Abstract: The ‘Navigating Relating’ program introduced in this paper adopts a skills-based empowerment approach to minimising harmful relationship outcomes. Specifically, the program aims to reduce the risk of abusive dynamics forming in adolescents’ current and/or future couple relationships by promoting personal responsibility and positive self-agency. Few programs in this area are based on clearly articulated, empirically supported theory (Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006), and programs notable for their strong theoretical framework and promising evaluation results (see Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004) are typically very demanding in terms of the class-time, community involvement, and co-ordination effort they require. ‘Navigating Relating’ is unique in that it is both research-driven and designed to facilitate widespread and sustained implementation in schools. This paper summarises the theoretical and empirical foundations upon which ‘Navigating Relating’ was developed, outlines the key features and components of the program and, finally, heralds plans for the program’s future development.

URLs: http://www.achper.org.au/documents/item/83
Navigating healthy relationships:
A skills-based empowerment approach to
relationship education
The ‘Navigating Relating’ program introduced in this paper adopts a skills-based empowerment approach to minimising harmful relationship outcomes. Specifically, the program aims to reduce the risk of abusive dynamics forming in adolescents’ current and/or future couple relationships by promoting personal responsibility and positive self-agency. Few programs in this area are based on clearly articulated, empirically supported theory (Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006), and programs notable for their strong theoretical framework and promising evaluation results (see Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004) are typically very demanding in terms of the class-time, community involvement, and co-ordination effort they require. ‘Navigating Relating’ is unique in that it is both research-driven and designed to facilitate widespread and sustained implementation in schools. This paper summarises the theoretical and empirical foundations upon which ‘Navigating Relating’ was developed, outlines the key features and components of the program and, finally, heralds plans for the program’s future development.

The Problem of Abuse in Relationships

Harm-causing behaviour within romantic/intimate relationships is typically referred to as partner or relationship abuse, suggesting an unshifting power differential between the ‘perpetrator’ and the ‘victim’. This connotation, while accurate in some cases, can be misleading. In developed western nations (see Archer, 2006), abusive relationships tend to evolve dynamically with the target of the abuse shifting between partners (Dutton & Nichols, 2005; Hamel, 2007). In addition, harm-causing behaviour in relationships is not always enacted with malicious intent. For example, an emotionally needy partner can cause social harm without deliberately trying to cause harm. While abuse resulting in serious harm is easy to identify, identifying the precise point at which a relationship becomes “abusive” is often difficult.

Despite these problems, the terms “abuse” and “abusive” are used in this paper to refer to behaviours by one or both partners that have the potential to cause harm. Physical abuse (or violence) is defined as aggression by a partner that could result in physical pain, injury, or fear. A number of physical and psychological problems are associated with young men’s and women’s experience of physical partner abuse (Fletcher, 2009). On the other hand, psychological partner abuse is an equally worthy target for prevention, typically affecting physical and mental health in males and females more profoundly than physical abuse (Coker et al., 2002). Psychological abuse is defined as behaviour by a partner likely to result in social or emotional harm. Social harm, in this context, is a negated sense of connectedness.
with others outside of the relationship or a restricted sense of social autonomy. Emotional harm is defined as a compromised sense of self-esteem or self-confidence.

**The Extent of the Problem**

Abusive relationships are so common in Australia that it is surprising that the issue has not attracted more concerted attention in schools as a health education topic. A nation-wide study conducted by the Crime Research Centre (2001) is the most comprehensive prevalence study on this topic published in Australia to date. This study found that almost one-in-three young Australians have witnessed violence between their parents/step-parents, and one-in-ten young Australians have been exposed to such violence on three or more occasions. More young Australians reported witnessing violence by both parents (14.4%) than by only the male partner (9%) or by only the female partner (7.8%). Over half of young Australians reported observing psychological abuse between their parents/step-parents, with over 25% reporting being exposed to such abuse on three or more occasions.

Relationship abuse is not confined to adult couples. In most samples, 30-40% of young people with relationship experience report being directly affected by abuse in one or more of their relationships (e.g., Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009; O'Leary, Smith Slep, Avery-Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008). The Australian study cited above found that over half of all boys and girls aged 12-14 years have had relationship experience, and over 20% of these adolescents reported that they had experienced violence by a partner. Of the 80% of 18 year olds who reported relationship experience, over 40% reported experiencing violence. About half of relationship-experienced boys and girls reported being psychologically abused by a partner: 12% reported being repeatedly yelled at, and 9-13% reported being repeatedly put-down or humiliated. Preventative education efforts with young people are clearly warranted.

