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RECONSTRUCTING THE PRACTICAL THEORY OF COMMUNICAITON IN  
*DATING MATTERS: EXAMINING TEEN DATING VIOLENCE PREVENTION*  
FROM A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

by

Diana Costanzo

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Communication Studies

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2022

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## ABSTRACT

Reconstructing the Practical Theory of Communication in *Dating Matters*: Examining  
Teen Dating Violence Prevention from a Communicative Approach

by

Diana Costanzo, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Matthew Sanders

Department: Communication Studies and Philosophy

Teen Dating Violence (TDV) has lasting impacts on teens' health and well-being. *Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships* (DM), a curriculum published by the CDC in 2019, seeks to mitigate the consequences of TDV and promote healthy relationships. Using Grounded Practical Theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995, 2014), this paper analyzes how DM conceptualizes communication. Specifically, I explore and critique how DM discusses topics related to communication and conflict. The findings of the analysis show that DM takes a transmission-based approach to viewing communication. In DM, parents and teens are encouraged to “talk it out” or “speak up” when facing various problems, while not being taught *how* to do this or what the process may look like. DM also frames conflict negatively and does not teach effective conflict management strategies. While this curriculum is well-intentioned and effective in some ways, it could improve by incorporating a more sophisticated view of communication and

evidence-based practices from communication research. As this is the first study to take a communicative approach to understand TDV prevention, it can be used to guide future TDV prevention efforts and encourage researchers and practitioners to use communication theory in their interventions.

(120 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Reconstructing the Practical Theory of Communication in *Dating Matters*: Examining  
Teen Dating Violence Prevention from a Communicate Approach

Diana Costanzo

Teen Dating Violence (TDV) has lasting impacts on teens' health and well-being. *Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships* (DM), a curriculum published by the CDC in 2019, seeks to mitigate the consequences of TDV and promote healthy relationships. Using Grounded Practical Theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995, 2014), this paper analyzes how DM conceptualizes communication. Specifically, I explore and critique how DM discusses topics related to communication and conflict. The findings of the analysis show that DM focuses on sending the right message in communication. In DM, parents and teens are encouraged to “talk it out” or “speak up” when facing various problems, while not being taught *how* to do this or what the process may look like. DM also frames conflict negatively and does not teach effective conflict management strategies. While this curriculum is well-intentioned and effective in some ways, it could improve by incorporating a more sophisticated view of communication and evidence-based practices from communication research. As this is the first study to take a communicative approach to understand TDV prevention, it can be used to guide future TDV prevention efforts and encourage researchers and practitioners to use communication theory in their interventions.

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I dedicate this thesis to all the teens I have worked with in the past. Thank you for allowing me a window into your lives. I hope we can continue to improve outcomes for people like you and help youth thrive in safe, healthy relationships.

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One of the significant challenges facing youth in the United States is learning how to navigate romantic relationships. Research has shown that although engagement in romantic relationships can have positive effects on teens' lives (Furman & Shaffer, 2003), if they experience teen dating violence (TDV), it can have a wide range of significant negative consequences that start in adolescence and last into adulthood (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Wincentak et al., 2017). In fact, reducing sexual and physical TDV is one of the goals for the 2030 Healthy People Initiative (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Many curricula have thus been developed to help teens learn how to develop healthy relationships with peers, romantic partners, and their parents.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of these curricula is to prevent TDV before it starts, manage it when it occurs, and help teenagers get on a path of developing positive and satisfying relationships, romantic and otherwise (e.g., Carlos et al., 2017; Crooks et al., 2019; Malhotra et al., 2015; Niolon et al., 2019). A frequent skill referenced in these TDV prevention programs is to help teenagers learn how to communicate effectively (e.g., Carlos et al., 2019; Crooks et al., 2019; Foshee, et al., 2005, 2012; Niolon et al., 2019). However, TDV prevention curricula have shown mixed results regarding whether they help develop effective communication with their peers, romantic partners, and parents (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Crooks et al., 2008; Foshee et al., 2005, 2012; Miller et al., 2011; Niolon et al., 2019). Therefore, more research is needed to understand why

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the words “teenagers” or “teens” to refer to both pre-teenagers (11–12 year-olds) and teenagers themselves (13–19-year-olds). This is to keep in line with the theme of *teen* dating violence prevention (it is not pre-teen dating violence prevention, even though most prevention efforts target pre-teens) and how most other research categorizes teens and pre-teens together as adolescents, youth, or teenagers. I believe it reads better to refer to a particular group in a consistent manner throughout the paper.

TDV prevention curricula are only sometimes useful for developing communication skills. Communication scholars have yet to explore TDV prevention in general, let alone how curricula are teaching communication. As healthy communication is related to an improved quality of life and the reduction of violence, it is important to understand how teens are being taught to communicate and determine the extent to which such teaching is grounded in communication theory and practice (Basile et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Messinger et al., 2011, 2012; Muniz-Rivas, 2019; Smith-Darden et al., 2017; Stewart & Koeing Kellas, 2020).

In this study, I analyze the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) 2019 TDV prevention curriculum: *Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Relationships* (DM). To do this, I use qualitative analysis and apply Craig and Tracy's (1995, 2014) Grounded Practical Theory (GPT) to understand how DM conceptualizes communication and how communication skills are being defined and taught to teenagers and their parents. This study will proceed as follows. First, I review previous research on TDV and prevention curricula, the intersections of communication and TDV, and discuss how different models of communication affect our understanding of relationships and abuse. Next, I discuss my research method and how I applied it to the DM curriculum. Then, I offer a GPT analysis of the DM curriculum and show that its view of communication limits its effectiveness and hinders its ability to fully achieve its desired outcomes. Next, I offer specific suggestions on how this curriculum could better reach its goal of teaching effective communication and fostering healthier relationships in the TDV context. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## **Literature Review**

To better understand TDV and its connection to communication theory and practice, this literature review will do the following: give an overview of the effects of TDV, review TDV prevention curricula, discuss how communication affects and moderates TDV, review the transmission and constitutive models of communication and how they impact our understandings of relationships and abuse, and explain Grounded Practical Theory and how it can be useful to understand communication in TDV prevention.

