



- Youth may not report dating or sexual abuse if they have concerns about confidentiality.
- No procedures exist to support research participants who are adolescent survivors of abuse.
- We conducted a structured ethical decision-making process to solve our ethical dilemma.
- Our novel protocol helps balance participant confidentiality with survivor welfare.

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Rigorous research and program evaluation are needed to understand the experience of dating and sexual violence among youth and the impact of prevention and intervention efforts. Our dilemma in doing this work occurred when youth disclosed dating and sexual violence on a research survey. What responsibility do researchers have to protect survivors' confidentiality as a research participant versus taking steps to ensure the student has the opportunity to access help? In our evaluation of a pilot dating violence prevention program, our protocols employed widely used procedures for providing resources to participants upon their completion of the survey and de-identifying survey data. Upon reviewing preliminary survey results, we became concerned that these established procedures were not sufficient to support research participants who were adolescent survivors of dating and sexual violence. We followed a structured ethical decision-making process to examine legal and ethical considerations, consult with colleagues, consider impacts and alternative solutions, and ultimately find a solution. Through this process, we developed procedures that balance participant confidentiality and the desire to support the welfare of survivors, which other researchers may want to employ when conducting youth sexual and dating violence research in school and community settings.

Many youth rarely tell others, especially adults, about dating violence experiences (e.g., Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008), and may be even less inclined to report abuse if they have concerns about confidentiality. There are also challenges around raising awareness about these issues among youth, as youth are navigating unknown territory in their early dating relationships and may not recognize signs of abuse. Due to the importance and challenges of dating violence research and program evaluation, this paper explores the ethics involved in balancing confidentiality and the welfare of adolescents. When dating violence is disclosed on a research survey, what responsibility do researchers have to protect teenage survivors' confidentiality as a research participant, versus ensuring the minor has the chance to access help?

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Our research team was contracted to evaluate what is LOVE, a school-based dating violence prevention program that draws from restorative justice principles to reach students, parents, and staff. The program focuses on how to identify the harm caused by unhealthy and abusive dating behaviors, take accountability for causing harm, and safely repair relationships. Interventions provided by what is LOVE include an assembly for all freshman students, 6-week workshops for small groups of students, parent presentations, crisis intervention, and disseminating outreach materials.

To evaluate the 6-week workshops, we implemented a quasi-experimental design with random assignment at three local high schools. Regarding confidentiality, youth assent forms stated:

Your name will not be used on any of the research documents. You will be given a study identification number, which will be the only identifying information on study materials. All information used for research purposes will be reported as a group, so there will be no way to identify your participation in any of the study's findings. However, be aware that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, since research documents are not protected from subpoena. Additionally, since we are reporting

school-based practice (Armistead, Williams & Jacob, 2011). The model addresses ethical dilemmas via seven steps:

(1) Identify the ethical dilemma; (2) identify the parties; (3) identify the stakeholders; (4) identify the values at stake; (5) identify the options; (6) identify the consequences; and (7) identify the best course of action.

We adopted this approach for our dilemma because employing a logical, systematic approach is likely to lead to a better solution and is more defensible than common sense judgment (Boccio, 2015). After the ethical challenge became clear, we described the problem (Step 1) as a conflict between disclosing the abuse to protect the minor and con

Contemplating our legal and ethical guidelines, we realized that our participants' privacy was a high priority. We felt that maintaining the privacy of participants was a high priority and that whatever course of action we took must proceed with extreme caution if we were to reveal any link between who they are and their survey responses.

Mandated Reporting and Minor Consent Laws

As MH professionals, we are mandated reporters in the State of California and under the CANF (California Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act) we are mandated to report child abuse. According to the California penal code, child abuse includes physical injury inflicted by other than accidental means upon a child by another person, sexual abuse, neglect, the willful harming or injuring of a child or the endangering of the person

s. Some researchers provided examples of the additional crisis intervention support as needed for informed consent documents they use in their research, reported or disclosed incidents of dating and sexual violence, examples of their confidentiality protocols. Most use a protocol that was similar to our original procedures; it was common for researchers to provide a list of resources to students after their research participation, and for researchers to ask questions about sexual violence experiences without any protocol for reporting student responses to authorities. We concluded that this was a dilemma among our research team, which is comprised of a diverse group of researchers and practitioners with experience in school-based contexts and training in community, clinical, developmental, and school psychology and social work. For example, some researchers believed it was important to empower youth to choose when and how they might disclose experiences of sexual assault, and felt researchers would be disempowering survivors by breaking that confidentiality despite their status as minors.

Consultation with University Administrators

We did not receive conclusive guidance from our university and school administrators. The Office of Research staff asked us to consult with Chief County Counsel and school district personnel. The project PI called the University Compliance Hotline as instructed by the mandated reporter protocol. She made a report with an answering service and then was contacted by the UCSB Chief Counsel. During this conversation, it was clear that this situation fell outside the typical child abuse reporting scenarios addressed by this unit. UCSB counsel advised us that work was not under the University purview because the abuse did not happen during a University program or activity, but was discovered through a research project. They noted that we were the UC experts on this topic and should develop a protocol that we believed adequately addressed our conundrum.

Consultation with School Personnel

Because disclosure happened during the course of a confidential research survey, they felt it was not their report to make. The school personnel felt that their awareness-raising efforts, including bringing the What is LOVE program to their schools, were sufficient for educating students on these topics. The school professionals were willing to meet with the student survivors if we felt it was our legal or ethical obligation to identify the survivors. The schools contracted with the What is LOVE director to provide

effective, this program had the potential to reach many students to learn about dating and sexual violence and develop healthy relationship skills. From a practitioner perspective concerned primarily with student safety, we worried about students receiving needed support for abuse

Therefore, this protocol allowed us to offer confidential assessments that maintained the rigor of our evaluation and provided students with easily accessible supportive services.

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Armistead, L., Williams, B.B., & Jacob, S. (2011). Professional ethics for school psychologists: A problem-solving model case-book (2nd edn). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
Becker-Blease, K.A., & Freyd, J.J. (2006). Research participants tell-

The resolution to our ethical dilemma was not without limitations. Some students who reported sexual violence in their relationships but did not want to reach out to our MH professional did not receive any additional support beyond a list of resources. However, the goal of this program was to understand and reduce dating violence; therefore, only violence occurring within the context of a dating relationship was addressed. As survey questions asked about sexual violence that occurred with a current or most recent dating partner only, students who may have experienced sexual violence outside the context of a relationship would likely not report these experiences. However, all participants had access to a list of resources that could be used to seek support.

This protocol is generalizable to other community-based research and evaluation projects on dating and sexual violence. Researchers could adapt this protocol to be more inclusive of sexual violence outside of relationships, other forms of dating violence, or to those experiencing acute emotional distress resulting from an abusive relationship. This protocol could also be adapted to programs outside of the school context. The protocol is flexible in that, through relationships built with community-based organizations and/or schools, research teams can identify the best person to follow up with students who request support for abuse experiences.

The authors have no conflict of interest regarding the research conducted related to this manuscript; the article is their work and the opinions stated are their own. The research that informs this paper met the ethical standards for research involving human participants.

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