

# Digital Dating Abuse

## A Brief Guide for Educators and Parents



2020



**CYBERBULLYING**  
RESEARCH CENTER

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines dating abuse as physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional violence that occurs within a dating relationship.<sup>1</sup> The number of persons who have been victimized by romantic partners ranges from 10% to 47%, depending on how the behaviors are defined and measured in research studies.<sup>2, 3, 4-7</sup> Interestingly, research has shown that teenagers are at a higher risk than adults when it comes to abuse by intimates.<sup>8</sup> Estimates from the nationally-representative Youth Risk Behavior Survey involving almost 15,000 high school students, found that approximately 8 percent had experienced physical dating violence in 2017 (down from 10% in 2013).<sup>1</sup>

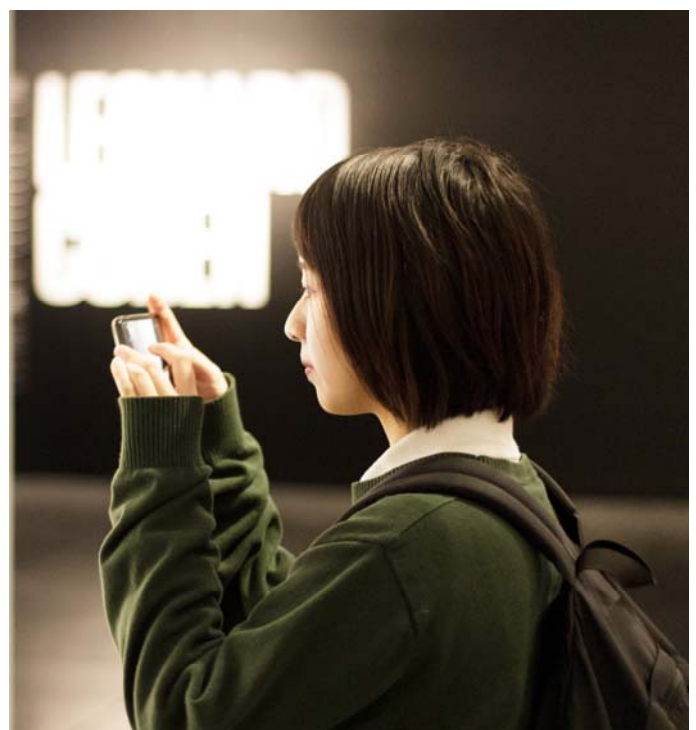
In the 21st Century, a new manifestation of dating abuse has emerged, one that exploits digital communications technologies that are omnipresent. "Digital dating abuse" (also known as "electronic dating violence") can be defined as "a pattern of behaviors that control, pressure, or threaten a dating partner using a cell phone or the Internet."<sup>9:1</sup> Given that participation in romantic relationships increases when moving through adolescence into young adulthood,<sup>10-13</sup> and that in recent years partners are constantly in touch with each other via their mobile devices,<sup>14-16</sup> more opportunities for digital dating abuse can arise.<sup>17-19</sup>

There are many specific techniques through which teens can take advantage of their connected devices to cause harm to a romantic partner. For instance, aggressors may be excessively mean-spirited to their significant other when communicating with them online for the same reasons that those who cyberbully do.<sup>20-22</sup> In addition, privacy violations can occur as one checks up on, monitors, and even stalks their love interest by tracking their location in social media posts, using their password to login to their accounts, or by having physical access to their device(s).<sup>14, 23-25</sup> In short, the opportunities for abuse are endless. We've even heard of situations where one person pays for the other's cell phone (and/or monthly bill), and then feels entitled to constantly check and monitor who their partner is communicating with (calls or messages). When this happens – and conflict ensues – the abuser may take away or even destroy that phone, effec-

tively cutting the target off from help, support, and communication with others.

There have also been incidents where aggressors utilize sexually explicit photos or videos to blackmail, extort, or otherwise manipulate their partner into saying or doing something against their will.<sup>26</sup> Of course, this content can be shared with a very large audience – a classroom of students, the entire student body, a neighborhood, the town, the entire world – with ease and great speed either through the forwarding of texts or uploading screenshots or screen-recordings to social media platforms. Its "viral" nature, then, can greatly expand the extent of victimization a partner suffers, knowing that the embarrassing or harmful content is being viewed and shared – perhaps repeatedly – by so many people. The situation can become worse after realizing that it is sometimes challenging to work with social media companies and web site administrators to get private content removed in a timely manner.