### **Overview of Teen Dating Violence**

Teen dating violence is a public health issue in the United States that includes psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse and stalking between teens who are romantically involved (CDC, n. d.; Debman & Temple, 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017). Teen relationships are likely to have co-occurrence of several types of abuse (Sears & Byers, 2010). Over 12% of teens experience physical or sexual TDV each year (Basile et al., 2020). Between the ages of 13-18, 20% of teens will experience physical TDV, and 9% of teens will experience sexual TDV (Wincentak et al., 2017). Some research shows that 33% of 7<sup>th</sup> graders have already engaged in at least one form of dating aggression (Sears et al., 2007). The numbers for emotional abuse are significantly higher, with up to 77% of teens experiencing emotional abuse in their dating relationships (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Niolon et al., 2015; Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011). Digital dating abuse is also likely to happen in teen relationships, with anywhere from 12-54% of teens reporting

being victims of digital dating abuse and 12-56% of teens reporting being perpetrators (Stonard et al., 2014). Furthermore, these relationships are likely to be mutually abusive, with somewhere between 49% and 66% of teens reporting abuse that was two-sided and not one-sided, indicating even more violence (Giordano et al., 2010; Gray & Foshee, 1997; Paradis et al., 2017).

Teens who have experienced or perpetrated TDV are more likely to view their education in a negative manner, drop out of school, and miss more classes (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Suldo et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2019). Teens may also be at a greater risk for eating disorders, substance use, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Plichta, 1996; Niolon et al., 2015; Shorey et al., 2008; Singer et al., 1995; Wingood et al., 2001). Further, they are more likely to face mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Singer et al., 1995; Wingood et al., 2001). These negative outcomes may be amplified for racial and sexual minority youth, as they are more likely to experience TDV (Basile et al., 2020; Eaton et al., 2010; Garthe et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2014). Furthermore, a teen may face these negative health outcomes for years to come. Those who have experienced TDV are more likely to also experience intimate partner violence, substance use, and suicidal thoughts in adulthood (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Shorey et al., 2008). Because TDV has negative effects in adolescence and into adulthood, it increases the importance of preventing TDV to minimize these negative, long-term outcomes.

What teens experience in their friendships, family relationships, and in their community can greatly affect their romantic relationships. If a teen is aggressive with

peers, experiences childhood abuse, has friends in abusive relationships, witnesses intimate partner violence in their home, or see violence within the community, they are more likely to perpetrate TDV (Davis et al., 2019; Shorey et al., 2018; Vagi et al., 2013). This may be because teens model the behavior that they have seen, as they perceive that violence is accomplishing something (Bandura, 1977; Davis et al., 2019). On the other hand, teens are more likely to have healthy relationships themselves if their friends and peers are also in healthy relationships (Shorey et al., 2018). If a teen feels connected to their school and has positive relationships with their parents and other adults, they are also more likely to engage in healthy dating behaviors (Davis et al., 2019; Espelage et al., 2020). Therefore, research clearly shows that the quality of a teen's other relationships in their lives – and I would argue that this includes the quality of their communication in those relationships – is a significant factor in whether a teen engages in healthy or abusive dating behaviors.

### **Reviewing Teen Dating Violence Prevention Curricula**

Due to all the consequences related to experiencing TDV, scholars and practitioners have developed TDV prevention programs over the last four decades (for a review of TDV prevention curricula, see: Carlos et al., 2017; Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Crooks et al., 2019; De La Rue et al., 2017; Doucette et al., 2021; Malhorta et al., 2015). These programs seek to “promote nonviolent, equitable, and respectful relationships” in youth (Crooks et al., 2019, p. 30). Programs aim to both prevent interpersonal violence before it starts and address violence that may be already occurring (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Crooks et al., 2019). Some programs focus on skill-

building, such as developing empathy, self-awareness, and good communication skills, whereas others focus on role-playing activities to learn about violence prevention and how to have healthy responses. Other programs work to address sexist and homophobic ideas and teach bystander intervention (Carlos et al., 2017). In addition, some programs do not directly focus on teens, but address parents and help them learn how to have healthy conversations with their teens about dating, sex, and abuse (Doucette et al., 2021).

The most recent TDV prevention curriculum is entitled *Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Relationships* (DM) and was published for public use by the CDC in 2019. It is directed towards teens, their friends, teachers, and parents, as well as the community at large, and its goals are to “create a comprehensive, multi-component model that [is] built on the existing evidence-base” (Niolon, 2021, p. 146) and “enhance expectations for and teach skills to have respectful and healthy relationships with others” (Niolon et al., 2019, p. 16). This curriculum was influenced by and has incorporated elements of several previous curricula (Tharp, 2012), including *Safe Dates* (Foshee et al., 1996), *The Fourth R* (Crooks et al., 2008), *Second Step* (Frey et al., 2000), *Life Skills Training* (Botvin & Griffen, 2004), *Parents Matter!* (Dittus et al., 2004; Long et al., 2004), and *Families for Safe Dates* (Foshee et al., 2012).

Each of the curricula incorporated into DM has proven to be effective (Tharp, 2012). *Safe Dates*, for one, increased student’s knowledge of abuse, decreased weapon-carrying and engaging in physical violence at school, and decreased TDV victimization and perpetration (Foshee et al., 1998, 2000; Foshee, McNaughton Reyes, & Agnew-Brune et al., 2014; Herrman & Waterhouse, 2014; Wesche et al., 2021). *The Fourth R*

reduced physical dating violence and increased teens' negotiation skills and engagement in safe sex practices (Crooks et al., 2008; Temple et al., 2021; Wolfe et al., 2009). *Second Step* helped develop adolescents' prosocial behaviors including empathy, anger management, and problem-solving skills, while decreasing delinquency, bullying, aggressive behavior, sexual harassment, and homophobic name-calling (Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2015; Espelage, Low, Van Ryzin, & Polanin, 2015; Moy & Hazen, 2018; Ryan et al., 2004). *Life Skills Training* reduced aggressive, mean, and delinquent behaviors, as well as teen substance use (Botvin and Griffin, 2004). *Parents Matter!* increased parent-child communication surrounding sexual topics, helped parents become more comfortable having these conversations, and reduced adolescent's risky behaviors (Forehand et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2011). *Families for Safe Dates* decreased teens' acceptance of abusive behavior and created positive changes to the family dynamic to encourage conversations about dating-related topics (Foshee et al., 2012).

This brings us to the *Dating Matters* program, which is the accumulation of all the previously discussed curricula and is the focus of the present study (Niolon, 2021; Tharp, 2012). The CDC tested and evaluated DM for several years before releasing it to the public in 2019, comparing it to students who only received *Safe Dates* (DeGue et al., 2020; Niolon et al., 2016; Luo et al., 2021). The original DM trials were done on youth who lived in areas of higher rates of violence and poverty (DeGue et al., 2020; Niolon et al., 2019). Studies showed that DM was even more effective than *Safe Dates*, decreasing TDV preparation by 8.43% and victimization by 9.78% (Niolon et al., 2019). DM also reduced negative conflict resolution strategies, sexual harassment, physical violence, (cyber)bullying, weapon carrying, substance use, and delinquency (DeGue et al., 2021;



Estefan et al., 2021; Niolon et al., 2019; Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2021). Studies are currently in progress to see if these results continue through high school (DeGue et al., 2020).

