Gorman, 2015).

Table 3

*Description of Sibling Placement and Age by Gender of Participant*

Gender	Sibling Placement			Age		
	Youngest	Middle	Oldest	10	11	12
Male	2	6	4	3	8	1
Female	9	2	4	6	8	1
Percentage	40.7%	29.6%	29.6%	33%	59%	7%



The majority of the participants reported that they reside with both biological parents. Participants not residing with their parents reported that they reside with either their grandparents or their aunt and uncle. Table 4 includes an illustration of the distribution of participants by Head of Household and gender. The reader will note that 67% of students reside with both parents, and 26% reside with their mother only.

Table 4

Description of Parents/Guardians by Gender of Participant

Gender	Head of Household			
	Both Parents	Mother Only	Dad Only	Other
Male	7	3	0	0
Female	11	4	1	1
Percentage	67%	26%	4%	4%

In addition, it is important to note that seven of the participants are enrolled in what is referred to as the “Gifted Program” in their respective schools. This program provides enhanced educational opportunities to extend and accelerate learning and achievements of students who are recommended by their teacher and meet criteria for gifted services including advanced scores on norm-referenced tests (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011). Though this was not within the scope of demographic information the researcher requested, it was self-evident when the researcher visited the classrooms to retrieve the participants to participate in the interviews.

### **Interview Overview**

The questions for the study were broad and open ended, and informed by the dating violence literature. Having employed the member checking process throughout all interviews

conducted, data used for this study originated from the interview transcriptions and anecdotal notes recorded by the researcher and MSW Intern. Anecdotal notes also included records of observations that emerged as a result of peer debriefing with the intern. Data analysis was driven primarily by the codes and themes that emerged from the data and provided connections among the domains. The following section presents a brief overview of themes that emerged from each domain with examples of codes supporting each theme. General descriptions for each theme are highlighted by select examples of the thick and rich narratives provided by the participants.

### **Initial Coding Results**

Using the procedures outlined in Chapter 3, initial coding resulted in over 145 codes. After consultation with a TDV subject-matter expert the researcher examined each code to identify and merge redundancies, which resulted in 112 codes. For example “smile” and “happy” were merged; and “looks like a friendship” was merged with “doesn’t look different than friends”; “use bad words” and “say bad things” were merged; “break up then make up” was merged with “breaking up with each other”. One code, “parents either say yes or no” was removed as there was only one narrative attached to this code, which was already captured by another similarly worded code. Twenty one codes only occurred once in the narrative and were therefore either merged with similar codes or were removed with a few exceptions that are discussed in detail below.

### **Overview of Overarching Constructs, Domains, and Themes**

As the data collection phase of the study began the researcher recorded anecdotal notes including initial impressions of emergent trends. Additionally, notes kept in the researcher’s field journal were utilized to capture additional observations and impressions of trends during the data collection and analysis process. These trends would later be identified as two overarching

constructs of preadolescent perceptions of dating, Ambivalence and Taboo. These constructs were supported by the data as the first seven themes contributed directly to these constructs. Throughout this chapter, the number located in the parenthesis beside themes and categories refers to the number of times each code or theme emerged. The number of participants who made statements contributing to the code (sources), theme, domain, or construct is identified with an “*n*”.

### **Ambivalence**

The researcher observed that there appeared to be a pervasive ambivalent attitude about dating among 89% of participants therefore, the first construct was labeled Ambivalence. First, participants referred to their peers as “Dating But Not Really Dating” ( $n = 15$ ), and they indicated that dating is a label but that it looks just like a friendship. A second theme that emerged often ( $n = 22$ ) was “Neutral: Some are Ok with it and Some are Not”. The third theme supporting the construct of Ambivalence was evidenced by the most commonly occurring code in the study: “I don’t know” (63;  $n = 24$ ). Because “I don’t know” is used as a filler construct in common speech, and was apparent in participant responses, for the purposes of data analysis, instances of “I don’t know” as filler were coded differently from “I don’t know” reflective of ambivalence. Instances when “I don’t know” was used as filler were coded together with other fillers such as “um”. The statement, “I don’t know” was made more often than any other statement, and occurred frequently among multiple participants. For example one participant responded “I don’t know” to seven out of the total 11 questions. Often participants would begin their responses to questions with “I don’t know” however, when probed they would provide more content-related responses. This code occurred most frequently when participants were asked to define and describe dating ( $n = 9$ ), healthy dating ( $n = 7$ ), unsafe dating ( $n = 8$ ), and how

technology is used by people who date ( $n = 12$ ). Surprisingly none of the participants indicated an “I don’t know” response when they were asked to describe unhealthy dating, or negative ways technology is used. This phenomenon is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

### **Dating is Taboo**

Consistent with reports from the literature that early dating is correlated with negative outcomes (Orpinas, Horne, et al., 2013), participants in the current study described dating among fifth graders as taboo. They referred to dating as “frowned upon” saying fifth graders are “too young to date” but “we date anyway”. Most of the participants ( $n = 20$ ) provided statements to support this construct. It is interesting to note the notion of taboo occurs infrequently in dating literature, and is primarily utilized to describe perceptions of sex before marriage among teen dating partners (Wouters, 2014). Themes contributing to this construct include Too Young To Date (47;  $n = 20$ ), Dating Is Frowned Upon (76;  $n = 23$ ), Secret (40,  $n = 16$ ), Reasons to Date (45;  $n = 18$ ), and Definitions of Dating (24;  $n = 14$ ).

Though both of these constructs were originally observed during the data collection phase of the study they were consistently supported throughout data analysis by the frequency of related themes and codes.

### **Themes Extracted from the Data**

Table 5 provides an illustration of each theme, the codes that were grouped into each theme, the list of domains through which the theme emerged, and the number of participants who made statements related to each theme. Additionally percentages of females and males contributing to the theme are included beneath the number of participant sources.

Table 5

*Codes and Sources Contributing to Themes*

Theme (Frequency)	List of Code(s) (Frequency)	List of Domain Sources	Number of Participant Sources
Too Young (47)	Too young (36) Should date at age...(11)	Description of Dating What Parents Say Unhealthy Dating Healthy Dating	$n = 20$ Female: (69%) Male: (31%)
Dating is Frowned Upon (76)	Parents say don't date (22), Secret (17), Communicate when not in school (5), Avoid rumors (9), Date at home and not at school (5), Dating is not cool (4) Dating is Frowned Upon (14).	Descriptions of Dating Healthy Dating Unhealthy Dating What Parents Say Pressure to Date Reasons for Conflict	$n = 23$ Female: (59%) Male (41%)
Neutral: Some are ok with it and some are not (40)	Some parents are ok with it and some are not (10), Parents are ok with it (10), Not expected to date (20),	Description of Dating What Parents Say Pressure to Date	$n = 22$ Female: (54%) Male: (46%)
Dating , But Not Really (31)	Just a label (12), Doesn't look different than friends (9), Dating but not really dating, Do it to look cool (3), Do it to fit in (4), Annoying (3)	Descriptions of Dating Healthy Dating Unhealthy Dating Technology What Parents Say Reasons for Conflict Pressure to Date	$n = 15$ Female: (59%) Male: (41%)
Secret (40)	Communicate when not in school (5), Avoid rumors (9), Date at home and not at school (5), Secret (17) Drama (4)	Reasons for Conflict Unhealthy Technology	$n = 16$ Female: (51%) Male: (49%)

Theme (frequency)	List of Code(s)	List of Domain Sources	Number of Participant Sources
Definition of Dating (24)	Like more than a friend (13), Like each other (6), Just you and the other person (5).	Descriptions of Dating Healthy Dating Technology	<i>n</i> = 14 Female: (55%) Male: (45%)
Reasons to Date (45)	Pressure from kids (10), Do it to look cool (3), Do it to fit in (4), That one girl or boy (5) Pressure from parents, adults, and older kids (10), To look happy/smile (3).	Pressure to Date Conflict Unhealthy Dating	<i>n</i> = 18 Female: (48%) Male: (52%)
Guidelines For Dating (61)	Know the person (14), Rules for dating (11), Adult dating ideas (10), Act nicer to each other (6), Like each other (6), You don't have to date (9), Be respectful (5).	Description of Dating Healthy Dating Unhealthy Dating What Parents Say Reasons for Conflict Healthy Technology Unhealthy Technology Helping Someone in an Unsafe Relationship (All domains)	<i>n</i> = 26 Female: (50%) Male: (50%)
"Good" Dating Behaviors (108)	Talk to each other (21), Spending time together (18), Hanging out (16), Physical affection (24), Play with each other (6), Happy/Smile (4), Say I love you (4). Call or text on the phone (15)	Description of Dating Healthy Dating Unhealthy Dating Healthy Technology Unhealthy Technology Reasons for Conflict What Parents Say Helping Someone in an Unsafe Relationship	<i>n</i> = 27 Female: (51%) Male: (49%)
Trust and Mistrust (35)	Cheating (18), Like someone else (3), Jealousy (7), Trust (7)	Description of Dating Healthy Dating Unhealthy Dating Unhealthy Technology Reasons for Conflict	<i>n</i> = 18 Female: (55%) Male: (45%)

Theme (frequency)	List of Code(s)	List of Domain Sources	Number of Participant Sources
Dating Conflict (128)	Fighting (20), Arguing (17), Being mean (29), Don't like each other (10), Like something different (7), Wants them to do something they don't want to do (7), Like someone else (3) Ignoring them (11), Jealousy (7) Breaking up with each other (10), Break up then make up (3), Stalking (4)	Healthy Dating Unhealthy Dating Unsafe Dating Reasons for Conflict Unhealthy Technology Pressure to Date	<i>n</i> = 27 Female: (57%) Male: (43%)
Pressures Within Dating (7)	Wants them to do something they don't want to do (7).	Unhealthy Dating Unhealthy Technology Pressure to Date Reasons for Conflict	<i>n</i> = 5 Female: (57%) Male: (43%)
Bystander Helping (47)	Talk to an adult (14), Talk to parents (7), Talk to the person (13), Tell them to break up (13).	Helping Someone in an Unsafe Relationship	<i>n</i> = 20 Female: (63%) Male: (37%)

Because themes were developed directly from the participant transcripts, they do not directly or exclusively align with each domain. Instead relationships between the themes and domains became more evident through the rich text associated with the codes and themes. This combination allowed for a more parsimonious development of themes, many of which are also supported by the literature. All participants were given equal opportunity to provide responses within each domain with the exception of unsafe dating. This question was added to the interview guide after the first three participants had been interviewed.

To gain a greater understanding of their perceptions of dating, the researcher asked participants probing questions in addition to the questions on the interview guide. As an

example, after interviewing several participants this researcher wanted to know their perceptions about how many kids their age date. The remaining participants were given a choice of answers: *None*, *Very Little*, *Some*, *A Lot*, and *All*. One participant answered *None*, 15 participants answered *Very Little*, nine participants answered *Some*, and three participants indicated that *A Lot of kids their age date*. This finding was consistent with other studies that suggest that 20 to 28% of pre-teens report engaging in some form of dating or romantic relationship (Connolly et al., 2004). Also to ensure that the researcher was utilizing terminology consistent with that used by the participants, she asked participants to identify words they use to describe dating and dating partners. The term “dating” was frequently identified as the only way to describe this kind of relationship. Other synonyms were provided infrequently but included: “Going out,” “In a relationship,” and “Together”. Synonyms for dating partners were “Boyfriend and Girlfriend,” and “Bae”. It should be noted that Bae is a slang term that has strong connections to social media, “The meaning of Bae is largely understood to be “babe,” and some say that it is an acronym for “Before Anyone Else” (Retrieved from <http://slangdefinition.com/bae-meaning/>).

Additionally, because of the potential for the study to inform a local intervention, the researcher asked the participants for advice on how to help people their age maintain healthy dating relationships. Responses to this question were woven throughout many of the themes presented below.