Studies on this topic, including the Australian study just mentioned, tend to find that the prevalence of perpetration and victimisation in relationships is similar for young men and young women (e.g., Harned, 2001; Kaura & Allen, 2004; O'Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Straus, 2008; Temple et al., 2005; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Indeed, studies focusing on partner violence tend to find that more girls are aggressive in their relationships than are boys (e.g., Chapple, 2003; Hird, 2000; McCloskey & Lichter, 2003; O'Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Ozer, Tschann, Pasch, & Flores, 2004; Windle & Mrug, 2009). However, while some males are severely victimised by female partners (Fontes, 2007; Frieze, 2005), girls are more likely than boys to report being hurt or frightened by a partner’s aggression (55% versus 22%; Crime Research Centre, 2001).

**How Relationships Become Abusive**
Given that abusive patterns can become established early in young people’s relationships and can carry through into their later relationships (Feiring & Furman, 2000; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999), preventing the development of unhealthy dynamics in adolescent relationships is an imperative challenge for health educators. Adolescence is a “sensitive period” for learning about relationships and, therefore, provides an important window of opportunity for prevention education (Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005). Effective relationship education for young people is not just important for optimising young people’s present and future wellbeing, but also for protecting the wellbeing of children they go on to raise (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; O’Leary & Jouriles, 1993; Osofski, 1999). While statistics are plentiful on the prevalence of abusive acts in adolescent relationships, only recently has research attention begun to shift towards the processes that lead to chronic partner abuse (e.g., Bell & Nagle, 2008; Winstok, 2007). Of importance is what these processes mean for how health educators can best help young people to avoid harmful outcomes.

A range of factors render individuals more at-risk than others of perpetrating or experiencing chronic partner abuse (e.g., Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Vezina & Hebert, 2007); however, no one factor is a reliable predictor. Indeed, it is misguided to believe that partner abuse is a phenomenon predicted by variables relating only to victims or perpetrators. The extent of harm caused depends on the characteristics of the dyad (i.e., both partners). For example, in cases of social abuse, at least one partner needs to behave in a manipulative manner, but not all partners are equally likely to succumb to a partner’s control tactics (e.g., Few & Rosen, 2006). In cases of physical abuse, bi-directional aggression is associated with more frequent and severe violence than uni-directional aggression (Crime Research Centre, 2001; Gray & Foshee, 1997; Temple et al., 2005; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Far from suggesting that both partners are always equally “to blame” (see Hamel, 2007), chronic abuse of any type is the result of a problematic combination of both partners’ tendencies and vulnerabilities.

The dyadic slippery-slope model (Murphy & Smith, 2010a) captures this complexity, highlighting the role of each partner’s actions (referred to as “warning-sign behaviours”) but also each partner’s reactions in contributing to abusive dynamics. According to this model, relationship dynamics that lead to harm—characterised by secrecy, overdependence, hostility, and/or power imbalance—develop when one or more warning-sign behaviours by either or both partners are accommodated or responded to aggressively by the other partner. Warning-sign behaviours include dominance-seeking, possessive, denigrating, conflict-controlling, and retaliatory behaviours; and are engaged in by both young men and young women (e.g., Crime Research Centre, 2001; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Harned, 2001; Miller & White, 2003; Murphy, 2009a) in heterosexual and same-sex relationships (Bunker Rohrbaugh, 2006).
Warning-sign behaviours are often not viewed by young people as forms of abuse *per se* (Crime Research Centre, 2001; Murphy, 2009a). However, they can exacerbate a partner’s existing vulnerabilities such that assertive responses to future warning-sign behaviours become less likely over time. Assertive responses, here, are defined as clear, non-aggressive expressions of one’s needs, rights, or wishes; that is, responses that are neither accommodative nor aggressive. Thus, warning-sign behaviours can increase in intensity or frequency as the recipient partner’s responses become more accommodative or aggressive. As abusive dynamics develop, and behaviours evolve which are clearly abusive, assertive responses may become ineffective even if they are tried. To complicate matters further, warning-sign behaviours in unhealthy relationships are often initiated by both partners at different times, not just by one partner. Clearly, “keeping a grip” on the relationship slippery slope is much easier for partners at the top of the slope than once the downward slide has begun.

**The Need for Skills-Based Empowerment**

Disturbingly, significant minorities of young women view domineering, possessive, denigrating, conflict-controlling, and retaliatory behaviours by a partner to be acceptable (Murphy, 2009a). Even when such behaviours are perceived to be problematic, many girls report a propensity to respond accommodatively or aggressively (Murphy & Smith, 2010b). Such interactions can prove pivotal in setting the trajectory of girls’ relationship careers and future wellbeing. Despite this, most girls embark on their couple-relationship careers with little formal preparation in terms of strategies for steering clear of the metaphorical slippery-slope; that is, for “keeping a grip” should they encounter warning-sign behaviours by a partner.