However, DM only decreased negative behaviors such as those referenced above; it did not increase positive relationship behaviors (Niolon et al., 2019). DM, then, is working to prevent violence but is not working to promote the positive behaviors and communication needed in healthy relationships. Furthermore, most of the results from the DM trials were lower or insignificant for males (Debman & Temple, 2021), which is consistent with other prevention efforts (Debman & Temple, 2021; Taylor et al., 2010; Wincentak et al., 2017). Last, *Safe Dates* and *Families for Safe Dates* were both significant elements of DM (Tharp, 2012), but the research shows that these curricula may be less effective for the most vulnerable teens, do not reduce severe forms of violence, and are less effective for teens previously exposed to violence (Foshee et al., 2004, 2005; Foshee & Dixon et al., 2014). In fact, most TDV prevention programs are not as effective for those most vulnerable to violence, such youth who are immigrants, homeless, LGBT+, of a racial minority, and/or live in poverty, as well as youth who have been exposed to domestic violence in the home or experienced child abuse (Crooks et al., 2019). While elements of DM overall have been proven to be effective to reduce negative behaviors with youth who live in high-risk areas, it is unknown if DM is effective for the most vulnerable, why its results were lower or insignificant for males, and why it did not increase positive behaviors.

DM claims to encourage parent-child communication and peer-to-peer communication to reduce dating violence and increase healthy relationship behaviors with teens (DeGue et al., 2020, 2021; Niolon et al., 2019). Yet, what DM teaches about

communication and relationship skills only decreased negative interactions and did not increase positive ones. Cornelius and Ressugie (2007) write that TDV prevention curricula very clearly want to develop healthy relationship skills, and yet they often have difficulty accomplishing actual skill-building. This is interesting given that research shows that good communication skills and teens' having healthy relationships with their parents, peers, and school community can decrease and prevent TDV (Adelman & Kil, 2007; Basile et al., 2020; Black & Preble, 2016; Davis et al., 2019; Espelage et al., 2020; Martino, 2008; Muniz-Rivas, 2019), yet curricula seem to struggle to build the good communication skills that help to foster healthy relationships.

### **Communication and Teen Dating Violence**

Research shows that communication skills can positively influence teens' romantic relationships and reduce TDV. Prevention programs that "support development of skills for communication, emotional regulation, empathy, and respect" reduce sexual violence, homophobia, bullying, and sexual harassment amongst teens (Basile et al., 2020, p. 34). Social support and empathy both reduce TDV perpetration (Davis et al., 2019; de Wied et al., 2007; Espelage et al., 2020; Loudin et al., 2003; Ramons et al., 2017), and teens with high levels of cognitive dissonance may realize that their abusive dating behaviors are wrong and change their behavior (Schumacher & Smith-Slep, 2004). However, this can go the other way: if a teen enacts abusive behaviors, they may be more likely to accept violence in the future (Vivolo-Kantor, 2017). Of note, teens who are in abusive relationships use a *wider* variety of communication practices than those in healthy relationships; these practices can be positive such as reasoning through conflict,

or negative such as escalating the conflict (Messinger et al., 2011, 2012; Fortin et al., 2021; Rudd & Burant, 1995; Weathers & Hopson, 2015).

Along with that, using appropriate conflict resolution strategies may also prevent TDV (Messinger et al., 2011, 2012; Fortin et al., 2021; Smith-Darden et al., 2017), with some scholars asserting that abuse often comes from a lack of conflict-management and good communication skills (Feldman & Ridley, 2000; Goussinsky et al., 2020; Infante et al., 1989). Many TDV prevention curriculums seem to operate under that same understanding, as they seek to improve conflict management and good communication skills (e.g., Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Crooks et al., 2019; Estefan et al., 2021; Foshee et al., 2005; Niolon et al., 2021). However, other scholars have pointed out that intimate partner violence (and therefore, TDV) is much more complex than whether someone has good communication skills or knows how to solve conflict or not, and it is inaccurate to assume that abuse is just a lack of certain skills (Bancroft, 2002; Spitzberg, 2011; Whitchurch & Pace, 1993).

Parent-child communication and the family environment can be both a protective and risk factor for TDV (Muniz-Rivas et al., 2019; Park & Kim, 2018; Shaffer et al., 2017). Teens who have experienced TDV tend to have less communication overall with their parents, but more problematic communication such as yelling and fighting, than those who have not experienced TDV (Ombayo et al., 2019). If families are able to communicate warmth to their teens, their risk of experiencing TDV is reduced (Muniz-Rivas, 2019). When teens disclose abuse to their parents, they can positively or negatively impact their relationship with their child and their child's relationship with their dating partner, depending on how the parents respond (Black & Preble, 2016).

Teens report that in conversations about relationships and TDV, they wish that their parents would be more supportive, comforting, and empathetic, and that they would ask good questions, provide appropriate education and advice, help them make their own decisions, and refrain from overreacting (Black & Preble, 2016; Preble et al., 2018).

Good-parent child communication about sex is also important in the reduction of TDV, as it decreases negative outcomes (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Widman et al., 2016). However, parents are often indirect and shallow in their conversations with their teens about sex (Holman & Koeing Kellas, 2018; Hyde et al., 2013). Research tends to focus on parent's sharing information and wisdom to their teens about sex; however, other research takes a child-centered approach, focusing on what the child needs and wants to know and how these conversations are interactive, reciprocal, and a process (Holman & Koeing Kellas, 2018; Flores & Barroso, 2017). Young adults report that they wish that their parents had talked about sex more, talked about it earlier, were more specific, talked about sexual safety, and talked about a wider variety of topics (Holman & Koeing Kellas, 2018; Pariera & Brody, 2018). For families who talk about sex repeatedly, teens feel closer to their parents, are better able to talk to their parents about a variety of topics, and have greater openness than those who do not talk about sex often (Martino, 2008). It is thus clear from the research that improving parent-child communication is important for the reduction of TDV.

Other research has looked at friend communication in regards to TDV. Dating and dating violence can cause conflicts among friends, and teens can also enact abusive and hurtful communication toward their friends over their romantic relationships. However, friendships can also be helpful, in that they can share when they think their

friend is in a hurtful relationship (Adelman & Kil, 2007). Other research has focused on if teens feel safe telling their friends that they are in an abusive relationship, and found that female teens are much more hesitant to reach out to their friends than male teens in cases of abuse (Martin et al., 2011). Dating abuse might also extend to the friend network, where the abuser will share “nasty messages” online or via text to their partner’s friends (Hellevick, 2019, p. 184). Thus, TDV prevention becomes more complicated because it is not solely about the romantic dyad, but also how friendships and family relationships also play a role in these relationships.