### **Emerging Themes within Domains**

The following section presents a detailed discussion of the themes that emerged within each domain. A selection of codes contributing to each theme is included however a more extensive list of supporting codes can be located in Table 5. Except as otherwise identified most themes were not domain-specific. Themes occurred across domains indicating the uniqueness of



the themes while supporting the interdependence of the themes, codes, and domains. Following are descriptions of themes as they occurred in each domain.

**Domain 1: Descriptions of dating.** The researcher asked the participants to describe dating. Similar to the findings presented by Shaffer (2013) descriptions of dating included illustrations of the relationship, as well as of behaviors in the relationship. “Getting to know the other person” was the most prevalent code, and is related to four of the themes that emerged in this domain. Themes relating to descriptions of the relationship were Definition of Dating, and Dating but Not Really Dating. Themes related to dating behaviors included Good Dating Behaviors and Guidelines for Dating.

**Definition of dating.** Many participants ( $n = 14$ ) provided definitions of dating when they were asked to describe dating including, “You would like each other more than friendship” (Aqualad, 11 year old male). Participants ( $n = 5$ ) also described, “Dating is just you and another person” (Maxx, 11 year old male). When asked to describe what dating means, another participant reluctantly described their peers as liking each other and hanging out,

I’m not sure how to answer that question. I actually don’t know. The girl in our class, she told me that the boy liked her and they are together and she told me that they are dating. When they got together, they started hanging out a lot and tell each other everything. I really don’t know what dating means. They hold hands, they give hugs. (Valkyrie, 10 year old female)

**Dating but not really dating.** In eight interviews, participants described their peers as saying that they are dating however participants did not really think that this qualified the relationship as a dating relationship. There were a variety of reasons presented by the participants: fifth graders cannot go on dates because they cannot drive; “dating is just a label,”

“I think kids now don’t actually know what it is, so they just put labels or something like that” (Pepper, 11 year old female) and it looks just like a friendship, “It is the same as friends” (Valkyrie, 10 year old female); they date to be cool “They are just doing it for the looks. They date to make people think they are cool” (Mystique, 11 year old female); and they keep it secret that they are dating, and only date when they are not in school. One participant stated, “They are technically not dating even though they say they are” (Valkyrie, 10 year old female). A few participants referred to the word “Love,” “They say I love you but I don’t think they really do” (Pepper, 11 year old male). Another participant said, “Like they think they are boyfriend and girlfriend, but not really” (Malina, 10 year old female). A few participants explained why they believe that kids their age are not really dating, “You aren’t really dating if you aren’t going out” (Maxx, 11 year old male).

When describing dating from a behavioral lens, participants presented information that was coded into themes corresponding to Good Dating Behaviors, and Rules for Dating.

**“Good” dating behaviors.** Participants provided similar descriptions for good dating behaviors such as talking to each other “When you date somebody, they probably would be like holding hands or something like that, or staying together most of the time” (Steel, 10 year old male), and spending time together, “That person is always around with each other” (Raven, 11 year old female).

Also, the majority of participants ( $n = 15$ ) described physical affection behaviors that included hugging and holding hands. Kissing was described by two participants, one as a healthy dating behavior, “They hold each other’s hands. They hug each other” (Xena, 11 year old female), and one as an unsafe dating behavior.

***Guidelines for dating.*** This was one of the largest themes with all participants contributing. Participants described a variety of guidelines or rules that shape dating behaviors. There appear to be three primary sources for the rules, the youth, “Just don’t let the person be a bad person” (Xena, 11 year old female); their parents, “The parent who allows it says don’t kiss them or hug them” (Shera, 12 year old female); and school rules, “We are not allowed to use technology at school” (Gideon 11 year old male). Participants ( $n = 11$ ) described parents as setting the rules for dating, including not using technology before homework is completed, or after bedtime, “Sometimes it is unhealthy, you might say, to stay up all night talking or calling and not getting any sleep” (Gideon, 11 year old male). Another pervasive code included in this theme is “Get to know the person” ( $n = 14$ ), and occurred in most domains, including descriptions of dating, what parents say, healthy dating behaviors, and advice.

Get to know the person to see if they are right for you. If they are right for you, you can start a relationship. You can take the time to get to know them and know them for who he really is or her. (Magneto, 10 year old male)

Another participant explained their suggestions for dating,

You need to make sure that you know the person really well. I would say if you had just started out at a new school then you need to hold back because you can’t just like someone immediately if you don’t know their personality, you don’t know anything about them, you don’t even know if they are going to be mean. You don’t know if they will be nice, or if they are going to pick on you, if they are going to be bullies or if they are going to touch you. Like, if I was going to do something, I would need to know someone really well if I was going to do it. I guess you introduce yourself, you talk and then you become really good friends. (Kata, 11 year old female)

The following participant had some additional ideas about getting know the person before you date them,

Get to know the person first. This takes one to three months....You have to know more about the person. Who what they are, see if they are ready. Then if you are ready, you can do it (date)....You know you are ready when you know them for a big period of time...Teens can go one to three months, but kids my age need a year. (Valkyrie, 10 year old female)

Other codes that contribute to this theme were adult dating ideas (10), like each other (6), you don't have to date (4), be respectful (5), and act nice to each other (6). All of these themes and codes provided insight into pre-teens' descriptions of dating.

**Domain 2: Beliefs and descriptions of healthy dating.** After participants were asked to describe dating in general the researcher then asked them to describe healthy dating. A notable finding of this study was multiple participants ( $n = 7$ ) were initially unable to describe healthy dating. With these participants, the researcher asked additional probing questions and also asked the participant if they could describe unhealthy dating instead. For six participants, it was apparent that they could more easily describe unhealthy dating. The researcher then repeated the question about healthy dating, and was able to elicit responses from the same six participants. Responses aligned with several themes that emerged in the overall study. Many of the responses from participants were worded negatively (i.e. don't cheat, don't fight, don't break up). Most are recorded under the next domain with the assumption that these themes connect both healthy and unhealthy dating beliefs and descriptions. "I guess just not fighting. They aren't afraid to have people know they are dating" (Hera, 10 year old female), and "Them not yelling and not calling them bad names and stuff" (Bolt, 11 year old male). "Good" Dating Behaviors (43) were

collectively identified in the narrative for this domain more than any other theme. The most prevalent responses to describe healthy dating were “Spending quality time together” (Plurabelle, 10 year old female) and “talk to each other.” Participants also described positive ways that technology can be used in dating relationships, “They communicate with each other when they are not in school” (Lex, 12 year old male). Some of the participants provided answers that described physical affection in this domain as well. “It would mean you hugging them before they leave...or maybe like talking to each other all the time and seeing each other” (Flash, 10 year old male).

One code that emerged in this domain reflected the notion of caring relationships as indicated by Orpinas, Hsieh, et al. (2013b). When asked to describe a healthy dating relationship, participants referred to liking each other and helping each other, “I’d say you’d be nice, you’d help them out if they need something. Like if they can’t reach something in the cabinet, or if you go out, you pay for it like a gentleman” (Gideon, 11 year old male). Similarly participants referred to trust as being an important element of a healthy dating relationship, “When you like trust this person and like you really like them. But not only how they look but their personality. They trust you and you trust them. They are loyal” (Electra, 11 year old female).

Some participants described their peers as being happy when they are in healthy dating relationships, “They are happy to be with each other, and so that is all” (Magnet, 10 year old male). Another participant referred to trust as being indicative of a healthy dating relationship. One participant stated that a healthy relationship means, “You aren’t afraid to have people know that they are dating” (Hera, 10 year old female), and several participants referred to healthy dating relationships as secret,

They don't want anyone to know that they are dating because a lot of kids are like, well, are really picky about who their friends date sometimes. That is why we mostly just keep it a secret that they are dating. (Kata, 11 year old female)

Participants indicated their peers secretly date, and sometimes this is to avoid rumors about them, and the drama that coincides with their friends learning that they are dating, "They don't talk a lot at school, they don't socialize or nothing. But when they are not in school, they talk and they text a lot" (Kata, 11 year old female). This statement is consistent with the notion that the majority of dating behaviors occur via technology while participants are not in school (Christopher et al., 2016). Though some domains had strong agreement among responses healthy dating relationships elicited contrasting responses from participants. These contrasts were not related to demographics such as gender, age, or household composition, and are discussed further in later sections.

**Domain 3: Beliefs and descriptions of unhealthy dating.** In describing unhealthy dating participant responses included descriptions of dating behaviors as well as relationship dynamics. From this domain emerged the following themes, Conflict; Trust and Mistrust; Secrets; and Pressure Within Dating. Consistent with findings from the literature (Orpinas, Horne, et al., 2013; Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b; Orpinas et al., 2015; Orpinas et al., 2012), reports of aggression and arguing were prevalent among these young adolescents ( $n = 14$ ). References to physical fighting, however, were limited ( $n = 6$ ).

**Secrets.** As described in the previous section, participants referred to keeping secrets in their relationships as well as keeping their dating relationships secret from others. In some instances participants were describing healthy dating, and in other instances ( $n = 3$ ) however

indicated that keeping secrets is an aspect of unhealthy dating. “They lie to each other. They keep secrets. They yell at each other. They cheat on each other” (Maxx, 11 year old male).

***Conflict.*** Codes associated with conflict emerged frequently in this domain (70). Conflict is characterized by many of the ideas expressed by participants in this domain, including fighting, being mean, ignoring each other, and not knowing each other well. “Like they fight and they hurt each other. Hurt their feelings and physically hurt them” (Zod, 11 year old male), and “They probably don't even do anything together and they don't even like each other. They don't even know what dating is so they just try to be cool by dating. I don't think it is cool” (Pepper, 11 year old male). Also this was one of the domains in which participants described dating through a lens of adult behaviors. “They are yelling and their faces are turning red. Some people move out if they get mad at another person” (Penny, 11 year old female). As a result of initial participants’ reference to various conflicts that can occur in dating, the researcher began asking the remaining participants to identify potential reasons for conflict, therefore conflict is also a domain.

***Trust and mistrust.*** One of the most prevalent responses to the question about unhealthy dating involved references to cheating, jealousy, and trust. Participants described cheating and jealousy in dating behaviors 24 times.

When you never talk to them and you really don't trust them and you don't tell them any secrets and you don't really talk to them. You argue like all of the time and you never make up and you keep breaking up and getting back together. (Electra, 11 year old female)

***Pressure in dating.*** While participants provided descriptions that indicated feelings of pressure to date, a few participants also described pressures within the dating relationship. This theme is not frequently occurring (5), its appearance in the discussion of unhealthy dating and unsafe dating should be noted. Participants described an awareness of feeling a pressure to do things that they do not like or want to do. “Get mad at you if you don’t hang out with them” (Shera, 12 year old female). Another participant described a similar incident in the 4th grade,

Making the other person do everything that they want. Last year there was a girl in my class who had a boyfriend she was always making him do all this stuff. Everything that she wanted. Like making him kiss. She would make him kiss her when her shoe was untied and he didn't tie it then she told him that he had to kiss her. Because I don't think that people should really be bossing other people around. (Siri, 10 year old female)

**Domain 4: Unsafe dating.** After three of the participants described unsafe dating situations, the researcher added a question to explore participants’ awareness of unsafe dating. The initial responses to this question were primarily “I don’t know” (n = 10) however 14 participants were able to describe unsafe behaviors including threats, stalking, taking inappropriate pictures, posting inappropriate things online, breaking up, and fighting. Three participants described kissing as an unsafe dating behavior. It should be noted that very few of the statements made by participants in the study were gender specific. When asked about unsafe dating one participant stated “Either male or female abusing each other. Doing inappropriate things to each other” (Starfire, 10 year old female). Additionally during the discussion about unsafe dating, one participant described an incident involving children hiding while the adults were “fighting every day, yelling, hitting, kicking, and throwing dishes”(Xena, 10 year old female). Because of the parameters of the IRB approved study, and the instructions that



participants were given to describe experiences of kids their age in general rather than their own experiences specifically, a referral was made to the counselor at the elementary school for follow up.