The instrumentality of girls’ responses in setting the course of their relationship pathways is typically overlooked or downplayed in existing relationship abuse prevention programs, especially those guided by structural feminist theories of partner abuse (for examples, see Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2009). Rather than building relationship skills, these programs attempt to change gender-related attitudes and norms (see Murphy & Smith, 2010a). Gender-focused programs teach girls that any abuse they suffer is unacceptable and that they should seek help if they are being abused. While this constitutes sound and important advice, girls might be better served by education programs which also equip them with the insights and skills required to consciously resist the relationship abuse slippery-slope when warning-sign behaviours first begin to occur. Without opportunities to learn and practice assertive scripts for responding to warning-sign behaviours, it is difficult to see how general “expect respect” messages might empower girls to have greater control over the course of their relationships. That is, such messages are unlikely to help girls to become more conscious and active participants in their own relationships.
Likewise, relationship abuse prevention programs which presume males are more powerful and abusive in relationships than females (see Pease, 2008) are unlikely to be perceived by boys as empowering. Messages delivered in gender-focused programs may be dismissed by some boys as unrealistic and unfair. This may explain why boys have been found to respond disappointingly to gender-focused programs (e.g., Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992; Jones, 1998; Weisz & Black, 2009). Such messages may unwittingly reinforce problematic gender-norms or spur undesirable backlashes (increased aggressiveness) among some young women. Because warning-sign behaviours are displayed by both boys and girls, young people may respond more positively to relationship education programs which, instead of focusing on gender-stereotypes, help them to acquire skills for “keeping a grip” when faced with potential slippery-slope situations, irrespective of their gender.

A Girls-Only Pilot Study

The ‘Navigating Relating’ program is based on the content of the ‘Safe at Heart’ program recently piloted with 133 self-nominated girls in Years 8 to 11 with a mean age of 14.7 years (Murphy, 2009b). This pilot program was delivered to 13 groups, each comprising 8 to 15 girls, across ten Victorian secondary schools. This pilot version of the program consisted of five modules delivered over one school day: Choosing, Noticing, Responding, Ending, and Bouncing Back. The Noticing and Responding modules were longest, each running for approximately 90 minutes.

Unlike the wait-list control group, participants in the intervention group demonstrated significant increases in assertive tendency from just prior to the program to three months after its completion (Murphy, 2010c). Assertive tendency was measured by a condition-blind assessor who, guided by detailed rating criteria, rated on a 5-point scale the assertiveness of participants’ hypothetical responses to 23 specific warning-sign behaviours. Mean Tendency to Resist or End Abusive Dynamics (TREAD) scores were calculated to allow for pre- to post-program comparisons. Prior to the program, participants’ TREAD scores were negatively associated with their recent exposure to warning-sign behaviour. Pleasingly, though, pre- to post-program increases in TREAD were associated with decreases in participants’ recent exposure to warning-sign behaviour. The waitlist control group reported no reduction in exposure.

Participants in the ‘Safe at Heart’ pilot responded amenably to the program’s empowerment-oriented approach, and reported finding their participation in the program to be worthwhile and enjoyable. It is hoped a similar approach with girls and boys in universal classroom settings, in the form of the ‘Navigating Relating’ program, might prove similarly well received and effective.
The ‘Navigating Relating’ Program

Boosted by the heartening results of the above pilot study, ‘Navigating Relating’ takes a similar skills-based empowerment approach. It is designed for universal delivery as part of Year 8 to 10 students’ compulsory health education program, but requires evaluation in this context to determine its efficacy as a universal/non-elective program.

Like the initial pilot program, ‘Navigating Relating’ incorporates characteristics associated with effective health education programming in other areas (Tobler, 2000), including student-centred and interactive teaching techniques. Students complete a few short individual tasks, but primarily participate in guided small-group activities. A number of worksheets are included because many teachers and students appreciate the structure they provide; however, these serve mainly as prompts for discussion and hands-on activity, and require minimal reading and writing.

Programs need to be actually implemented, and done so faithfully, in order to achieve their demonstrated potential (Tobler, 2000). The ‘Navigating Relating’ program has been developed with an acute awareness of the qualities likely to promote widespread and sustained uptake of the program in schools: teacher-friendliness in terms of planning and preparation requirements; budget-friendliness in terms of teacher leave/training requirements; student-friendliness in terms of the accessibility of the program’s ideas and activities; and curriculum-friendliness in terms of time-effectiveness. While investment in, and evaluation of, preventative relationship education in schools is well warranted, efficiency of implementation is important given the multitude of competing and equally worthy curricular agendas vying for attention in schools.