Other than research related to talking about sex, little of the research on TDV and communication has come from within the field of Communication Studies, but instead comes from psychology, prevention science, social work, and other fields. This means that there is much to learn about TDV from approaches rooted in communication theory. Scholars from other disciplines have called for more research on communication and TDV (Messinger et al., 2011, 2012). Communication scholars have primarily studied intimate partner violence, though, which is the adult form of TDV (e.g., Dailey et al., 2007; Spitzberg, 2011; Weathers & Hopson, 2015; Whitchurch & Pace, 1993). Although this research is a helpful guide or starting point to understand TDV, it is important to apply and create communication theory specifically to TDV itself, since teens experience abuse and conflict differently than adults and because their communication is still developing (Messinger et al., 2012).

### **A Communicative Approach to Teen Dating Violence**

There is a clear link between teen dating violence and communication, echoing what communication scholars have found showing the link between communication and intimate partner violence occurrences and outcomes (e.g., Dailey et al., 2007; Spitzberg, 2011; Whitchurch & Pace, 1993). Coming from transactional and constitutive views of communication, these scholars tend to focus on communication in interactions and in relationships where abuse is occurring, not just on the presence or lack of communication skills and the transmission of information (Dailey et al., 2007; Manning, 2014, 2020; Spitzberg, 2011; Whitchurch & Pace, 1999). Instead, a constitutive approach sees communication as a simultaneous process occurring between interactants, that communication encapsulates everything that occurs within relationships, and that communication (re)creates and sustains our relationships. In other words, a constitutive approach argues that *the relationship is communication* and that people collaborate to create meaning in their relationships and to create the relationship itself (Adler & Proctor, 2017; Koshmann, 2010; Koshmann et al., 2015; Manning, 2014, 2020; McCornack & Morrison, 2019; Stewart, 2012). Thus, both abusive and healthy relationships can be defined and understood by the type(s) of communication that is occurring and what communication is creating in the relationship.

A constitutive approach argues that both people contribute to their relationship and to their communication patterns, and that their communication choices constitute relationships. In mutually abusive relationships, which is what teenagers are likely to be in (Giordano et al., 2010; Gray & Foshee, 1997; Paradis et al., 2017), it makes sense that both people contribute to the unhealthy dynamics in relationships. However, one person's less-than-perfect behavior or communication is not the cause for someone to choose to

escalate the situation and be abusive (Bancroft, 2002; Whitchurch & Pace, 1993). So, although abusive communication is constitutive to the relationship and a particular interaction (Dailey et al., 2007; Spitzberg, 2011), abusive behavior *cannot* be blamed on the other partner (Bancroft, 2002; Messinger, 2012; Whitchurch & Pace, 1993).

Although a constitutive approach is common and understood by communication scholars, other disciplines and most practitioners adopt a transmission model (Koschmann et al., 2015). A transmission model of communication looks simply at information exchange and if someone “got” the message. Transmission models work well when we are discussing simple communication interactions, information-sharing processes, and mediated communication, among other types of communication (Wendland, 2013). However, transmission models cannot account for the complexity of relationships and communication (Koschmann et al., 2015; Stewart, 2012). When people in established relationships are communicating, they are not just sharing information; they are also communicating about the relationship itself at the same time (Adler & Proctor, 2017; Galvin et al., 2015; Stewart, 2012). Transmission models look at *what* was said and if it was understood, not at the effects of the message on the relationship or on the other person. Particularly, transmission models cannot address how people create meaning or how people may interpret the same situation in different ways (Stewart, 2012). Transmission models also leave things out, like “nonverbal communication, [and] unintentional messages” and “deception, manipulation, and power” (Koschmann et al., 2015, p. 204).

What transmission models leave out may be particularly relevant to abusive and unhealthy relationships. What a person *says* may be quite different than what they *mean*

and what the other person understands (Bancroft, 2002; Dailey et al., 2007; Manning, 2014, 2012; Koschmann et al., 2015; Stewart, 2012). Furthermore, transmission models cannot account for someone's communication that is interwoven with ulterior motives, deceit, self-protection, violence, and grasps for power (Bancroft, 2002; Koschmann et al., 2015; Spitzberg, 2011). Transmission models also often treat communication as a single moment in time, rather than as an ongoing pattern of interaction in relationships (Koschmann et al., 2015; Manning, 2020; Stewart, 2012). This is particularly relevant to the study of abusive relationships, as abuse often follows a pattern and process (Bancroft, 2002; Dailey et al., 2007). A transmission approach to communication, then, cannot account for the complexities of relationships in general and abusive relationships in particular (Manning 2014, 2020). Therefore, communication scholars adopt a constitutive approach to the study of relationships and abuse (Adler & Proctor, 2017; Dailey et al., 2007; Koschmann, 2010; Koschmann et al., 2015; Manning, 2014, 2020; McCornack & Morrison, 2019; Spitzberg, 2011; Stewart, 2012; Whitchurch & Pace, 1993).

### **Using Grounded Practical Theory to Study Teen Dating Violence Prevention**

One useful way to study TDV from a communication perspective is through Craig and K. Tracy's (1995, 2014) Grounded Practical Theory (GPT). GPT seeks to reconstruct the practical theory of communication within a group or context, and focuses on communication problems, the communication skills, behaviors, and practices that are



taught to address to those problems, and the underlying assumptions about communication that inform understandings of both problems and practices. Since TDV prevention curricula in general and DM specifically tend to struggle to make an impact on improving communication skills and healthy relationship behaviors, it is worth exploring if these outcomes could be a result of how communication is conceptualized and taught in these curricula.

As both a metatheoretical and methodological approach, GPT allows a researcher to reconstruct the practical theory of communication within a data set, critique its communication practices, and offer normative claims about how communication practices could be done better. GPT is particularly useful in studying complex problems – such as teen dating violence – and how communication is not only part of the problem but can also be used to reflect on practices and create solutions. Thus, GPT is a blend of both interpretive and critical research (Craig & K. Tracy, 1995, 2014; Craig, 2015; K. Tracy, 2015).

From an interpretive approach, GPT addresses three levels of communication at different degrees of abstraction: the technical level, the problem level, and the philosophical level. GPT starts at the problem level: identifying the communication problems or challenges a particular group or text identifies. The technical level is closely related, seeking to identify how people are instructed to communicate based on what types of communication problems they encounter. This includes communication strategies, techniques, and skills. Undergirding and informing both the problem and technical levels is the philosophical level, which focuses on the norms, assumptions, and

beliefs that people hold about communication that inform how they decide to address and solve problems (Craig & K. Tracy, 1995, 2014; Craig, 2015; K. Tracy, 2015).