**Domain 5: What parents say.** The researcher asked the participants to describe what parents say about dating, and observed that participants primarily described whether parents permitted dating. Messages about how to date were absent in the narratives. One participant stated, “Parents don’t talk to kids about dating” (Blade, 11 year old male). Parallels can be drawn between participants’ descriptions of dating, and their reports of what parents say about dating. Nine participants stated that parents say that they should not date. The themes that developed within this domain were Too Young to Date; Dating is Frowned Upon, Neutral; Some Are Ok With It and Some Are Not; and Dating But Not Really Dating. It should be noted that these themes also comprise a large part of the constructs, Taboo and Ambivalence.

***Too young.*** Similar to previous studies with teens ages 14 and up, most participants indicated that parents think this age is too young to date (Shaffer, 2013).

Some parents are ok with it I guess you would say. My parents would not be ok with it, because I am not allowed to date until I turn 13. Some parents are like shocked because I think that they think that they are like kissing in a school area and like that. No one has, at least I don't know that they have, but my parents would be shocked. (Kata, 11 year old female)

Participants indicated that kids should wait to date until they are either in high school, going to prom, or driving. The ages that participants indicated were appropriate to begin dating ranged from 13 to 18. One participant indicated that the age of the person talking to you influences the age until which they tell you to wait. “If the person is older, then they want you to wait longer”

(Pepper, 11 year old male). Though participants recommended different ages for dating, they consistently indicated fifth grade is too young.

***Dating is frowned upon.*** This theme was developed from a statement that one participant made during one of the first interviews. This notion was replicated multiple times throughout the study referring to participants' perceptions of opinions of their peers and parents. "I think parents would frown upon it" (Pepper, 11 year old male). When asked if kids their age date one participant's response was, "They date but they shouldn't be dating" (Hera, 10 year old female). Participants indicated that parents do not encourage them to date at this age. "From their face expressions, parents don't like it" (Maxx, 11 year old male).

***Neutral, some are ok with it and some are not.*** "My parents say I shouldn't date, but they let me do it if I think I should do it. So I do it" (Maxx, 11 year old male). Participants indicated variety in adult opinions of fifth graders dating. "Some parents say they can and some say they can't" (Loki, 11 year old female). Participants ( $n = 12$ ) described parents as being both ok with it and not ok with it. However as one participant indicated it is because they are not really doing anything different than they would in a friendship. When gathering demographic information the researcher asked participants to identify the parent with whom they spend the most time. Four of the participants indicated that they are closest to both parents, 16 are closest to their mother, and seven reported being closest to their father. Of the children who reported being closest to their mother, over half indicated that parents say don't date. One participant closest to both parents indicated that parents say it is ok to date, and two participants closest to their father indicated that parents say it is ok to date.

***Dating but not really dating.*** One of the reasons participants gave for parents being okay with dating at this age is though the participants say that they are dating, they are not really

dating. “Most don’t care because they know that it is not even nothing now” (Bolt, 11 year old male). Another participant pointed out, “They say it is not really dating, because we are not going out and not going out to places. They don’t say anything about how to date” (Maxx, 11 year old male). Though all participants were able to provide a response regarding what parents say about dating their recollections of parent conversations focus primarily on whether or not fifth graders should date as opposed to how they should date.

**Domain 6: Pressure to date.** “No one expects me to date” (Buffy, 11 year old female). In this domain participants were asked if kids their age are expected to date. It should be noted that 78% of the participants stated that there is no expectation that they should date. “I know a lot of my friends and my mom and their moms and dad say that you can’t date until you are like 30 or something. Because they don’t want you to grow up” (Mystique, 11 year old female). The researcher noted however that 56% of the participants described elements of dating that indicate pressure. Most of the statements related to pressure to date involve participants feeling pressure from their peers, followed by pressures from adults. These statements fall into one theme titled Reasons to Date, and are described below.

**Reasons to date.** This theme was developed out of participants describing a variety of things that impact their decision to date. When this study was designed the researcher sought to learn more about participants’ feeling pressured to date. Although participants ( $n = 21$ ) indicated that they do not feel they are expected to date they described reasons that kids their age date. “I think that some kids actually are pressured to date since maybe their friends have dates” (Pepper, 11 year old female). Some of the participants ( $n = 8$ ) described feeling pressure from their peers sometimes as a result of feeling pressure to fit in.

There is one particular girl in our school who has to like someone in our school, like she has to, but the boy just doesn't want to because it is not the right time. I totally agree with him, and I am like she just has to like somebody. If that boy doesn't like her then she goes on to the next and the next and the next. And we are all just like, "yeah" you are probably not going to get a boyfriend if you just keep doing that. I think that she does it for attention because she is one of those kids that bullies people a lot. (Kata, 11 year old female)

Another example of pressure from peers was elucidated by two boys,

Kids on my bus that sit next to me actually do expect fifth graders to date because fifth graders have to get into the knowledge of healthy relationships, and when they grow up they will get a better understanding of how to do dating and stuff (Magnet, 10 year old male);

and,

There are some people who say y'all should be dating and stuff like that. If they think that they are a good match for each other, they don't make you date, but you might feel pressure to date. (Aqualad, 11 year old male)

Four of the participants described pressure from older siblings and adults. "Their adult sister and brother may tell them to date" (Penny, 11 year old male). Another participant described his impressions of another participant's experiences with pressure to date,

One person probably is. She dates everyone in the school and everyone likes her except the smart kids. I don't know how she knows that she is expected to date. Her mom probably expects her to date. (Bolt, 11 year old male)

Three participants indicated parents, older siblings, and other adults pressure them to date, “Because maybe like my mom’s friend always teases me about having a girlfriend” (Flash, 10 year old male). Additionally three participants stated that they might be inclined to date because their older siblings or friends who are dating look happy and smile.

**Domain 7: Technology.** Participants were asked to describe how technology is used among kids their age who date. The participants seemed to demonstrate the most consistency in their narratives when describing the use of technology in dating. This consistency is evident by the number of times that the words Text, Social Media, and, Phone appear in the data. Participants referred to the use of texting 33 times in the data ( $n = 25$ ). Texting was followed by references to social media sites such as Instagram ( $n = 13$ ), Facetime ( $n = 9$ ), Snapchat ( $n = 9$ ), Kick ( $n = 7$ ), Facebook ( $n = 8$ ), Musicly ( $n = 7$ ) and Twitter ( $n = 5$ ). Participants referenced calling each other on the phone ( $n = 20$ ) and sending emails ( $n = 2$ ). Only one participant stated he did not have a cell phone, although this was not a question that was asked in the interviews. Multiple participants indicated that they are not allowed to use technology while in school, and therefore dating behaviors happen more often outside of school, “At school we don’t usually do social media at school” (Gideon, 11 year old male). None of the participants referred to gaming devices, which may be due to the fact that the question how technology is used by people who date.

**Domain 8: Unhealthy technology in dating.** Technology was primarily described as a good communication tool for participants. When asked how technology can be used in an unhealthy way by people who date participants provided very few descriptions. Seven participants said “I don’t know.” Participants referred to cyberbullying (3) “They bully you...they say mean things” (Mystique, 11 year old female), posting mean things about a person

(8), or posting inappropriate pictures and things (7). “Being anonymous and saying bad things sometimes. Bad things about them. Things you don't like about them. Use someone else's phone” (Aqualad, 11 year old male). Three participants referred to the ability to track phones, “They can track your phone so they know where you are and they can hurt you really bad” (Lex, 12 year old male). Additional codes captured by this theme include breaking up, and ignoring them “Not calling, not texting, and not checking in to say that they are alright” (Penny, 11 year old female).

One participant described what they believed to be a positive use for technology, “Facetiming to prove that they are actually there and they are not like someone else, or not with someone else” (Zod). This description of healthy dating appears to be contradictory to common attitudes among professionals about the problematic use of technology to monitor a partner’s activities.

The use of technology is prevalent and seems to be at the center of dating in the fifth grade. Unsafe use of technology was only mentioned by a small number of participants despite all participants contributing information in this domain.

**Domain 9: Reasons for conflict.** Throughout the data collection process the researcher observed that participants referred to a variety of sources of conflict among their dating partners. To better understand participants’ perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating the researcher asked the participants to identify potential causes of conflict in dating relationships. Many of the codes that emerged from the data were similar to those associated with healthy and unhealthy dating and have already been referred to in previous sections. Those codes include being mean (22), don’t like each other (10), like something different (7), ignoring them (11), and keeping it a secret (17). The themes that emerged from this domain include Trust and Mistrust, Pressure In Dating, and Dating But Not Really.

***Trust and mistrust.*** As stated previously this theme emerged in a variety of domains. Multiple participants referred to cheating and jealousy as reasons for conflict, “Since they are so young, they find someone else that they like, and then they're gonna get mad at each other and that's how they get mad” (Pepper, 11 year old male). In the anecdotal notes jealousy was one of the first themes identified due to the pervasive responses related to this notion; this was collapsed into another code, cheating.

***Pressure in dating.*** Pressure in dating was the last theme identified by the researcher in the data analysis with only one code contributing to the theme. Participants described potential sources of pressure within a dating relationship to do things that they do not want to do. “If a person asks them to do something and they don’t want to do that, then they may feel pressured to do it” (Siri, 10 year old female). The same participant went on to describe a girl making a boy kiss her if he did not tie her shoes. Another comment that emerged from this domain was “they force you to do something” (Kuzco, 11 year old male).

***Dating but not really.*** Other participants described conflict arising from the notion that the kids are not really dating. “They may not really like each other. They are just doing it for the looks. They date to make people think that they are cool. I think it is kind of gross” (Mystique, 11 year old female). Though this theme appears to be one of the hallmarks of dating among fifth graders participants consistently describe the theme as contributing to conflict.

**Domain 10: Helping someone in an unsafe relationship.** Participants often referred to ways they would intervene when their friends were involved in unhealthy and unsafe dating situations. As a result the researcher added a probing question to the interview guide to further explore these ideas. Responses to this question were grouped together into one theme, Bystander Helping. Participants described two primary ways of helping friends who are in unsafe dating

situations. The first and most common response was to talk with the person and tell them to break up, or tell them that they do not have to continue to date ( $n = 14$ ). “I would tell them not to hang out with that person. I’d tell them that it is not good for them to stay with them. I would try to help the boy or girl stay away from that person” (Raven, 11 year old female). The second most frequent response was to talk to an adult including parents and school teachers or counselors ( $n = 13$ ). “Give them advice if they need some. I would tell her to stay away from that person. I would tell a social worker or my mom or dad or my teacher” (Mystique, 11 year old female).

### **Outcomes Related to Research Questions**

Pre-teens describe dating from three perspectives. The first is a behavioral perspective wherein they describe spending time together and talking with each other. They describe using texting and social media as venues through which dating occurs due to the desire to keep dating a secret. This secrecy leads to the second perspective: opinions and beliefs. Pre-teens describe healthy and unhealthy dating according to their opinions about dating. Because the participants in this study believe dating to be taboo they seek to avoid rumors and drama by engaging in dating behaviors away from school. The third perspective is similar to Bandura’s notion of vicarious learning (Bandura, 1997). Pre-teens define and describe dating based on what they have learned from the experiences and perceptions of others (peers and adults). It is in this area that pre-teens experience pressures around dating, and develop their ideas about guidelines for dating.

### **Pressure to Date**

The researcher compared demographic information to participant responses indicating pressure to date. Because all of the participants reported having siblings there are limits to the variability in this study. It is unknown if results would be different with children who have no



siblings. Sibling group placement appears to have some impact on participants' feelings of pressure to date. Specifically 73% of participants ( $n = 8$ ) who are the youngest of their siblings report feeling pressures from peers and adults, while 63% ( $n = 5$ ) of participants who are the middle child, and 63% ( $n = 5$ ) of participants who are the oldest child report pressures to date. There appear to be no differences between genders among the participants' feelings of pressure to date. Additionally, only one of the four participants who reported being close to both parents made reference to pressure to date, as opposed to 75% of those closer to their mother ( $n = 12$ ), and 71% of those closer to the father ( $n = 5$ ). Because the participants primarily reported only whether the parents allow them to date, the researcher was unable to ascertain potential relationships between the presence of parenting statements and participants' perceptions of pressure to date.