It is important to note that motivations for teenage dating violence include anger and a felt need to exert power;<sup>27</sup> both of these can be vividly demonstrated when apps and phones are involved. An adolescent can quickly send a scathing or harassing message to a girlfriend or boyfriend solely based on negative emotions, without taking the time to



calm down and react rationally to a feeling or situation and without considering the implications of that textual content.<sup>21</sup>

Also, power can be readily expressed in a dating relationship because the target's past and present experiences with the abuser provide a unique relational dependency and history that make it difficult to resist or get away from online mistreatment or harm. Even though this may be less true in adolescent relationships than in adult relationships (where there is sometimes a need for financial assistance and sometimes the presence of children),<sup>28</sup> there still often exists a power dynamic that may be exploited if the relationship is unbalanced and dysfunctional. More suffering and pain may very well result from cyberbullying within a romantic relationship, as compared to cyberbullying among strangers, casual acquaintances, or even platonic friends. Relatedly, these technological devices allow abusers to feel constantly connected to (and within "reach" of) their partner, who often feels that he or she has no escape from the torment.<sup>21</sup> This is amplified by the fact that teens constantly have their phone with them day and night, and use it as their lifeline to maintain and grow their relationships.

### **Digital Dating Abuse as a Form of Cyberbullying**

There are many similarities between cyberbullying and digital dating abuse that should be pointed out. First, both naturally utilize technology. Second, cyberbullying is largely perpetrated by and among known peers,<sup>29,30</sup> as is aggression in romantic relationships (where youth typically select partners from within their peer group). Third, both lead to tangible emotional, psychological, physical, and behavioral consequences.<sup>9,31-33</sup> Fourth, both also may have similar fundamental antecedents such as inherent insecurities and a need to demonstrate control and power. With regard to differences, cyberbullying tends to occur between individuals who do not like, and do not want to be around, each other. Digital dating abuse transpires between two people who are (or were) attracted to each other, at least on some level.



### **What Does Research Tell Us About Digital Dating Abuse?**

Recent research has shown that dating violence among youthful populations remains a significant social problem, and a few studies indicate that the internet and cell phones serve a contributing role. One benchmark study of 3,745 7th-12th graders across three states who were in a current or recent dating relationship found that 26.3% have experienced some type of "cyber dating abuse victimization" in the prior year, while 11.8% reported offending.<sup>31</sup> This can be compared to an examination of over 4,200 9th graders from eleven states where 56% revealed they were victimized and 29% were aggressors,<sup>34</sup> a smaller study of high schoolers from Texas where 22.3% had experienced victimization and 17.7% were offenders over the last year,<sup>35</sup> and a study of almost 800 7th graders from four schools where 51% reported this type of victimization while 32% revealed they had perpetrated the behavior.<sup>36</sup>

To be sure, these numbers vary significantly. A recent critical review of digital dating abuse studies discovered a victimization incidence range from 6% to 91% of youth victimization due to significant "variability in terminology use, construct definitions, the specific behaviors elicited, and other issues related to instrument design."<sup>37:47</sup>

### **Our Digital Dating Abuse Research**

We studied digital dating abuse for the first time in 2010. In that study of 4,400 11-18 year-old middle and high school students from a large school dis-

“My ex boyfriend kept spreading rumors that I cheated on him and I was a slut. I felt so angry and upset that I dated the guy for 5 years and then he turned out to be a complete jerk and a different person. I told my mom and blocked him in every way possible.”

*17 year-old girl from New York*

trict in the southern U.S., we found that about 12% of students had been the victim some form of digital dating abuse, while 8% admitted to abusing their romantic partner digitally. The most common type of digital abuse (which affected about 10% of youth) was receiving threatening messages from their boyfriend or girlfriend. About 7% of youth said they had threatened a romantic partner via text message.

We revisited the issue of digital dating abuse among teens in more detail in our 2016 study. This project involved a survey of a national sample of approximately 5,500 12-17 year-old youth from United States. In our survey, only about 40% of the students (n=2,203) had been in a romantic relationship within the previous year. When focusing only on those youth, 28% had been targeted for digital dating abuse (32% of boys; 24% of girls) and 18% admitted to targeting their partner (22% of boys; 14% of girls). More specific results from this research are summarized below.

