

AUSTRALIAN DOCTOR

August 4, 2004

Early Sex Ups Risk of Dating Violence

By Brad McLean

Sexually experienced teenage girls are commonly exposed to dating violence, which in turn places them in danger of high-risk sexual behaviour such as having multiple partners, a study of more than 7000 high school students shows.

Almost one in five sexually experienced girls aged 14-18 had been exposed to violence on a date in the previous year compared with 4% of non-experienced teenagers, the US data revealed. Those exposed to dating violence were twice as likely to undertake risky sexual behaviour and almost twice as likely to get pregnant.

“Overall these findings indicate that ... adolescent girls who experience dating violence are at significantly increased risk for multiple high-risk behaviours related to sex, including having greater numbers of sexual partners, not consistently using condoms and using substances before sexual intercourse,” the authors wrote in *Pediatrics* (August 2004).

Dr David Bennett, head of the department of adolescent medicine at the Children’s Hospital at Westmead, NSW, said the finding that early sexual experience was linked to violence was concerning.

“We know that kids who are well educated and informed about sex are the ones most likely to postpone sexual initiation, and the earlier you start the greater risk you are at.”

Risky sexual behaviours were often associated with mental health disorders, particularly depression, said Dr Bennett, who supported a call by the study authors for school programs to address the issue of dating violence.

Dr Bennett also encouraged GPs to proactively assess their teenage patients for exposure to violence and abuse (see box). “Doctors must be prepared to ... have the confidence to ask teenagers about the issues of sex and violence.” *Pediatrics* 2004; 114: e220-25.

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