Additionally 38% of participants with older brothers ( $n = 13$ ) were likely to make reference to pressures ( $n = 5$ ) to date compared to 30% ( $n = 3$ ) of participants with older sisters ( $n = 10$ ). Of the participants with no older siblings ( $n = 8$ ) 62% made statements connected with pressure to date ( $n = 5$ ) were primarily male (80%;  $n = 4$ ) and more likely to report pressure from peers than from adults, "I think that some kids actually are pressured (to date) since maybe their friends have dates and they find someone so that they can fit in but they don't really. They definitely want to fit in and are pressured by their friends" (Pepper, 11 years old, male).

### **What Parents Say**

All participants were asked what parents say about dating. There was one participant who described her father's insight into dating, "My dad's perspective is no, I want to know what this person looks like, what he is thinking, and what he is going to do. Every move they make" (Valkyrie, 10 year old female). The data revealed seven males and 11 females said parents say

“don’t date”; two males and six females said some parents say “it is ok to date,” but all of these females said that their own parents say they cannot date. There did not appear to be any differences related to who they spend the most time with and whether parents say ok or no to dating.

### **Unhealthy Dating and Digital Dating**

Several codes and themes emerged in both unhealthy dating and negative technology descriptions including being mean, cheating, rules for dating, dating but not really dating, and ignoring each other. From the data it is apparent that participants identified digital dating as way that unhealthy dating behaviors occur, with the specific addition of posting inappropriate and mean things. There are no notable differences across genders in each of these domains.

### **Significant Demographic Findings**

The distribution of emergent themes was analyzed within groups based on gender, sibling placement, and the household composition. There is a notable distinction between larger households as 63% ( $n = 12$ ) of participants who reported having older siblings and/or cousin(s) in their home talked about dating from an adult perspective, and described adult dating behaviors such as paying for a meal or helping to reach things.

As displayed in Table 5 most of the themes were gender neutral. There were a few differences including the themes Too Young to Date and Bystander Helping. In both cases, (69%,  $n = 10$ ; and 63%,  $n = 9$  respectively) female participants contributed slightly more codes within each theme. Additionally the findings of this study were similar to that of Fredland et al., (2005); as healthy relationships were explored both genders described respect, sharing interests, and having fun. Girls valued dating relationships characterized by trust and no cheating whereas boys valued buying things and helping.

Participants in the Gifted Program ( $n = 7$ ) accounted for 26% of the population, and provided 40% of “I don’t know” responses. These participants responded “I don’t know” most frequently to the questions asking them to describe dating, and unsafe dating, and to the questions around the use of technology. This appears consistent with previous studies in which adolescents with stronger academic performance are less likely to engage in dating behaviors at an earlier age (Orpinas, Horne, et al., 2013). Participants in the Gifted Program had a higher rate (45%) of describing elements of the theme involving reasons to date, which included pressure from kids and adults.

The researcher sought to determine if there were any differences in perceptions of pressure to date among participants from different schools, different household compositions, or different sibling placement. The synonym “Bae” was presented only by participants from one school. Additionally, the code referencing pressure by peers was primarily distributed between two of the three schools. There appear to be no consistent differences between genders across each domain. In contrast to reports of gender differences in the literature (Miller et al., 2009; Simon et al., 2010; Yahner et al., 2015), physical violence was considered an unhealthy behavior similarly across gender, age, and all other demographics.

### **Contradictions in the Data**

There are several areas in the study that produced contradictory findings. First, in the anecdotal notes and field journal the researcher recorded that there seemed to be no reference to “Love” among participants. After transcribing the interviews it became apparent that four participants referred to love. Three of the participants described dating behaviors that include saying the words “I love you.” One participant used “Love” to describe a dating relationship.

Second, as stated previously, participants presented contradictory opinions of keeping their dating relationships secret. Some described healthy dating relationships as being secret, while others described this as unhealthy and a source of conflict.

Third, when asked if children their age are expected to date participants overwhelmingly said no ( $n = 20$ ). However many participants described things that this researcher perceived as contributing to feelings of pressure to date. Participants indicated, “If you like someone, don’t tell a lot of people” (Kuzco, 11 year old male). Though they may not feel that they are expected to date this researcher concluded that there is a strong influence on dating from peers. This peer influence is evident in the notion that dating is taboo, but they continue to date, and reflected by the prevalence of secrecy in dating among this population.

As stated in previous sections, several of the themes represent contradictions in the data and in perceptions of dating. Dating But Not Really is a theme that emerged as a representation of participant descriptions of contradictions in pre-teen dating. Participants referred to relationships that are similar to friendships, and are not characterized by some of the traditional aspects of dating, like going out on dates or going places together. As a result, participants concluded that their peers say they are dating, but they are not really dating.

### **Pre-Dating**

Taking all of the above into consideration, findings from this study suggest there may be a pre-dating stage in the developmental trajectory, which by definition precedes dating, but captures some attitudes and behaviors that are linked to ideas of dating. This preliminary outcome is in part reflective of some of the conceptual and empirical literature related to developmental stages of dating (Brown, 1999; Christopher et al., 2016; Connolly et al., 2013). Because of the negative consequences of early dating identified in the literature, this finding

indicates that more research would be important to further clarify this stage of dating development in adolescents. From the current study pre-dating can be understood as the period of time during which pre-teens begin developing attitudes and behaviors in preparation for dating. Pre-teen cognitive functioning in this stage involves a transition from concrete operations to formal operations, thus their cognitive and emotional development are such that they may not yet be poised to fully consider the consequences and meaning of a dating relationship. Previous theories have presented information on the early stages of dating including the affiliation stage (Connolly et al., 2013), the initiation phase (Brown, 1999), and the application of steps of initiation (Bredow et al., 2008) and how relationships begin with the inclusion of the use of technology (Christopher et al., 2016). These descriptions, however do not describe the nature of the pre-teen relationships. According to Christopher et al. (2016), sixth through eighth graders followed a series of steps as they began to pursue a romantic interest as described by Bredow et al. (2008). These steps included deciding whether they are attracted to someone, deciding whether to make an overture based on whether they believe it will be successful, devising a strategy on how to present oneself, and building rapport. Consistent with the current study, these steps included an explanation for the role of peers in helping gather information to reduce uncertainty, and the role of technology in reducing the risk of uncertainty. As another parallel to the current study the researcher also explained that these behaviors are indicative of a “crush” or infatuation, but differ from being in a relationship (Christopher et al., 2016). Based on data from the current study, the pre-dating phase appears to include similar assertions about the roles of peers in helping to gather information and determine who should be dating whom, the uncertainty of early dating, and the use of technology as a protective mechanism. In addition to the assertions of Christopher et al. (2016), characteristics of the pre-dating phase may also

include not knowing what dating is when it does not conform to traditional definitions of going places together, opinions that pre-teens should not date, and the inclusion of ideas about caring relationships in pre-dating.

In the initiation phase as described by Brown (1999) young adolescents are becoming acquainted with the other gender with a focus on gaining confidence in relating to the other gender. The second phase (status phase) is characterized by adolescents being confronted by pressure of dating the right or wrong people as defined by their peers. Drawing from this perspective though the participants in the current study expressed similar pressure from peers regarding who they should date, they did not describe whether other genders have joined their social network. Participants also emphasized the importance of getting to know the person before making the decision to date them. Additionally participants in this study described healthy and unhealthy dating based on their perceptions of dating rules. The pre-dating stage may also be characterized by mimicking dating behaviors such as holding hands, and hugging.

In the affiliation phase (Connolly et al., 2013) young adolescents begin to form mixed-gender peer groups, and the onset of puberty triggers interest in other genders. Adolescents become intensely interested in romance, and dating is measured by the frequency that youth see their boyfriend or girlfriend outside of school. Connolly et al. (2013) also describes adolescents who were early daters or late bloomers, compared to the behaviors of their same age counterparts. Similar to the current study, there was a general absence of gender differences in the affiliation stage. According to the data in the current study pre-dating is characterized by pre-teens descriptions of not really knowing what dating means, and having an interest in talking about dating, yet a sense of ambivalence towards dating. Participants in the current study describe dating as occurring primarily over technology and made little mention of their peers

seeing a boyfriend or girlfriend outside of school. The notion of early daters appears to be represented in the current study and may describe the one boy or girl who participants described in the study as dating everyone and pressuring others into dating them.

The stage of pre-dating builds upon and expands the significant contributions of Brown (1999), Connolly et al. (2013), and Christopher et al. (2016). The characteristics of the pre-dating stage lend a more in depth description of the interplay between adolescent development, peer relationships, the integration of technology, and the opinions of pre-teens.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented a detailed description of the findings regarding preteens' perspectives of dating, dating violence, digital dating behaviors, and pressures to date. There are several notable findings from this study. For example, despite the rich data obtained from participants about their perceptions of dating, many of the participants were initially unable to describe dating until the researcher proceeded with probing questions about unhealthy dating. This discrepancy is balanced by the finding that the theme good dating behaviors were identified in the narratives more than any other theme, or may be a reflection upon the way the research questions were worded as they are on developmental stage. Participants were more able to articulate specific dating behaviors, as opposed to answering the broader question, describe dating.

Feelings of pressure to date was an area of the study that required probing to elicit responses. The delayed response may be a result of the way that the question was worded, "are kids your age expected to date." It was surprising to this researcher that when asked if they were expected to date, there was no reference to media influence, despite the prevalence of studies that have examined the influence of media on sexuality and body image among adolescents (Brown

& Bobkowski, 2011; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005). Additionally the literature supports that may be no differentiation between violence perpetrated through public venues such as social media, and private venues such as texting and email (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008a). The findings of this study are similar. This study also supported previous notions that TDV behaviors are less gender-specific than adult domestic violence (Barner & Carney, 2011; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Given the equal contributions by both male and female participants to the theme Guidelines for Dating, this researcher surmised that both genders have similar rules regarding dating.

In summary the results indicate that participants in the fifth grade are aware of dating behaviors, despite the overarching perspective that dating is taboo among this population, as evidenced by the statement of one male participant, “They don’t know what they should do when they are dating. They don’t understand healthy relationships” (Magneto, 10 year old male). There is significant overlap between some of the themes and domains. The group appears to be somewhat homogenous in their perceptions of dating, healthy and unhealthy dating, and pressures to date, thus lending credibility to a notion that there may be an additional phase of dating that expands upon current identification of dating progression in the research. A more detailed discussion about the findings and the resulting potential implications are presented in the next chapter.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

Teen dating violence remains a concern among researchers, educators, and domestic violence prevention agencies due to the range of negative consequences. Although studies demonstrate that dating begins as young as nine years old (Fredland et al., 2005), few studies have examined pre- and young adolescents' perspectives and experiences, as such there is a gap in understanding of how pre-adolescents conceptualize dating and dating violence. Additionally intervention literature does not identify the utility of prevention programs for children in grades earlier than sixth, yet youth who begin dating earlier are at risk for reduced emotional well-being (Connolly et al., 2013). The current qualitative study addressed some of these gaps in knowledge by exploring pre-teen perceptions of dating through the use of semi structured interviews with fifth grade students. Findings from this study begin to address some of the gaps by providing rich data related to this understudied group which highlight important areas for future research, and potentially provide direction for policy and prevention programs.

