

Why are teenage girls attracted to boys who hurt them? We talked to high school students to find out

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When boy and girls reach adolescence, they are bombarded with messages that [associate attraction with violence](#). These messages—from

their peer group, TV series, films, music, social media, and so on—depict boys with violent and demeaning attitudes towards girls as attractive, but not so much those who treat girls well.

An example of these messages can be seen in the 2019 film [After](#), based on a [2014 novel of the same name](#). The main character starts out with a high school boyfriend—a nice guy who she treats more like a friend than a lover—but when she goes away to college she cheats on him with a more attractive "bad boy." Her boyfriend's response is sympathetic, which only makes him seem insecure. The girl later finds out that her new flame was only with her for a bet, but that doesn't make him any less attractive because, in the end, he apparently "falls in love for real."

Dominance and coercion

Messages that link attraction to [violence](#) and contempt can occur in different settings and in different ways, and this association is known as "[coercive dominant discourse](#)". Long-term exposure to this discourse [leads girls to consider violent boys attractive](#), eventually pushing them into toxic emotional and [sexual relationships](#).

In our [recent study](#), we analyzed the ways in which this discourse manifests within a peer group, leading some girls into what are known as "[disdainful hookups](#)" with boys who do not treat them well and show violent attitudes and behaviors, and to suffer the consequences.

To do this, we interviewed 59 boys and 71 girls from 3 different secondary schools, all aged between 15 and 16. They told us about the interactions in their peer groups—the groups of people of a similar age with whom they share interests and activities, either inside or outside school, and with whom they socialize and build their identities.

Peer pressure and the desire to fit in

The peer group is one of the most important contexts for adolescent socialization and learning, and [peer pressure](#) can lead some girls to get involved with violent boys, even if they don't want to.

The peer group also exerts pressure on girls by telling them repeatedly that they should like boys with violent attitudes and behavior, which causes many of them to end up liking—or believing that they like—this type of boy. This pressure leads to violent behavior being normalized and accepted, and even to girls mistaking it for love, pushing them into toxic relationships.

Peer pressure is also rooted in the media messages that young people are exposed to.

"I have watched a series in which the girl, at first, was dating a boy who did not treat her well, and then he left her. He kept saying to her that she was ugly ... and she did not realize that there was another boy in her class that was always looking after her and that he liked her." ([Teenage female research participant](#))

For their part, boys are pressured to follow [patterns of violent and disdainful masculinity](#) if they want to be attractive and successful with girls.

The danger of being boring

For girls who are already in a stable relationship with a boy who is not violent, the coercive dominant discourse in the group labels them as "boring," and pressures them to cheat on their boyfriends with boys who show more violent attitudes and behavior. This is because, as the girls

participating in our research explained when recounting their experience, "that's the fun part."

Violent behaviors can range from bragging about having hooked up with someone and then belittling her, to showing contempt for a girl once they have got together, talking down to her, and treating her badly both in front of others or when they are alone.

There are girls who end up giving in to these pressures, getting together with people they do not want to and cheating on people they like, because they don't want to be considered boring in their group and they are afraid of losing their friends. And the role of their peers does not always stop there.

Harassment can continue when friends, for instance, take photographs of a girl with a boy—either being intimate or being close to each other in a way that makes it look like they are. They can then send the photograph to the girl's boyfriend, send it to more people, or post it on the internet, broadcasting her deception to the wider world and damaging the girl's relationship with her boyfriend.

Health consequences of gender-based violence

[Scientific research](#) has shown that gender-based violence has negative health consequences, including chronic pain and an increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases, depression, and suicidal tendencies.

Around 27% of women and girls aged 15-49 have experienced some form of [physical or sexual violence](#), so it is necessary to identify the factors that increase the risk of gender-based violence, especially among younger girls who are in their first relationships.

Our research shows that disdainful hookups are one such factor that

increases the risk of gender-based violence among teenagers, as they socialize girls to normalize and be attracted to violence. Moreover, when these relationships are shared among many people or posted online, they are linked to that girl forever, with potentially serious consequences for her health. As one of them said, "The photo will follow you to your grave. Some people end up committing suicide because it hurts so much."

(Good) friends can prevent the problem

Putting pressure on girls to get into abusive or disdainful relationships increases the likelihood that they will be victims of gender-based violence. But just as a girl's peer group can put pressure on her to get into these relationships, it can also help to prevent them.

In our research, girls talked about [peer pressure](#) or "fear of losing their friends," but they also refer to "fake friends" pressuring them into a relationship with someone they did not want to be with.

According to the findings of [this](#) and [other research](#), working on quality friendships from an early age can be an important part of preventing and protecting against gender-based violence.

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