From a critical approach, GPT uses the insight and understanding from the interpretive analysis to both critique the communication practices of a group and offer normative claims about how people could communicate better. It is different from some critical research in that it is less concerned with power, and instead focuses specifically on how people could act and communicate better (K. Tracy, 2015). The end goal of GPT research, then, is to reconstruct a practical theory of communication, help communicators (re)think about how they communicate, make connections that would otherwise go unnoticed, and offer new avenues of action (Craig, 2006; K. Tracy, 1995, 2015).

GPT research has typically been used in health and organizational communication settings using discourse analysis, interviewing, focus groups, and ethnography as data sets (see Craig & Tracy, 2014 for a review of select studies). For example, Koshmann (2013) used GPT to understand how people manage their religious identities as a communication practice in an inter-organizational collaboration on human trafficking. Ashcraft (2000) used GPT to study the staff members of a domestic violence prevention organization and how they navigate sexuality, dating, sexual relationships, and relationship boundaries between staff, volunteers, and clients and how these are (mis)managed through communication. In a later study, Ashcraft (2006) used GPT again and identified the communication dialectics of this domestic violence prevention organization and their underlying feminist ideology. Other studies have used GPT in educational settings (Agne & Muller, 2019; Borland, 2017; K. Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001; K. Tracy & Muller, 2001; Muller, 2014; K. Tracy, 2007). For example, K. Tracy and

Ashcraft (2001) used GPT to analyze how a school board discusses diversity policy regarding sexual minorities.

These studies have focused on group and organizational communication; however, K. Tracy (2015) writes that GPT should be extended to interpersonal communication theorizing and argues that institutional documents are an appropriate and important site for gathering data for GPT analyses. Lyon and Mirivel's (2011) study on institutional documents of the pharmaceutical company Merck uses this kind of data. They reviewed nearly 1,000 pages of data (mostly training materials and internal communications) to try to discover how Merck taught pharmaceutical sales representatives to communicate with doctors about a particular drug, even though emerging data indicated that this drug could cause serious side effects and death. Using GPT, they analyzed the text and created themes based on the GPT framework and other emerging ideas, such as distinctions between verbal and nonverbal communication. GPT provided a useful explanation of the underlying assumptions Merck had about communication, how Merck articulated communication problems, and the (not great) solutions Merck proposed. Lyon and Mirivel (2011) were then able to conclude with a critique of Merck's communication and offer normative claims about how Merck as well as other such organizations' salespeople could better communicate with doctors about medicine and risk.

I seek to follow Lyon and Mirivel's (2011) approach and K. Tracy's (2015) call to use GPT and institutional documents by examining the *Dating Matters* TDV prevention curriculum. Through analyzing DM, it should become clear if DM subscribes to a transmission or constitutive view of communication and how its approach frames

communication problems and practices. Understanding DM from a communicative approach will offer important insight into how communication is working (or not working) to prevent TDV, help teenagers and their parents have healthy relationships, and highlight how relationships and the broader social world are understood. Therefore, the research questions for this study follow GPT's three levels of analysis:

- RQ1: What are the communication problems defined within DM?
- RQ2: What are the solutions and skills taught to address these problems?
- RQ3: What are the underlying assumptions, norms, and beliefs DM makes about communication?

### **Research Methods**

This study analyzed the *Dating Matters* (DM) curriculum, which was discussed in detail in the literature review. Using qualitative analysis, I reconstructed the practical theory of communication in DM using Craig and K. Tracy's (1995, 2014) Grounded Practical Theory (GPT). This kind of interpretive research seeks an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon by collecting and analyzing data and offering a useful explanation of it. The researcher seeks to understand the situated meanings within their data set, where meaning and knowledge are found through interpretation (Keyton, 2015). As S. Tracy (2013) writes regarding this paradigm, "knowledge about reality is therefore always mediated by the researcher" (p. 40). Thus, the researcher is the research tool that interprets the data and offers new insights and knowledge about what is being

studied. In the interpretivist paradigm, then, the researcher seeks to reconstruct a portion of social practice and offer a useful explanation of it.

This study reflects a “Theory-as-Method” approach. This means a theory, like GPT, is used to discover new knowledge and apply categories to both the theory itself and its research object (Roth et al., 2021). The development and execution of this study is also representative of S. Tracy's (2011, 2013; S. Tracy & Hinricks, 2017) “Big Tent” criteria for gauging the quality of qualitative research. S. Tracy suggests excellent qualitative work demonstrates a worthy topic of study (such as preventing TDV). Another element of the “Big Tent” criteria is that the study is rigorous and details the appropriate samples and analysis process, which is included in the following section on data analysis. S. Tracy also writes that the study should also be ethical, resonate with the audience, make significant contributions to the field and practice, meet its own goals, and connect its findings with previous research (S. Tracy, 2011, 2013; S. Tracy & Hinricks, 2017). This study meets ethical guidelines as human participants were not used in this study, and in staying true to the original DM text. In the discussion, reimagining, and conclusion sections, I demonstrate how DM could be rooted more strongly in communication research as well as the contributions this study makes to the communication discipline and violence prevention work.

Another key element of quality qualitative work is that the researcher must maintain sincerity and self-reflexivity about how they influence the research process (S. Tracy, 2011, 2013; S. Tracy & Hinricks, 2017). This is particularly important in GPT—as the normative claims about how I think DM should teach communication are based on my ideas of what makes for effective or ineffective communication (K. Tracy, 2015).

Thus, throughout the process, I had to be aware that my own training in communication theory and my own experiences influenced my critique, recommendations, and data analysis. For example, I will discuss later how conflict could be reframed more positively in DM. This is based on my own training in communication theory and conflict management; however, there are plenty of books and articles published on conflict management that do not attempt to reframe conflict positively and still have good results. As I have worked with children and teenagers and their parents in professional settings before, this also influenced my analysis. For example, I believe most teenagers are much more capable than parents and teachers think they are, and that adults tend to limit teenagers' potential. Thus, these opinions and experiences influenced the research process and how I reconstructed and critiqued communication in DM. Nonetheless, I grounded any critique or suggestion that I made in research and not just my own opinions.

### **Data Analysis**

The DM curriculum is large and expensive, full of resources, documents, and videos for parents, teens, policymakers, educators, health departments, and the general community. DM is delivered in multiple ways to target different elements of the social ecology. For the purpose of this study, I decided to focus on DM's curricular documents for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders and their parents, as well as the curriculum and supplemental materials for DM's brand ambassadors (peer educators). I chose this based on the research questions, and because I was curious about how DM instructed teens and parents

to communicate in their relationships. In general, these parts of DM are delivered in one-to-one-and-a-half-hour-long classroom workshops for seven weeks.