The overall findings of the study suggest there is a pre-dating phase in adolescent dating trajectories that begins to occur in the fifth grade. This phase is characterized by pre-teens' curiosity about dating and the formation of opinions, rules, and guidelines for dating. During this phase, pre-teens may engage in behaviors that mimic dating and are classified as "more than a friendship." As a result of these new experiences, there may be a heightened focus on trust, cheating, and jealousy. Finally, during this pre-dating phase, many pre-teens primarily utilize technology to socialize with their partner, and often keep the relationship a secret. The findings

from this study largely support existing literature, while contributing the notion that there is an early phase of dating that may be overlooked. Additionally the findings suggest that though the intimate partner violence literature provides a great deal of insight into the dynamics of partner violence, there are nuances within pre-teen dating that may alter some of the assumptions about healthy and unhealthy dating behaviors.

As outlined in Chapter 4, 13 themes emerged across the domains of descriptions of dating, healthy and unhealthy dating, pressure to date, parent influence, and technology use in dating. Two overarching constructs describing fifth graders' perceptions of dating became apparent: Ambivalence Toward Dating, and Dating is Taboo. Together these constructs reflected fifth graders' limited relationship knowledge and social experiences, and suggested the participants confirm the assertion that they should not be dating in the fifth grade. Despite these pervasive opinions of dating, pre-teens in this study were curious about dating, and were engaging in what the researcher identifies as pre-dating behaviors.

Previous studies have examined trajectories of teen dating and teen dating violence among adolescents from middle school to high school (Connolly et al., 2013; Espelage et al., 2014; Orpinas, Horne, et al., 2013; Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b; Orpinas et al., 2012). Additionally other studies have presented evidence of stages of romantic relationship development (Brown, 1999; Christopher et al., 2016; Collins et al., 2009; Connolly et al., 2009; Connolly et al., 2004; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Meier & Allen 2009). Each of these studies identified the first stage of dating as involving affiliation with mixed-gender peer groups around 11 years old (Brown, 1999). From the current study, the researcher has determined that there may be an additional pre-dating or early dating component that contributes to the dating trajectory and extends the notion of mixed-gender peer groups to include opinions of dating,

characteristics of the relationships, and rules and guidelines for dating. Similar to the findings of Connolly et al. (2013), this study supports the notion of “soft stages” (p. 1021) suggesting that some of the characteristics of each stage carry over to the next stage. In this chapter, the reader will find descriptions of dating that indicate dating among pre-teens has significant characteristics upon which later dating behaviors are built. This study adds to the current knowledge of dating trajectories by providing a rich description of pre-dating perceptions and behaviors which then inform characteristics of the first few stages of dating including “Positive Communication” and “Early Stage in a Relationship” (Goldman et al., 2015).

The findings of this study suggest pre-teens form ideas around dating consistent with their developmental stage. According to Piaget (1970), children at this age are beginning to move from the concrete operations stage of cognition to the formal operations stage. Around 11 years old children are in the very early stages of understanding abstract ideas. They are used to understanding the world around them according to rules that define what is right or wrong, and what is good or bad. Their next challenge at approximately 11 or 12 years old is to begin to understand the more abstract ideas that include the grey areas and inferential reasoning. This stage of cognitive development is not fully achieved until adulthood. According to social cognitive theory moral development is impacted by cognitive development and interpretations of one’s own experiences, as well as vicariously through the experiences of others (Bandura, 1997), thus indicating the interplay between cognitive development, behaviors, and input from the environment.

Consistent with the tenets of social cognitive theory, participants in the study described dating from three perspectives. From a behavioral perspective, they described spending time together and talking to each other. Because of the desire to keep dating a secret, participants used

social media and texting as the primary venues through which dating occurred. The secrecy is an example of the opinions and beliefs perspective as it reflects the opinions that dating is taboo and they should not be dating. The third perspective, vicarious learning, is evidenced by pre-teens' experiences with pressure to date, and the development of rules and guidelines that impact their dating behaviors. The impact of social cognitive theory and cognitive development is evident in this study, and provides a lens through which many of the findings can be interpreted. Following, a discussion of findings of the study and conclusions related to the research questions is presented.

### **Pre-teen Definitions and Descriptions of Dating: Square Peg in a Round Hole**

The researcher sought to learn what dating means to fifth graders. Early in the study, it became apparent that participants were eager to talk about dating, but they think they do not know what it really means for them as fifth graders. It was as though dating was a language they were not yet proficient in; they understand some of what is going on, and what they think they understand they may later learn is not what they thought, but they remain intrigued.

Participants described pre-teen dating as “not really dating” and “just a label.” Based on the findings, it appears these pre-teens have developed a specific set of rules, or guidelines for dating based on adult relationships, and the relationships among children their age do not assimilate into the mold they have conceptualized for dating. As an example, participants indicated that dating should involve going out on dates, yet they indicated that pre-teens do not go places with their boyfriend or girlfriend. Therefore, the notion of Dating But Not Really Dating indicates conflict for them as they attempt to put the square peg of pre-teen dating into a round hole of adult dating.

This conflict leads the researcher to surmise that the identification of pre-dating as a stage of dating designed specifically for pre-teens has the potential to provide a space for pre-teen experiences, interests, and opinions about dating. The emergence of pre-dating among this participant group is characterized by the themes developed in this study and resembles a stage in which pre-teens are uncertain about their own dating, but remain certain about rules and guidelines for dating. Pre-dating likely includes the stages of initiation as explained by Christopher et al. (2016) and Bredow et al. (2008) as well as elements of affiliation with mixed-gender peers outside of groups, as opposed to within groups as described by Connolly et al. (2013).

Dating ideas among these participants appear to be developed primarily through vicarious learning (Bandura, 1997). Initially when asked to describe dating among their peers many of the participants were unable to do so. When probed further about what dating looks like for fifth graders, participants were able to describe ideas about how dating should be. This contradiction may be the result of the conflict between the definition of dating they have learned from the media, older peer and adults, and the behaviors they have observed among their peers. Although the researcher did not directly explore the impact of media in the current study, the effects of media are key considerations that should factor into future research. Additionally, participants in this study believed that because their peers are not going out on dates, the label they attach to dating is not correct. This belief suggests that participants have not been exposed to guidance around what pre-teens are supposed to do when it comes to dating, and what they should call it when it does not involve going out on an actual date. The researcher refers to this as stage as pre-dating. Identifying this stage potentially provides a framework to capture behaviors exhibited by pre-teens expressing interest in dating thus creating an opportunity for discussions with pre-teens

about healthy and unhealthy pre-dating behaviors as well as an opportunity to inform future research in this area.

### **Healthy and Unhealthy Dating**

As the researcher met with the participants, it became apparent that many of the fifth graders were unable to articulate healthy dating. As the researcher asked additional probing questions, participants identified healthy dating behaviors which tend to reflect aspects of caring relationships: helping each other, checking on each other, trusting each other, being comfortable with each other, liking each other, physical affection, talking and spending time with each other, and saying nice things to each other. Conversely research demonstrates that TDV is associated with less caring relationships (Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b). The study's findings around descriptions of healthy dating align with existing research which describes the effects of caring relationships as a deterrent to TDV.

Notably the pre-adolescent participants in this study more easily identified unhealthy behaviors, and then, upon probing further, healthy dating was framed in unhealthy dating terms. Unhealthy behaviors identified by the participants in the current study (i.e. physical aggression and cheating) closely align with those outlined in TDV literature (Giordano et al., 2010; Simon et al., 2010). However, unlike previous studies that described sixth graders as perceiving hitting a boyfriend or girlfriend as acceptable in certain circumstances (Simon et al., 2010), participants in this study consistently described hitting and fighting as unhealthy behaviors.

These discrepancies may be reflective of the cognitive developmental stage of concrete operations among fifth graders. As stated in earlier sections, the intersection of cognitive development and vicarious learning may provide the best explanation for the variations among participant responses regarding unhealthy behaviors. Children who have had limited exposure to

relationships and the relationships of others may continue to remain in the concrete operational stage as described by Piaget, and see behaviors as either good or bad. However children who have been exposed to relationships, either personally or vicariously, may demonstrate an ability to expand their judgments of behaviors as being situational and dependent on more than one variable.

Multiple participants described healthy and unhealthy behaviors in terms of adult dating behaviors. When the researcher sought clarification, participants affirmed they were referring to adults. As the researcher probed further into their perceptions of unsafe dating among their peers, with one exception, participants said they did not know. As a result there appear to be gaps in pre-teens' understanding of unsafe dating, as well as gaps in their ability to articulate healthy dating behaviors among pre-teens. In examining the continuum of behaviors participants appear to be more versed in what they should not do, as opposed to what is dangerous and what is efficacious in dating.

Perhaps their focus at school on rules impacts this phenomenon. As an example school climates are often criticized for yielding an authoritative, punitive approach to behavior management and achievement (Konold et al., 2014). Perhaps the focus on "what not to do" has impacted pre-teens' perceptions of dating as well as other areas of socialization.

As an alternative explanation participants often described adult dating, and rules that guide adult dating behaviors. Additionally participants almost unanimously identified fifth graders as too young to date. Because pre-teens do not appear to be able to conceptualize expectations around how pre-teens can engage in healthy dating behaviors, the researcher suggests the reason that they present ambivalence about dating, and dating is considered taboo is because pre-teen dating does not fit their definitions of dating. This nuance leads the researcher

to surmise that pre-teen dating is not only a part of the trajectory of dating, but also requires attention from professionals and parents to help pre-teens conceptualize what pre-dating entails, and its role in the bigger picture of teen dating. Healthy, unhealthy, and unsafe pre-teen dating behaviors should be explicitly defined for children ages 10 to 12.

### **Like a Friendship, Building a Bridge**

To accommodate this dissonance between what dating actually looks like among fifth graders, and their conceptualizations of what dating means dating was described by many of the participants as looking like a friendship. Many of these outcomes mirror that of other studies as described below.

Dating among fifth graders was characterized by talking to each other and spending time together, or getting to know each other. These findings were consistent with studies conducted with older adolescents (Shaffer, 2013). Some participants described physical affection to include holding hands and hugging. In their study with older participants, Goldman et al. (2015) described the first two clusters as Positive Communication, characterized by spending time together, talking all day, laughing and smiling, and Early Stage in a Relationship, characterized by displays of affection and thinking it will last forever. Based on the descriptions the participants in the current study provided, dating among pre-teens is an extension of friendship in which individuals seek to engage with another person on a more intimate friendship level that mirrors some of the aspects of dating described by the participants in the study conducted by Goldman et al. (2015). In essence, the pre-teen behaviors and opinions lend insight into ways in which the bridge between friendship and dating is built, and begin to illuminate the notion of an early phase of dating (pre-dating) that contributes to the trajectories described in extant literature.



## **Trust and Mistrust**

Engaging in a new and potentially more intimate friendship may contribute to a feeling of vulnerability, and this vulnerability can lead to concerns about betrayal. This connection is reflected in the current study as one of the most common descriptions of healthy and unhealthy dating involved the theme of trust and mistrust. This theme potentially reflects the influence of media on pre-teens' perceptions of dating. As stated above the effects of media were outside of the scope of this study, however the implications of media influence on pre-teens is an area that warrants further consideration. As Bandura (1997) pointed out moral and social development are impacted by vicarious experiences. The notion of the impact of media on adolescents is a widely accepted idea. When the researcher conducted a search using Google on the topic, "Cheating in relationships in the media," Google provided over 4 million results in 0.53 seconds. Although this was not within the scope of this study, the researcher surmises that there may be an influence from media that possibly extends to pre-teens' perceptions of dating. The researcher suggests that the effects of media may be linked to the participants' focus on cheating as a primary conflict in dating. As a result, future research may examine this notion. Additionally the researcher suggests that because of the vulnerability that these new kinds of relationships present to fifth graders, the notion of trust emerged frequently in the data.