The following outlines the content covered in each 50- to 70-minute session of the ‘Navigating Relating’ program. Further information, including a complete facilitator manual and details regarding optional training opportunities, is available by contacting the author.

Session 1: Good Relationships

In this session, students describe how partners might feel, think and act in a ‘good relationship’. They are introduced to three important needs for happiness: feeling confident, having choice, and feeling connected to others. Students then generate and share mini-stories which illustrate how an outsider might be able to tell that both partners in a relationship have their needs for confidence, choice, and connectedness met.

Session 2: Bad Relationships
In this session, students are introduced to the three types of harm that can occur when a partner’s needs are not met in a relationship: social, emotional and physical harms. Students identify types of harm in ‘bad relationship’ case-study snippets. Students then try to judge which of the three types of harm (if any) is worst, and what factors might affect how serious each type of harm is. Students then generate reasons why a relationship might turn ‘bad’, under the following four banners: wrong reasons for starting the relationship, personality factors, past experiences, and outside stressors. Finally, students try to judge whether any of these reasons render the harms less serious: Do any of these reasons make a good excuse for the harms that are caused? Does having a reason for causing harm make it less harmful?

Session 3: Relationship Slippery Slopes
Students are introduced to the notion of relationship “slippery-slopes”; that is, the idea that relationships generally do not start out harmful but can gradually become harmful, starting with small “warning-sign behaviours” (the focus of the subsequent session). The focus in this session is on the four ways that relationships can slide downhill and result in serious harms: Secrecy, Overdependence, Anger, and Power Imbalance (S, O, A, & P). Students try to explain why each of these four slippery-slope dynamics is hard to reverse once it becomes established in a relationship.

Session 4: Slippery Slope Warning Signs
In this session, students are introduced to five types of warning-sign behaviour—Bossiness, Ownership, Meanness, Unfair Arguing, and Revenge behaviours—including 23 specific examples. Students (a) classify each of the 23 behaviours into the five categories, (b) identify which, if any, slippery-slope dynamic(s) each warning-sign behaviour could contribute to, and (c) identify what types of harm could result from each behaviour if the slippery-slope is not avoided or stopped early enough.

Session 5: Keeping a Grip
To help students make more conscious choices about how they respond to early warning-sign situations, it is necessary (a) to help them understand the potential effects of their responses on the long-term outcomes of their relationships and (b) to provide opportunities to plan and rehearse well-considered ways of responding. This session aims to do both, providing time for students (a) to consider the potential consequences of accepting versus aggressing versus asserting themselves in warning-sign situations and (b) to actively experiment with different ways of being assertive in response to a range of realistic warning-sign situations.

Optional: Good Relationships Advocate & Support Person (GRASP) Training
Based on the content of the Ending and Bouncing-Back modules of the ‘Safe at Heart’ pilot program, this optional two-hour adjunct is delivered to smaller groups of interested students as a special out-of-class training program. Following this training, students receive a certificate acknowledging their commitment to being a Good Relationships Advocate & Support Person. The training covers ways to encourage healthy, respectful relationships in their peer group; ways to positively challenge unhealthy beliefs and behaviours; and ways to support a friend in a slippery-slope relationship. Topics include how to help a friend safely end an unsafe relationship, and how to help a friend bounce-back after experiencing a harmful relationship. It is envisaged that specially trained welfare and/or teaching staff will deliver this training to interested groups of students, including higher-risk students.

**Program Dissemination and Evaluation Planning**

At the time of writing, the ‘Navigating Relating’ program manual is still in preparation. Suggestions by experienced health educators and student wellbeing staff for maximising the effectiveness of the program are encouraged and will be especially welcomed during April 2011. Later in 2011, pending relevant funding and ethics approvals, schools will be invited to participate in a wide-scale trial and evaluation of the program during 2012.

In order to determine what difference the program makes beyond the effects of normal adolescent maturation and life experience, schools will be asked to run the program with approximately half of the students/classes at the selected Year Level, and then deliver the program to the remaining students at least six months later. All students will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey (or a paper-and-pencil version, if preferred) before and then, again, six months after the first cohort of students participate in the program. Process-focused feedback will also be sought from teachers involved in the trial. A detailed plain language statement will be available to schools interested in participating in the ‘Navigating Relating’ trial, outlining the risks, requirements, and benefits of contributing to the program’s evaluation. In the meantime, interested schools are encouraged to contact the author at safe-relationships@rmit.edu.au to register their interest.

**References**


289


292