I specifically focused on the DM's curriculum designed for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders and their parents. This was because the associated 8<sup>th</sup>-grade curriculum used in DM, *Safe Dates and Families for Safe Dates*, was not free to access online. *Safe Dates and Families for Safe Dates*, which were reviewed earlier in the literature review, served as the "cornerstone" for DM and influenced the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum (Tharp, 2012, p. 399; for more information on the development of DM, see Tharp, 2012; Tharp et al., 2011; Niolon et al., 2016; Niolon, 2021). I decided to look specifically at DM's teaching and training documents because they would be explicitly teaching the practical theory of communication in DM; these data included the facilitator guides, lesson plans, slides, handouts, and workbooks for teens and their parents. These documents totaled 878 pages. For a full list of the documents used in this study, see Appendix.

I started the analysis by getting a general overview of the curriculum. Therefore, I skimmed and did a high-level reading of all documents before I started coding. Then, I started coding the data, using the NVivo qualitative analysis software. I first read and coded the handbooks for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders and their parents. Next, I coded the facilitator guides, which are the lesson plans for the classroom discussions that teachers are supposed to follow very closely. Finally, I coded the i2i program—which is the peer-led TDV prevention portion of the curriculum. At first, I started with codes about the technical, problem, and philosophical levels of GPT. As I went through the curriculum, I started coding for specific concepts and topics, such as communication, messages, conflict management, and breakups. Many of these codes were also coded at the problem

or technical level as well, as they usually included a problem or practice. Every time I added a new code, I would go back through the previously coded curriculum and look for that new code and code more data as necessary.

After reading approximately half of the curriculum, I did not notice anything new that I should be coding, thus reaching saturation. However, I continued to analyze the rest of the curriculum for the codes I had already created. Throughout the process, I took notes of initial analyses, thoughts, and questions that I had. After I finished coding the data, I began looking for common themes and ideas from within the codes. I began putting these ideas together. I would check the conclusions that I started coming to by going back to the original document and reading what was said in context. This was particularly important for reconstructing the philosophical level of communication, as DM's underlying philosophy about communication was not explicitly articulated, and I needed to be careful that I was reconstructing it in a way that was true to the text. Throughout the writing and analysis process, I would go back and forth between my thoughts, the codes, and the text itself. The problems, practices, and philosophical assumptions that I found to be the most salient to my research questions are discussed in the next section.



## Analysis

Grounded Practical Theory provides a lens to reconstruct the practical theory of communication within *Dating Matters* by looking at its underlying philosophy of communication, the communication problems it identifies, and the communicative practices it proposes to solve those problems (Craig & Tracy, 1995, 2014). GPT requires researchers to start with the communication problems in a text, then analyze the communicative solutions to those problems. Doing so will then show the underlying philosophical assumptions. Therefore, the next section answers RQ1 by identifying the communication problems in the curriculum as well as RQ2 by identifying the associated communicative solutions and practices to address those problems within DM. Addressing RQ1 and RQ2 in tandem allows for a more seamless reconstruction of the practical theory of communication in DM.

This analysis first addresses communication problems and practices for parents, followed by those for teens. DM makes distinctions between various types of relationships, such as parent-child relationships, teen friendships, and healthy and unhealthy teen romantic relationships. These different types of relationships add complexity to the presence or absence of TDV itself, as well as to TDV prevention programming. Although there are several types of relationships that DM addresses, how DM teaches teens and parents to communicate, as well as DM's underlying assumptions about communication, are similar across all these types of relationships. Of course, communication problems and practices in abusive relationships and non-abusive

relationships have significant differences. My goal in this analysis is to reconstruct how DM is teaching and conceptualizing communication itself. Later, in the discussion section, I will explore how some communication practices and my own recommendations for this curriculum might change for certain relationships, particularly in the case of abuse.

### **Communication Problems and Practices for Parents**

DM attempted to help parents have better conversations with their teens surrounding certain topics. Parents were positioned as both key relationship and sex educators for their teens, with the expectation that good parent-teen relationships will decrease TDV. The overall theme of communication problems that parents needed to address in the DM curriculum related to difficult conversations, such as talking to teens about sex and solving conflict with teens. Each of these next sub-sections will reconstruct what a particular communication problem is in DM, answering RQ1, followed by reconstructing the communicative practices proposed to address those problems, answering RQ2.

#### ***The Sex Talk***

A very clear communication problem was defined in DM: that if parents did not talk to their teens about sex, their teens would learn about sex from others, and their health would be at risk. For example, “When you do not talk about relationships and sex with your child, there are consequences. Your child is going to learn about relationships and sex from other sources” (CDC, 2019h, p. 12). These sources include “songs, music videos, movies, television, video games, and online” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 2) as well as

peers, emphasizing that these “other influences have control” (Miller et al., p. 3; Dating Matters® 2019a, p. 1-16)<sup>2</sup>. The curriculum highlighted severe consequences for parents not talking to their teens about sex and from them being exposed to sexual messages from other sources. These consequences include “early sexual activity” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 11), “problems in children’s lives [that] prevent them from reaching their goals in life” (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 87), “sexual health problems” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 37 & 47), and “inappropriate assumptions about healthy relationships” (p. 23).

A second communication problem was similar: that talking to teens about sex was difficult and full of barriers for parents. For example, DM claims that dating, violence, and sex “are not easy to talk about” between parents and teens (Foreston et al., 2019, p. 2). DM also says that there might be “obstacles” to talks about sex (Miller et al., 2019, p. 51), that parents might need to “[overcome] discomfort and hesitation” (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 2), and that these conversations “may be uncomfortable, children may resist, and parents may not know what to say” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 51). DM thus posits conversations about sex between parents and teens to be difficult and hard, yet necessary. Therefore, both talking to teens about sex was a problem because it was difficult, and not talking about sex was a problem because teens would have negative outcomes. In some ways, parents could not “win” in either scenario.