## **Technology**

Participants described dating as a secret activity that occurs primarily via technology. Interestingly, from the same search on Google mentioned above, it should be noted that the first hit was titled, "Social Networking Extends Cheating Opportunities." In the current study participants demonstrated the most consistency in describing the use of technology in dating. Participants described social media and texting as primary tools of communication used by pre-

teens who date, and dating via technology was primarily viewed positively by participants. When asked specifically about negative ways that people who are dating use technology, participants referred to threats, posting inappropriate things, saying mean things, and falsely claiming a dating relationship. These statements are consistent with the four categories identified by Bennett et al. (2011), hostility, humiliation, exclusion, and intrusiveness. Additionally Ely (2004) suggested that among adolescents, perpetrators and victims of DDV often do not consider their behavior as unacceptable or as violence, and because many of the behaviors are reciprocal between partners the incidents go underreported. Although reciprocity was not examined in this study, these findings provide a potential explanation for the contradictory response provided by one participant who described positive dating technology use as using Facetime to check in on their dating partner to ensure that they are at a certain location. Though this response was isolated to one participant it may be indicative that these potentially controlling behaviors may be viewed as an aspect of a caring relationship particularly presuming the absence of guidance around navigating the pre-dating phase. While conventional intimate partner violence (IPV) literature describes controlling behaviors as detrimental to a healthy and safe adult relationship (Simmons, Lehmann, & Collier-Tenison, 2008), this study leads the researcher to suggest that more information is needed in this area to explore whether such behaviors in pre-teens are controlling or are a result of fifth graders expressing their care and concern for another person. Another explanation might be that there is a contrast between the developmental level of the fifth graders and the nature of dating in the current technologic-central world. Further research that explores pre-teens' understanding of the ways in which deleterious controlling behaviors might emerge out of otherwise caring, checking-in behaviors is essential to informing prevention and intervention efforts.

Although the findings of this study support prior research that indicates no differentiations between DDV perpetrated through public versus private venues the fifth graders in this study reported feeling that there is more safety in private venues like texting and Gmail because they feel as though these cannot be viewed by others. As a result of these findings it can be ascertained that some of participants have received coaching around the safe use of technology. This notion lends further support to the need for schools to introduce safe technology use programs across the entire fifth grade population.

Because pre-teens appear to assign both positive and negative values to dating among pre-teens, dating was often described as being kept a secret, with the behaviors primarily occurring via technology such as texting, using social media, emailing, or calling each other on the phone. As this theme emerged from the data, the researcher examined literature surrounding the potential outcomes of social interactions occurring primarily through technology. Isolation is cited often as a potential effect of limiting dating contact to social media and technology (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Zweig et al., 2013). While domestic violence and the effects of isolation are outside of the scope of this study, it is important to note that isolation is also described by conventional IPV literature as deleterious and a warning sign for other forms of IPV (Lanier & Maume, 2009). As a result of this finding the researcher suggests there may be an increased risk for pre-teens engaging in early dating behaviors, particularly when the dating relationship is limited to the use of technology. Without the feedback from their peers and caring adults pre-teens have very few avenues to shape their perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating behaviors. Additionally restriction of socialization to modes of communication through technology has the potential to have sweeping effects on this population as they later enter

environments that require strong social skills (such as the workplace, adult relationships, and memberships in various organizations).

### **Conflict**

The findings of the study support previous studies that describe adolescent dating relationships as reflecting less commitment, as characterized by greater peer influence, and fewer available skills with which to resolve conflict (Caselman et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Participants described conflict similarly to those used to describe unhealthy dating including, fighting, arguing, being mean, ignoring them, and breaking up. Though participants described keeping their relationships secret for some this was reflective of healthy dating, and for others keeping secrets was understood as an aspect of unhealthy dating. Participants described keeping the dating relationships secret to avoid rumors and judgment by their peers. Though mainstream adult IPV literature identifies secret relationships as an indicator of an unhealthy relationship, this finding may lend insight into the need for secrecy and the impact of peer pressure on the pre-teen dating relationship. Further exploration may lead to a shift in beliefs to include positive aspects about the role of secrecy in dating, particularly among pre-teens who are beginning the first stages of dating. Furthermore these findings lead the researcher to question the extent to which the domestic violence literature should or should not be central to the development of interventions aimed at reducing and preventing TDV among pre-teens.

### **Pressure to Date**

Although participants described dating as taboo and frowned upon by parents and peers they reported their peers date anyway. These statements indicate there are pressures fifth graders experience which lead them to dating behaviors despite their beliefs that they should not date. Researchers have identified connections between dating activities and characteristics of peer

groups (Connolly et al., 2013; Friedlander et al., 2007). For example early dating behaviors were found to be correlated with exposure to older peer groups, and peers displaying deviant behaviors (Friedlander et al., 2007). Findings from this study provided support for the notion that pre-teens who have older siblings (or peers) may experience increased pressure to date. Participants in this study who self-described as being the youngest sibling provided a slightly higher percentage of statements related to experiences of pressure to date. As a result program developers may consider implementing additional emphasis on empowerment to make dating decisions for pre-teens who have older siblings.

In addition to examining pre-teen students' perceptions of dating this study sought to address the gap in literature related to pre-teens' experiences with, and perceptions of peer pressure to date. Specifically the researcher asked participants if they are expected to date. The resonating response was the participants do not believe that they are expected to date.

Despite this response participants elucidated a variety of indicators that suggest they may experience peer pressures around dating. First participants described situations that involved their peers engaging in match-making behaviors, with peers suggesting they should date someone specific. Participants described feeling pressured to date when they are told that another child is interested in them. Additionally multiple participants described pressures around dating and dating behaviors associated with the one girl or boy in their school who dates multiple people, and demonstrates bullying behaviors to get others to date them and/or to engage in dating behaviors with them. Though the literature points to a variety of risk factors for children who engage in TDV, there is a need to explore the personal and social characteristics of pre-teens who are described as bullying others into dating them. A greater understanding of the factors

contributing to this phenomenon could potentially lead to interventions in reducing some of the ill effects of early dating behaviors.

Although the researcher assumed that pre-teens experience pressure to date, the data supports that the pressures from peers may also be related to who they should date, with some influence from peers to refrain from dating because they are not expected to date. This outcome of the study may explain the gap in the literature and knowledge around young adolescents' experiences with pressure to date. Researchers should note however, that though they may feel they are not expected to date it is apparent that there is a significant impact of peers on the decisions about whether to date someone, and who they should date. Findings from this study suggest an opportunity for research to further explore the effects of peer pressure on initial decisions to engage in dating behaviors as defined by pre-teens. Parents, educators, and program developers should consider empowerment informed guidance to provide pre-teens with tools to effectively cope with pressure from peers, so they can make informed and developmentally appropriate decisions around dating.

### **Parents: To Date or Not To Date**

In addition to further understanding about the influences of peers on dating one of the aims of the current study involved learning more about what parents say about dating. Little is known about the conversations about dating that parents and/or caregivers have with pre-teens. When asked what parents say about dating participants provided responses that only addressed whether parents gave them permission to date. Participants indicated that this is because parents share the participants' feelings that pre-teen dating is not really dating.

To further address the research questions around pressure to date and parenting, the outcomes of the study indicated that participants who report being close to both parents do not

make references to pressure to date. Only one of the four children who made references to pressure to date, and are closest with their mother report pressures to date from adults. This finding implies there may be protective factors associated with feeling close to both parents. Though extant literature addresses the impact of parental monitoring on dating and deleterious dating behaviors (Andrews et al., 2000; Black et al., 2015; Friedlander et al., 2007; Niolon, Kuperminc, et al., 2015), more research is needed to understand the impact of parent/child conversations on pre-teen dating and feelings of pressure to date.

The researcher was surprised to find that participants only identified parent responses that either granted or denied permission to date. Participants revealed no information about guidance parents give about dating, or conversations about healthy and unhealthy dating. The researcher proposes a few potential explanations for this. First given the aforementioned developmental stage of the participants, the fifth graders' filters may only allow them to retain and restate conversations that address concrete ideas such as either you can date or you cannot. Therefore, even if parents are engaging in a more in-depth conversation with them about healthy and unhealthy dating, fifth graders may not as easily recall those conversations. An additional explanation involves the indication that parents do not believe that fifth graders are dating, therefore they refrain from coaching them about dating. The parents therefore may have taken a reactive approach to addressing healthy and unhealthy dating behaviors with their children. Another explanation is parents do not know how to talk to their children about healthy and unhealthy dating, thus representing a void in which prevention and intervention programs may focus additional efforts that educate, engage, and encourage parents to talk with pre-teens about healthy dating. Finally in this study data regarding the influence of parenting on dating was limited to responses from only those participants whose parents provided permission to

participate. As a result, there remains a gap in knowledge surrounding family factors that contribute to pre-teen decisions regarding dating.

### **Gender Differences in Perceptions of TDV And DDV**

Although previous literature points to gender differences in attitudes about dating violence (Orpinas et al., 2015), the current study revealed minimal differences related to gender. Most of the themes were consistent across gender, with the exception of Too Young to Date and Bystander Helping. Females referenced both exceptions more often than males. Specifically salient is the consistent contributions of each gender to the theme Guidelines for Dating. From this study it can be surmised that fifth grade girls and boys appeared to identify similar rules regarding healthy and unhealthy dating. Participants in the current study did not indicate a differentiation between traditional gender roles when describing healthy and unhealthy dating. The gender neutral aspect of this study supports the potential for reciprocity of TDV among adolescents (Orpinas et al., 2012). Additionally though physical maturation is noted to increase early dating (Friedlander et al., 2007), it is unclear how physical maturation relates to TDV, particularly given that females tend to mature at a faster rate than males. Although these participants may not yet be in puberty, according to Collins et al. (2009) the timing of romantic interests is more likely to begin coinciding with the onset of adrenarche rather than gonadarche, indicating that these interests may occur as early as 8 years old in females and 9 years old in males. It is important that programs consider the wide range of physical development of children in the fifth grade, as well as the onset of romantic interests.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the present study provided rich descriptions of the perceptions of dating among fifth graders, and begins to fill in the gaps in literature related to this population several



limitations of the study should be considered. As stated in previous sections, many of the limitations of the study are associated with the questions that were asked during the participant interviews. Though the current study pursued pre-teens' perceptions of dating violence, the word "violence" was not used in this study. Similar to previous studies by Noonan and Charles (2009) and Stonard et al. (2015) the researcher used healthy and unhealthy to characterize dating behaviors, therefore violence was not a recurring theme referenced by participants in this study. Additionally pressure to date was explored with questions that included the words "expected to date," and may not have captured the essence of the impact of peer pressure or pressure from adults on pre-teen decisions to date. Because only one data collection method was utilized, and incorporated recorded interviews and anecdotal notes by the researcher, there was little opportunity to triangulate the data to achieve more trustworthy results. As an example parent conversations with participants about dating were only represented by participant recollection and descriptions. As described earlier because fifth graders, according to Piaget (1970) are only beginning to emerge out of the concrete operational stage of cognitive development, their descriptions of what parents say are limited to the scope of their interpretive lens. Given the gaps in literature particularly surrounding the impact of father's conversations with their children on dating, and given the response by one participant regarding her father's statements about dating, this study further highlights that gap in knowledge.

Data gathered in this study were limited to participants' reports of perceptions of other children their age. Given the sensitivity of the research questions, and to protect the vulnerable study population based on IRB specifications the researcher discouraged the description of personal experiences and perceptions. Participants were asked to report what they think kids their age would say. As a result like the responses about parent conversations the data was generated

through a specifically subjective lens. At times during data collection, the researcher suspected the participants were describing their own experiences and self-perceptions. These data were not regarded differently than those of the participants who attempted to represent the larger group. Additionally when participants were not able to describe dating, healthy dating, or unsafe dating on their own probing questions were used to facilitate the interviews. This semi structured interview design allowed the interviewer to access more information from participants than would have not been possible otherwise. Although this method adds richness to the data, it may have also influenced the responses of the participants, and decreased their reports of other perceptions that might have surfaced.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher utilized several methods including peer debriefing, subject-matter expert review of samples of data and themes developed from the data, and the field journal. Because of the nature of the study, a third data source could not be utilized, thus the researcher was unable to triangulate the data. Data was limited to the statements of the participants during the interviews and the anecdotal notes recorded by the researcher and MSW Intern. The data did not include information gathered from other sources such as the parents, or adults in the school. Additionally member-checking was limited to strategies enacted during the interview by the researcher to check for understanding. These limitations may impact the trustworthiness of the study and lead to recommendations for future studies analyzing pre-teen perceptions of dating and dating violence.