#### VICTIMIZATION

12% of youth said a romantic partner has prevented them from using a computer or cell phone.

10% of boys and 7% girls said their romantic partner posted something publicly online to make fun of, threaten, or embarrass them.

12% of boys and 7% of girls said they received a threatening cell phone message from their romantic partner.

25% of boys and 18% of girls said their romantic partner looked through the contents of your phone, tablet, or other device without permission.

#### OFFENDING

8% of youth admitted that they prevented their romantic partner from using a computer or cell phone.

9% of boys and 3% of girls said they posted something publicly online to make fun of, threaten, or embarrass their romantic partner.

6% of youth said they sent a threatening cell phone message to their romantic partner.

17% of boys and 1% of girls said they looked through the contents of their romantic partner's phone, tablet, or other device without permission.

#### OTHER FINDINGS

Offline dating violence and online dating violence are highly correlated (victimization:  $r=.67$ ; offending:  $r=.59$ ).

Youth who are cyberbullied are more than 4 times as likely to experience electronic teen dating violence as those who are not cyberbullied.

Youth who have cyberbullied others are nearly 8 times as likely to engage in digital dating abuse.

Youth who had engaged in sexual intercourse were more than 7 times as likely to have experienced digital dating abuse.

Youth who had sent a sexually explicit image to a romantic partner were more than 12 times as likely to be the target of digital dating abuse.