Even though talking about sex is difficult for parents according to DM, they were still encouraged to do so. The communicative practice they were instructed to do was to “have a message” (CDC, 2019h, p. 2) about sex and dating to combat the messages of the

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<sup>2</sup> After some quotes from the DM text, there are sometimes two or more citations. This is because the exact texts appeared in the curriculum more than once.

internet, society, and teens' peers to "ensure" their child's sexual health (Miller et al., 2019, p. 51) and to "prevent their child from taking risks" (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 90). Parents are instructed to overcome barriers to talking to their teens about sex: "Despite obstacles, parents must be willing to provide appropriate guidance for their children" and "they cannot allow [fear] to deter them" (Miller et al., 2019, p. 51). When parents overcome these barriers, it "allows [them] to provide their children with parental opinions and expectations. That way their children are not dependent upon the messages of others" (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 2). Thus, DM tells parents to overcome their communication apprehension about talking to their teens about sex. To have good conversations about sex, DM says parents should practice "listening and talking openly, by being respectful of the child's thoughts, and by paying attention and setting age appropriate limits" (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 90) and "be prepared, relax, start now, listen, and talk about relationships and sexual issues again, and again, and again" (Miller et al., 2019, p. 58). The overall message was that parents must communicate about sex with their children, no matter how difficult it is or how apprehensive the parents are, and that parents must have these conversations about sex repeatedly.

### ***Parent-Teen Conflict***

Conflict usually represents a problem in a relationship: hurt feelings, disparate needs, grabs for power, etc. Within DM, conflict was presented as a problem in these ways. Conflict was also presented as a problem because conflict was seen negatively (or neutrally, sometimes) and that conflict was not conducive to parent-teen relationships. DM used words with negative connotations to describe conflict and discussed the

problem of negative conflict between parents and teens during adolescence. Words like “inevitable” (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 71), and “argument” or “disagreement” between parents and teens were used to describe conflict (Miller et al., 2019, p. 90). DM states that: “Conflict between parents and children will continue throughout life but will probably be worse during the teenage years” (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 78). The word “worse” is ambiguous and it is unclear if it means that conflicts happen more frequently during the teen years or that the conflicts are more intense or negative (or both). Either way, conflict was presented as a negative problem in parent-teen relationships that was not helping the relationship.

There was also an implied communication problem that some parents handle conflict negatively, and that there were more negative ways to handle conflict than positive ways, such as “yelling, demanding that the child do as the parent has requested, spanking, grounding, removing privileges, walking away, allowing the child to do as he/she wants, [and] talking about it” (Fortson et al., p. 78). DM says: “It is natural to become defensive, angry, or frustrated, and tell our children they are wrong” (p. 80), and that “Sometimes... [parents] may raise their voices or even use physical violence to get the result they want” (p. 78). Most of these methods are unproductive at the very least and abusive at the worst. What is interesting, however, is that DM never explicitly makes a claim that some of these methods of resolving conflict are better than others. Furthermore, they do not say that some methods – such as violence – are *not* okay for parents to use to solve conflict or for any other reason.

Although DM does not make clear distinctions between positive and negative ways that parents can manage conflict with their teens, they offer some specific

communication practices parents could engage in when in conflict with their teens. Many of these practices are based on sound research on conflict management and include things like: “Stick to [the] present issue during conflict. Do not dwell on past problems. Focus on developing solutions to problems rather than who is to blame” (Dating Matters, 2019a, p. 2-6 & 2-7; Miller et al., 2019, p. 9). These tips are included in a list of good parenting practices (that do not necessarily have to do with conflict), including telling parents to “ask open-ended questions to encourage talking,” “express openness to listen to other views. Try not to be too judgmental. Do not criticize your child for their opinions. Be respectful and avoid put-downs. Use I-messages” (Dating Matters, 2019a, p. 2-6 & 2-7; Miller et al., 2019, p. 9). Parents are also told to listen to their children during conflict: “If we do a good job listening to our children, our children are more likely to listen to us” (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 80). What is interesting about that quote is that parents are instructed to listen so that children reciprocate, not so that children feel that their voices and needs are important in conflict.

DM did include a specific practice for engaging in conflict between parents and teens. This conflict-management method was, “1) Define the issue or problem... 2) Discuss possible solutions... 3) Choose and use a solution... 4) Evaluate how well the solution worked” (CDC, 2019a, p. 27). For step one, teens and parents are supposed to “express their views... use ‘I’ messages...listen... ask open-ended questions... summarize what they have said” (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 80). For step two, they are supposed to “suggest solutions and listen to each other’s solutions without interrupting or becoming defensive” (p. 80). For step three, they are told to choose a solution—without being told how to go about choosing a solution. For step four, parents and teens are supposed to

have a conversation later to “evaluate how well the solution has worked” and to start the process over if the solution did not work (p. 80). Interestingly, DM did not go into detail about any communication practices required regarding how to define the problem, discuss solutions, or how to choose a solution.

### **Communication Problems and Practices for Teens**

Like the communication problems in the parent curriculum, communication problems for teens centered around various types of conflict and teens being to express themselves. The overall theme was that teens need to speak up if they have a problem, whether that is to an adult or a peer. Below, I discuss a few problems for teens: the problem of not speaking up when they have difficulties, the problem of conflict in their friendships, and the problem of managing break-ups. In each of these subsections, I will reconstruct the communication problem itself, answering RQ1, and then reconstruct how DM encourages teens to communicate in response to these problems, answering RQ2.

#### ***Not Speaking Up***

Like the problem of parents not talking about sex with their teens, there was also a problem of teens not talking about issues in their relationships. Overall, DM claimed that a lack of speaking up is not helpful in relationships, especially in abusive situations. In unhealthy relationships, DM says “it is difficult for teens to tell someone they are being hurt by someone else” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 65; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 77). DM lists reasons why teens may not speak up if they are in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, including that the teen “thinks the bad parts of the relationship will go

away...feels responsible for the abuse; wants to stay and help the person who is hurting them” and because the teen “is embarrassed; is afraid of being judged; thinks whomever they tell will have a negative reaction; alcohol or drugs were involved in the abuse and he or she is worried that he or she will get in trouble” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 64-65; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 77). Thus, DM identifies a problem of teens not speaking up about being in an abusive or unhealthy relationship—essentially, this is a problem of a lack of communication

In other non-abusive types of teen relationships such as with friends or in healthy dating relationships, there was also a problem of a lack of communication or speaking up, although different language was used. This time, not speaking up was called the “silent treatment.” This was discussed as an ineffective way to solve problems in relationships, as DM called it “torture” and that it “won’t solve anything” (CDC, 2019f, p. 11). DM tells teens that, “if you have a question, concern, or even if you don’t love mushrooms on your pizza, you should feel comfortable enough to bring it up” (CDC, 2019e, p. 10). Overall, DM encourages teens to speak up in their relationships if they have a problem, whether the relationship is healthy or not. It emphasizes that a sign of healthy relationships is feeling comfortable and safe to speak up.