The sample of participants was limited to those whose parents provided consent thus creating possible selection bias. Familial factors contributing to the approval or denial of participation in the study are unclear thus limiting understanding about parent and family factors that may contribute to dating and pressures for pre-teens to date. There may be differences

between characteristics of the families of participants for whom consent was given and those for whom it was not. These differences could not be discerned in this study, and may have impacted findings.

Further limitations of the study include the demographics of participants. The study was conducted in a rural county in Northeast Georgia, and thus does not capture a more broadly representative population. The population for the study was primarily Caucasian, and resided in two parent households. All of the participants referenced siblings in their homes. So findings from this study should be understood within the context in which they emerged.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the extremely limited body of research investigating the perceptions of TDV, DDV, and pressures to date among pre-teens. Key strengths of this study include the ability of the researcher to meet individually with students in their environment at each school. This study is the first of its kind to explore the notion of pre-dating as a stage of dating development and several of the findings support previous research findings.

### **Implications of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

Woven throughout this chapter, the researcher has referenced ways in which the findings create a space for additional research to enhance the understanding of pre-teens and dating. Specifically perceptions of pre-teens that Dating is Taboo “but they date anyways” leads the researcher to further question the way pre-teens attempt to engage in dating behaviors. One reason might be related to the impact of pressure to date on pre-teen decisions to date. Further research is needed to develop an understanding of the interplay between pressures from peers and adults and the decision to engage in pre-dating behaviors. Future studies may consider implementing focus groups or peer facilitated discussion as an additional method to explore

pressures to date among this population. Research is needed to explore the indications from this study that although pre-teens deny that they are expected to date, they are choosing to do so in spite of their belief that they should not date, and that they are unclear on what dating behaviors should include.

Extant literature provided evidence of correlations between early dating behaviors and negative consequences for adolescents. This study suggests that while not all fifth grade students are engaging in dating behaviors, there is evidence to support the notion of a pre-dating phase in which pre-teens begin exploring the idea of dating. This preliminary outcome of the study indicates the need for further research to clarify if and how pre-dating emerges developmentally, and what effects this may have on adolescents. Given the shifting cultural norms impacting these pre-teens, identification of this pre-dating phase could contribute to mechanisms to help them to adjust to this phase, and potentially reduce the negative effects identified with early dating behaviors. Identification of the characteristics associated with the pre-dating phase has the potential to enable adults to engage in conversations with pre-teens about healthy relationships and ways to establish them over time. As identified in Chapter 2, extant literature addressing early dating is presented from a heteronormative perspective. With the shift in culturally acknowledged romantic relationships, the identification of a new phase, pre-dating, has the potential to expand research and practice into a more culturally competent dialogue that includes a variety of relationship types. This may lead to greater understanding of pre-teen experiences, and may capture a broader range of gender identity and sexual orientation. Specifically, when obtaining demographic information from one of the participants, one described their gender as “something else, in the middle.” Although this participant was grouped with the female participants for data analysis purposes, it is important for future research to consider samples

with greater gender variability reflecting the shifts in culturally normative understanding of and expectations around gender identity.

Additionally the finding of Ambivalence suggests critical implications for pre-adolescent children as they enter into dating. According to Weiss (2013) ambivalence was used as a framework to highlight teens' ambiguity in definitions and identification of violence perpetrated by other teens. As Weiss (2013) points out, ambiguity towards definitions of violence and identification of violence perpetrated by others result from peer pressure, and may lead to reduced help seeking reporting of deleterious dating behaviors by peers. Ambivalence in the current study was demonstrated when participants were asked to describe dating, unsafe dating, and ways that technology is used in dating. The ambivalence that emerged in the current study supports the need for parents, youth organizations, and educators to guide pre-teens towards identifying the deleterious effects of TDV and help-seeking behaviors among peers. Prevention efforts should be targeted in age appropriate ways, and a deeper understanding of pre-dating is important in informing these efforts.

Encouraging outcomes of the current study however indicate that each of the participants was able to describe unhealthy dating and negative ways that technology is used in dating. Though they may be ambivalent about dating, participants demonstrated an ability to identify potentially problematic behaviors in dating relationships. Pre-teens who are able to identify unhealthy and unsafe dating behaviors and situations have a greater potential to seek help and change the situation to ensure their own well-being. Further as recommended in previous sections, pre-teens may benefit from an intervention grounded in principles of empowerment that will equip them to better cope, as well as to be better able to identify indicators of unhealthy and unsafe dating, and to make decisions to protect themselves.

Additionally further research regarding the relationships between ambiguity and pressures to date among pre-teens is needed. It should be noted however that because of the ambiguity, studies may require additional methods to better understand impact of ambiguity and pressure to date on dating and TDV. Specifically, future research may benefit from more closely exploring the themes related to ambivalence, and what, if any, reluctance to answer might impact the impression of ambivalence among pre-teens. For example the researcher suggests it may be efficacious to conduct a longitudinal study that examined ambivalence and peer pressure among pre-teens followed by later evaluations to determine if there is a link between ambivalence and peer pressure to date at an early age and TDV in later adolescent years.

The current study included seven children enrolled in the gifted program. Strikingly, this group of students contributed the most “I do not know” responses. It is unclear if this is due to their lack of knowledge and experience, limited social experiences due to more challenging coursework, their emphasis on providing a correct answer to a person in a position of authority, or their application of the notion “dating is taboo, therefore they should not know about it.” After providing prompts and further probing questions to these students, the consistent “I do not know” response led the researcher to note that this group of participants appeared to be the least knowledgeable about dating, and perhaps the least exposed to dating relationships. It was not within the scope of this study to examine differences between children served by different academic tracks, yet findings from this study support previous studies that indicate that academically advanced adolescents are less likely to date at an earlier age (Halpern et al., 2001; Orpinas, Horne, et al., 2013). Future studies may consider exploring whether social factors that impact the selection process for the gifted program also contribute to differences in dating behaviors among young adolescents. Future research is needed to begin to chip away at the

extent to which school-based tracks may relate to pre-dating and dating knowledge and behaviors, in order to unravel the complex intersection of factors that may be at work. Given this unexpected and notable finding, there may be important considerations for approaches to prevention and intervention.

Though acceptance of dating aggression has been cited in the literature as impacting TDV (Karlsson et al., 2016) the current study did not reveal similar results. Further research is needed in this area particularly with pre-teens. Specifically in this study fifth grade participants consistently identified aggression as an unhealthy dating behavior, and provided no indication of accepting aggression under any circumstances. The researcher is unclear whether there is a presence of dating aggression among fifth graders that was not expressed by these participants, or if there are factors that lead older children to change their perceptions of dating aggression. Additionally it is also be important for future research to consider the extent to which the timing of the onset of puberty has bearing on these factors, as well as whether specific demographics contribute to greater changes in the acceptance of dating and/or dating aggression.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

As a result of the outcomes of this study, the researcher identified several implications for schools, in terms of policy and program development, and for practitioners working with pre-teens and teens.

#### **Implications for Schools**

There were very few differences between participant responses aggregated by school. As an example the synonym for boyfriend and girlfriend, Bae, was provided by students that attend two of the three schools. Additionally references to the one student who dates, and pressures others to date originated from these same schools. These bullying behaviors are not clearly

identified in codes of conducts as being related to dating and teen dating violence. Although Georgia requires that schools implement anti bullying prevention strategies, there is no designation of the bullying specifically related to dating. Additionally these responses may be an indication of the climate in those two specific schools. As indicated in previous sections school climate has historically been classified as punitive or authoritative (Christensen & Knezek, 2015). Within the last decade there has been an increased focus on school climate. Climate impacts academic achievement, as well as social and civic development among the students (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007). In Georgia a climate rating scale is utilized annually to evaluate each school in the state. As school climate continues to be an area of focus both within the research and in policy development, may be room for consideration of how climate impacts dating in elementary schools. As a result of the findings of this study, the researcher suggests that schools and agencies engaging students in conversations about healthy and unhealthy dating may lead to reduced ambiguity among teens, increased knowledge about dating, and increased appropriate reporting of peer misconduct to protective adults. School programs should include an element of parent-engagement through which parent education and support can be provided. The inclusion of educational segments addressing TDV alongside the anti-bullying segments may demonstrate positive results in prevention as well as in the school climate. Though such a program is more likely to be permitted in schools with more encouraging climates, each school, county, and system maintains their own climates, thus impacting the extent to which such a program would be possible.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study lead the researcher to suggest several implications for practice with pre-teens. In their study examining the relationships between borderline personality disorder



features and TDV, Reuter et al. (2015) report a connection between TDV and borderline features. The implications of this connection coupled by the data gathered from this study indicate a need for future research as to how personal characteristics such as personality disorder features interact with TDV. Clinicians working with pre-adolescents who describe prevalent dating behaviors that include coercion and control may benefit from identifying whether the child exhibits personality traits that have been demonstrated by the research as potentially contributing to TDV. Mental health professionals and school administrators working with children who demonstrate controlling dating behaviors may consider the intersection between these behaviors the potential the mental health needs of the children involved.

In the current study the researcher observed that participants primarily described parent conversations as focusing solely on permission to date. This finding may indicate a reluctance to discuss healthy and unhealthy relationships with pre-adolescent children. Though children ages 10-12 appear to begin engaging in dating behaviors, the parents may be lagging behind them in discussions about healthy and unhealthy dating relationships. As indicated by Miller et al. (2009) parental support and monitoring tend to reduce female and male perpetration of TDV among sixth graders who reported that they were dating. The implications of the current study lend room for clarity on whether parents of fifth graders have conversations with their children about healthy and unhealthy dating, and what impact those conversations might have on TDV. Though the findings of the current study indicate that these conversations typically either do not occur or are not retained by the child, it can be surmised that pre-teens are learning about dating from somewhere. As indicated in previous sections, it is possible that the many of their conceptualizations of dating may be formed based on their exposure to media. Programs that

educate families and professionals about the characteristics of pre-dating may lead to more developmentally appropriate impression of what dating means to pre-teens.

Specifically the literature does not address the impact of fathers' conversations about dating with their pre-adolescent children. Reeves and Orpinas (2012) interviewed ninth graders who reported that parents influence boys not to hit girls. Together with their research, this study provides support for the idea that conversations with fathers may impact the nature and quality of dating among pre-teens. Though there is a need for additional research this area, there is also indication for potential intervention with parents to help encourage, educate, and empower them to talk with pre-teen students about healthy and unhealthy dating. Black et al. (2015) suggested that positive and supportive adults need help in knowing how to best respond to TDV. Parents of pre-adolescents may need additional support in how to talk with their children about pre-dating and healthy dating relationships. Professionals charged with developing and implementing TDV prevention programs should consider the utility of including a parent education component in an articulated curriculum, to first help parents understand pre-dating and then to further provide education to parents around how to talk with their pre-adolescents about healthy and unhealthy dating behaviors. Programs such as these create the opportunity to provide support to families to potentially inform school climate, and also to contribute to reductions in TDV.

Finally, given the emergence of Ambivalence and Taboo as constructs, and the prevalence of technology use by fifth graders TDV interventions with children 10 to 12 years old should begin with teaching effective interpersonal copings skills and safe and appropriate use of technology, instead of focusing on specific relationship dynamics. Pre-teens in the pre-dating stage are building their conceptualizations of dating, and may or may not be ready to embrace an in-depth discussion of dating violence and unhealthy dating. On the contrary, a program which

focuses on healthy and unhealthy use of technology provides an opportunity to connect with experiences that they have already had, and build a foundation for future discussions of healthy and unhealthy dating through the use of technology.