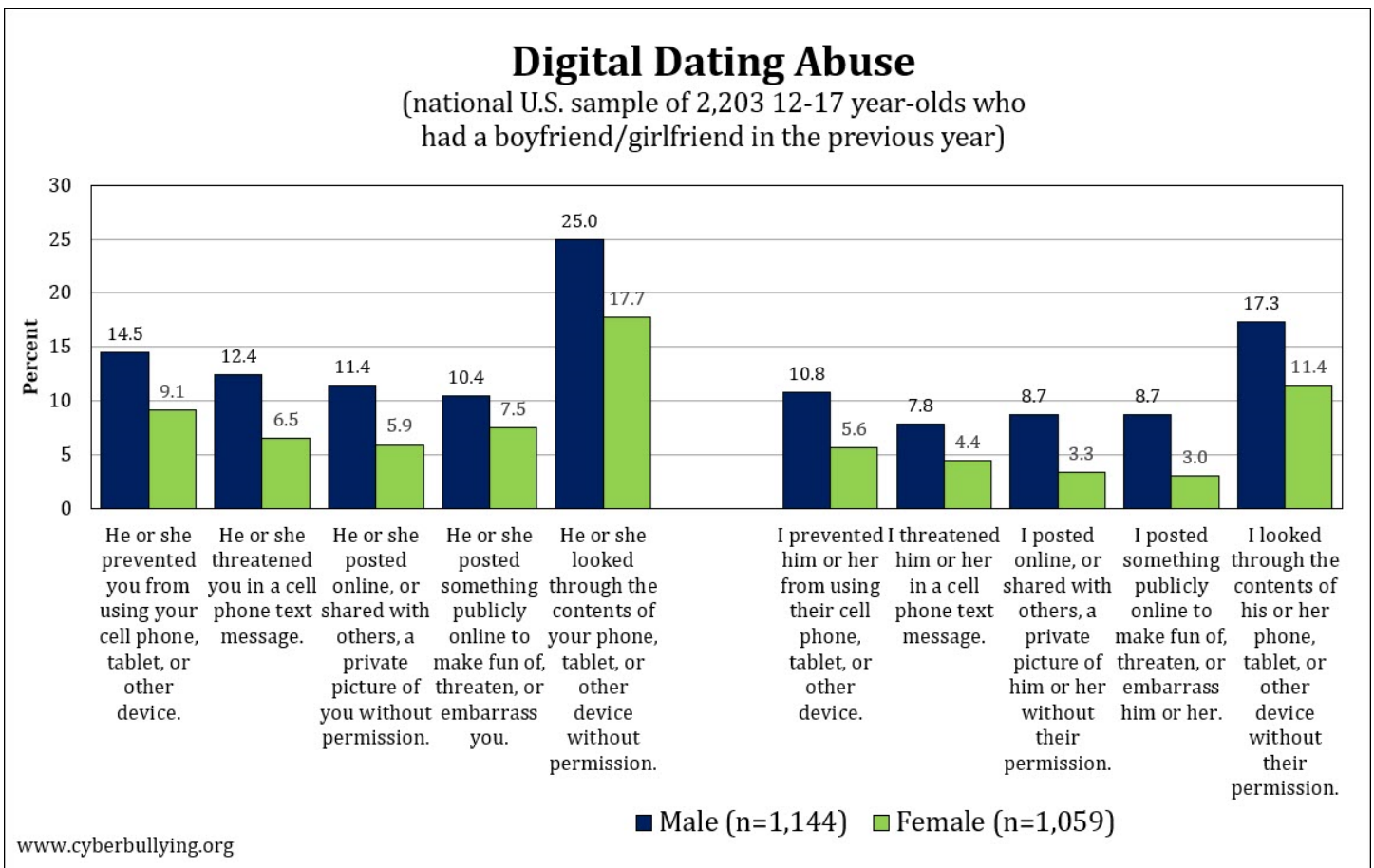
## Next Steps

It is clear that digital dating abuse affects a meaningful proportion of teenagers. As this problem continues to be studied, we hope to learn much more about context, contributing factors, and consequences. Future research should explore what individual- and family-level factors are associated with digital dating abuse, which can be used to shape policies, practices, and programs in school and community. In this way, youth-serving adults can be mindful of who might be most susceptible to this phenomenon and can concentrate their efforts on at-risk teens. Preventive informational and educational efforts based on research rather than emotion or alarm, then, may go a long way in curbing the problem at hand.

Additionally, there are laws that enable police to step in and address domestic and dating violence in practically every jurisdiction.<sup>38</sup> Law enforcement and other responding entities need, however, to be perceived as capable, compassionate entities who can deal with the problem in a way that does not make it worse for the target. Research has consistently

identified a reluctance on the part of battered women and the sexually abused to contact the police,<sup>39,40</sup> and this is tragic because it denies the opportunity to help in situations where it is most needed. A deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological mindset – and the situational circumstances – of teenage targets in a tenuous and complicated developmental stage provided through the current research may help inform police practice when called to deal with cases of teen dating violence. These issues are perhaps amplified when the violence is perpetrated via technology, as officers unfamiliar with cyberbullying and/or dating violence may not appreciate their significance and simply disregard them as non-serious issues.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, identifying and measuring certain potential outcomes dating abuse (such as suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, and delinquency) may serve to illuminate its consequences to one's mental, emotional, and physical health, and should hopefully lead to more attention and resources to reduce its frequency. While it is increasingly on the radar of criminal justice, educational, victim advocacy, and social ser-





vice institutions, there appears to be a lack of knowledge associated with what can be done about it. Future research should work to identify which factors lead to harm in youthful romantic relationships and can also pave the way for more informed prevention and response strategies.

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For additional information, see:

Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2020). Digital Dating Abuse Among a National Sample of U.S. Youth. Forthcoming in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519897344>

## Notes

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**"I was extremely angry,  
a little scared, and appalled."  
17 year-old girl from Florida**

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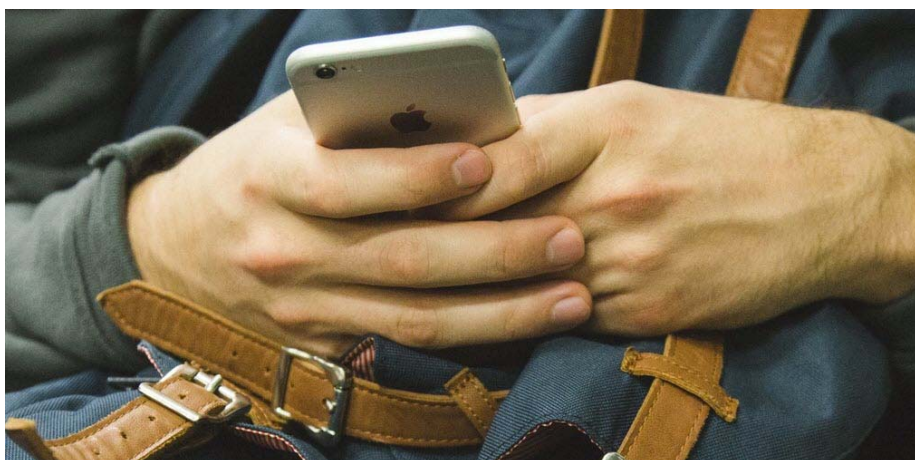
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