As described in Chapter one, this study emerged from a local initiative to develop an intervention to address the incidence of TDV in on a local level. Similar to the trajectory of dating violence described in the literature (Orpinas, Hsieh, et al., 2013b; Orpinas et al., 2015), this study lends credibility to the notion that there is also a trajectory of general dating behaviors, potentially beginning with the pre-dating stage characterized by secrecy that can be achieved through technology. Results of this study indicate that although participants consider themselves too young to date, some fifth graders are engaging in pre-dating behaviors. Most empirically-based TDV prevention programs focus on children who are in the sixth grade or older. There is a need for prevention programs aimed at children who have not yet begun dating behaviors. Simply stated, the findings of the study indicate that pre-teens consider dating taboo, but engage in dating behaviors anyway. As a result, dating behaviors are secret and primarily limited to the use of technology. Therefore, the researcher recommends the development of an intervention aimed at providing parents and pre-teens with knowledge and skills to recognize, discuss, and appropriately respond to safe and unsafe dating and digital dating behaviors.

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Healthy Relationships Interview Guide

Date:

School:

Pseudonym:

Gender:

Age:

Siblings:

Ages and Gender of Siblings:

Parent Spends the Most Time With:

1. What were the main issues or themes that you observed during the interview?
2. Summarize the information you received, or failed to receive, on each of the target questions (listed below):
  - a. Do kids your age have healthy friendships? What does a healthy friendship look like?
  - b. What does “dating” mean?
  - c. What does a healthy dating relationship look like?
  - d. What does an unhealthy dating relationship look like?
  - e. How do people who date use social media/internet/cell phones?
  - f. What are some reasons people who are dating experience conflict?
  - g. Are kids your age expected to date? If so, who expects them to date? How do you know?
  - h. What do parents say about dating?
  - i. What would be most helpful to kids your age to help them develop healthy relationships?
3. Describe anything else that struck you as interesting, illuminating, important, or salient:
4. What new (or remaining) questions do you have when considering the next interview?

## Appendix B

### Parent Consent Form

#### Healthy Relationships

Dear Parent/Guardian:

This letter is to ask your permission for your child to participate in a research study called Healthy Relationships. The goal of the study is to understand what fifth graders consider healthy relationships, both friends and dates. We will use this information to strengthen programs at the school. I am a doctoral student at the University of Georgia, and I am conducting this study as under the direction of Dr. Shari Miller in the School of Social Work.

**Why is my child invited to participate?** I am inviting all fifth graders to participate. Of those who agree to participate, 4 boys and 4 girls will be randomly selected for interviews. The interviews will be conducted by me or my intern, Lauren Welty.

**What will my child do?** We will interview the selected children for about 30 minutes at the school. We will not ask any personal information. In the interview, your child will be asked to describe healthy relationships between friends and between people who are dating.

The questions that we will ask your child are:

1. What does a healthy friendship look like?
2. What does “dating” mean?
3. What does a healthy dating relationship look like?
4. What does an unhealthy dating relationships look like?
5. How do people who date use social media/internet/cell phones?
6. What are some of the reasons people who are dating experience conflict?
7. Are kids your age expected to date?
  - a. If so, who expects them to date?
  - b. How do they know they are expected to date?
8. What would be most helpful to kids your age to help them develop healthy relationships?

**Can my child decide not to participate, even if I give permission?** Of course! Your child’s involvement is voluntary and either of you may choose for your child not to participate without any penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled. Your child will sign a separate form. Your child may choose not to participate or to stop at any time. If you (or your child) decide to withdraw from the study, the information will be kept as part of the study and will continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

**What are the potential benefits and risks of participating?** The findings from this project will provide information about the perception of fifth graders of healthy relationships between friends and dates, which will be useful for strengthening programs at the school and in the community.

The risks or discomforts are minimal, and are related to feeling nervous about being in an interview or answering some questions. Remember that your child can decline participation at any time without any consequences. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions and remain in the study. Participation is voluntary and the decision to participate or not participate will have no bearing on your child's grades or class standing.

**What about privacy and confidentiality?** All of the information that your child provides is kept private. Nothing that your child tells us is shared with teachers, students, or any other persons or agencies, unless required by law. If we believe your child is in immediate danger, we are required by law to report it. Even if this should happen, we would attempt to talk with you first and tell you exactly what our concerns are regarding your child's safety. In the report of results, no information would reveal your child's identity. We will record the interview, but your child will chose a fictitious name. The data collected from the interview will be accessible only to the research team, and we will destroy it upon completion of the project. The results of the research study may be published, but will not include any child's name or any identifying information.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?** If you have any questions, please call or email Jennifer Hadden (770-867-4527, [hadden.jennifer@gmail.com](mailto:hadden.jennifer@gmail.com)) or Dr. Shari Miller (706-542-2328, [semiller@uga.edu](mailto:semiller@uga.edu)). In the event that you or your child has any questions about your rights as a human research participant you may direct your questions to the Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 609 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602; telephone 706-542-3199; email address [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

**Please indicate whether not you give permission for your child to participate and sign below. Keep one copy for you and return the signed copy to the school with your child.**

\_\_\_\_\_ I give permission for my child to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_ I prefer that my child does not participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C

### Participant Flyer

**You Can Get Out and You  
Can Get Help!**



If you are in an unhealthy or violent relationship, leaving it is the best thing you can do for yourself. It will be hard and it will take a lot of courage, but you can do it with support from the people who care about you.

*If you have concerns about your own relationship or that of a friend, talk to an adult you trust — and get the support that you need!*

***Resources are Available  
At Your School!***

***You can talk to  
Your Counselor  
Your Teacher  
Your Social Worker***

#### **Dating Violence Prevention Resources:**

National Teen Dating Violence Hotline  
*LoveIsRespect.org*  
(text LOVEIS to 22522 or  
call 1-866-331-9474)

Understanding Teen Dating Violence  
Fact Sheet  
Centers for Disease Control  
<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/teen-dating-violence-2014-a.pdf>

The National Domestic Violence Hotline  
1-800-799-SAFE(7233)  
(Available 24/7 in over 170 languages)

## **Healthy Teen Relationships**



### **A Guide to Healthy Communication**



#### **What is a Healthy Relationship?**

A healthy relationship is about trust, respect, honesty, and understanding. You must be able to communicate with each other and treat each other as equals. The relationship can turn unhealthy if either, or both, of you are being dishonest, not trusting, feeling smothered, or pressuring the other person to do something they don't want to do.

## Your Rights

### *In a relationship, you have a right to:*

- Always be treated with respect
- Be in a healthy relationship
- Not be abused
- Have other friends and activities with other friends
- Keep your body, feelings, beliefs, and property to yourself
- Feel comfortable being yourself
- Set limits and values
- Have clear and honest communication
- Feel safe in a relationship
- Be treated as an equal
- Say no
- Leave a relationship

## WARNING SIGNS!!!

They are jealous of you or your friends

They get angry when you do not respond to texts or calls

They try to control you

They use alcohol or illegal drugs

They have big mood swings

They act differently in public

They isolate you from other friends

They show excessive anger when arguing with you

They blame other people for their problems

They have been violent before

They threaten violence to you

They have unrealistic or rigid expectations

They make you responsible for their feelings

You are scared of them or what they will do

## REMEMBER...

**ABUSE Is  
NOT Your  
FAULT!**



**Ask for Help**

## Appendix D

### Participant Invitation and Consent

Dear Student:

You are invited to participate in a project called Healthy Relationships. A goal of this project is to learn about ideas that students your age have about friendships and dating relationships. This study is a joint effort between The University of Georgia (UGA) and XXX County School System. You have been randomly selected from the group of students whose parents provided permission for participation.

If you agree to be in the study, you will participate in a short interview with either me or my intern, Lauren Welty. The interview will be about friendships and dating relationships. By sharing your ideas, you will be helping us to create a way to help teens avoid unhealthy relationships. I hope to learn something about healthy relationships that will help other children in the future.

You do not have to say “yes” if you don’t want to. No one, including your parents, will be mad at you if you say “no” now or if you change your mind later. We have also asked your parent’s permission to do this. Even if your parent says “yes,” you can still say “no.” Remember, you can ask us to stop at any time. *Your grades or academic standing in school will not be affected whether you say “yes” or “no.”*

#### About this interview:

- The interview will last about 30 minutes.
- Your participation is voluntary. You can talk or remain silent, or stop the interview at any time.
- The interview is about how students your age feel about friendships and dating. I do not want you to tell us your personal experiences.
- The interview will be recorded; I will destroy all recordings after they are transcribed. To keep the recording confidential, you will be asked to choose a fictitious name to use during the discussion.
- If you say something that makes me think that you are in danger or a threat to others, I will have to report it to the counselor or administrator at the school.
- A potential benefit to you is that you will help us understand the meaning of friendships and dating and what can be done to help students maintain healthy relationships.
- Although we don’t anticipate that anything that is said today will cause you any stress or worry, it’s important that you know that your school counselor, myself, or another school social worker would be happy to talk with you, if you would like.



- At the end, I am going to give all students a pamphlet with information about healthy relationships. Remember, you can also speak with your school counselor or social worker if you want to share your own experience with dating and potential dating violence.
- If you have a question at any time, please call or email Jennifer Hadden, the project director (770-867-4527, [hadden.jennifer@gmail.com](mailto:hadden.jennifer@gmail.com)) or Dr. Shari Miller, School of Social Work (706-542-2328; [sermiller@uga.edu](mailto:sermiller@uga.edu)).

**Student Agreement:**

I understand the project described above. My questions have been answered and I agree to participate in this interview. I have received a copy of this form.

---

**Name of Student**

---

**Signature**

---

**Date**

---

**Name of Researcher**

---

**Signature**

---

**Date**

## Appendix E

### IRB Approval



Phone 706-542-3199

#### APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

March 9, 2016

Dear [Shari Miller](#):

On 3/7/2016, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Pre-Teen Students' Perceptions of Dating and Teen Dating Violence: A Qualitative Study
Investigator:	<a href="#">Shari Miller</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00003018
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

The IRB approved the protocol from 3/7/2016 to 3/6/2017 inclusive. Before 3/6/2017 or within 30 days of study closure, whichever is earlier, you are to submit a continuing review with required explanations. You can submit a continuing review by navigating to the active study and clicking Create Modification / CR.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 3/6/2017, approval of this study expires on that date.

To document consent, use the consent documents that were approved and stamped by the IRB. Go to the Documents tab to download them.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Dr. Gerald E. Crites, MD, MEd  
University of Georgia  
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

310 East Campus Rd, Tucker Hall Room 212 • Athens, Georgia 30602  
An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution



Chris McMichael, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

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## Barrow County School System

Boldly Committed to Student Success

February 12, 2015

Jennifer Hadden  
132 Giber Drive  
Commerce, GA 30530

Dear Ms. Hadden,

I am delighted to offer this letter of support for your action research project, *Pre-Teen Students' Perceptions of Dating and Teen Dating Violence: A Qualitative Study*, and hereby give you permission to conduct this research in the Barrow County School System contingent on The University of Georgia's IRB approval.

I understand that all required protocols regarding human subject research and informed consent will be followed. I am approving the research with the understanding that the principal, teachers, and students are in no way obligated to participate because of my approval. This looks like a very interesting project and I look forward to receiving information regarding the findings of this research project.

All the best,

Dr. Chris McMichael  
Superintendent  
Barrow County School System

## Appendix F

### Research Tracking Chart

	BRES (M)	BRES (F)	CLES (M)	CLES (F)	HES (M)	HES (F)
IRB						
Lists from Counselor						
Parent Consent						
Parent Consent						
Parent Consent						
Parent Consent						
Parent Consent						
Parent Consent						
Student Assent						
Focus Groups						
Anecdotal Notes						
ID Themes						
Transcription of Groups						
Transcription of Notes						
SME Review						
Enter to Atlas TI						
Data Analysis						