No matter if a teen had barriers or felt uncomfortable speaking up, speaking up was the practice they were told to use. Like their parents, teens were encouraged to overcome their communication apprehension. For example, teens were told that “to fix a problem, you have to talk it out” (CDC, 2019f, p. 11), and “anything that makes someone feel uneasy, uncomfortable, or unsafe is enough to speak up” (CDC, 2017, p. 6). Teens were also encouraged to speak up by setting physical boundaries: “It is your body—set



your limits. And then clearly communicate these boundaries to your partner” (Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 24). This shows that DM believed teens should talk to their dating partners or friends about their problems and some of their needs. However, what was mostly reinforced in DM was speaking up to an adult about problems. “Relationships are complicated and talking to [an adult] can help you make decisions about how you can best keep yourself and others safe” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 59; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 59), “talking to someone can also help [teens] make good decisions about how to treat others” (p. 56), and “Teachers, nurses, and other adults in your community know how to help with these situations. Talk to them. It’s their job!” (CDC, 2019e, p. 28). It is important for teens to seek help and express themselves to adults or their friends. However, what DM does not address is *how* teens should speak up, especially in moments of discomfort or difficulty or when they have communication apprehension about speaking up in their relationships or approaching an adult about their problems.

### ***Teen-to-Teen Conflict***

For teen conflict, DM focused on relationships with peers and romantic partners, and not on conflict with parents or other adults. Like it was for parent-teen conflict, teen-to-teen conflict was discussed as a problem that was inevitable: “we cannot avoid problems and conflicts” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 41; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 42) and “good friends do not always agree” (Latzman et al., 2019a p. 14; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 14). DM claimed that the relationship “can still be healthy” even when there is conflict (Latzman et al., 2019a p. 14; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 14). For teens, not only was there a problem of conflict, but there was also a problem with how teens handled conflict. In

the teen sections of the curriculum, DM made a clear distinction between healthy and unhealthy ways to handle conflict: “What is most important is how we handle disagreements or conflict” (Latzman et al., 2019a p. 14; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 14). Some ineffective ways of handling conflict include “jumping to conclusions” (Latzman et al., 2019a p. 45; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 44), “you statements,” a “sarcastic tone of voice,” “not listening” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 42), “yelling or using violence,” “name calling,” and “controlling behavior” (Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 58). This contrasts with the parent curriculum, where healthy and unhealthy ways of solving conflict were not given clear distinctions. Thus, perhaps DM assumes that parents know what healthy and unhealthy ways of handling conflict are, whereas teens do not. As there is numerous research showing that parents also may not know how to solve conflict in a healthy way, this could be a problematic assumption that DM makes.

Using healthy communication skills was the practice teens were encouraged to engage in when faced with conflict. For example, “It is important to take steps to use healthy communication skills and talk through the problem” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 64; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 76), “When two people disagree, it is important to use healthy communication skills and respect each other’s opinions” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 58; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 58), and “Sometimes we can both prevent and solve conflicts by using healthy communication skills” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 52; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 52). Healthy communication skills were also talked about as the way for relationships to always feel good with no hurt feelings: “If we choose our words and actions carefully, we can resolve conflicts *without hurting others* [emphasis added]” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 39), and “Healthy communication allows both people to feel

good in the relationship!” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 38; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 40). Specifically, some of the healthy communication practices teens were encouraged to engage in were: “stay in control of feelings,” “calm down before having the conversation,” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 43) “make eye contact,” “watch your gestures and facial expressions,” “watch your tone of voice,” “listen actively” (p. 44), “asking questions,” “express your feelings” (p. 45), “ ‘I’ statements” and that “verbal and nonverbal messages must match” (p. 46).

Other communication practices DM included for solving conflict were to talk in-person instead of texting: “If you are having a fight with a friend, it is probably best to talk it out in person—things will get solved twice as fast and *nothing will come out the wrong way!* [emphasis added]” (CDC, 2019c, p. 19). Another practice teens were encouraged to use to solve conflict was through both compromising and not compromising, “Part of a healthy relationship involves respecting your differences, and willingness to compromise. However, if a person is in an unhealthy and unsafe situation, compromise is never okay” (CDC, 2017, p. 3). While this advice to use healthy communication skills in conflict is helpful, DM does not address how teens should go about the conflict management process. DM does attempt to do that with parents with a conflict management method included in their instruction. Teens, however, were not given this method or any other method in the classroom or in their handbooks. This is particularly interesting, as solving conflict with healthy parents, with abusive parents, with friends, with a healthy dating partner, and in an abusive dating relationship can all look a little different. DM does emphasize safety in the case of abusive dating

relationships, but how to accomplish that and resolve conflict in healthy relationships or abusive relationships with parents was not fully addressed.

### ***Break-Ups***

Breaking up an unhealthy relationship was also mentioned as a problem for teens in DM. Breakups were a problem because, as DM says, “nobody likes to think about breaking up” and “breaking up is hard” (CDC, 2019e, p. 30). In some instances, breaking up was not explicitly discussed, and instead framed as teens having “some choices to make about the relationship” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 16, p. 60; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 16, p. 59). Reasons for breaking up included because the relationship was “unhealthy, unsafe, or just [ran] its course” (CDC, 2019e, p. 30) and if someone “doesn’t feel right in a relationship” (CDC, 2017, p. 6) Teens are told that they “Have the right to end a relationship for any reason” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 64; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 76). DM thus makes a distinction between ending relationships because a teen *wants* to (when the relationship ran its course), and between ending relationships because a teen *needs* to (in cases of abuse).

Because of this difference between wanting to break up and needing to break up, DM does differentiate its breaking up advice to an extent. The only explicit practice for breaking up in a healthy relationship was that: “If it was a healthy relationship it’s ok to do it [the breaking-up] in person, but if it wasn’t then it might be safer to email, text, or phone it in” (CDC, 2019e, p. 30). In addition: “If you want to break up with someone, it is best to do it in person. However, it is best not to end unhealthy and unsafe relationships in person” (CDC, 2019b, p. 19). DM also gives general practices teens could use when

breaking up: “Tell an adult or friend that you’re planning to break up with your partner,” “If you choose to break up in person, do it in public,” “Stay strong. Tell your partner why you’re breaking up with them, and stick to it,” and to “keep your distance” after the breakup (CDC, 2019e, p. 30). In unhealthy relationships, they are told, “don’t bother breaking up” until they are in a safe place and an adult knows (p. 30). Teens were also warned:

Ending an unhealthy relationship—especially an unsafe one—is not like ending a healthy one. Your partner may not accept the break-up or may continue or start to use emotional violence and try to control you through using guilt, lies, or threats. This can make it very difficult to leave, and you may be worried about your safety” (CDC, 2019b, p. 22; CDC, 2019c, p. 27).

Other practices suggested to address the challenge of breaking-up an unhealthy relationship was for teens to, “trust yourself,” “ask for help,” “do not be alone when you break up, “expect it to be hard,” “say why you are breaking up once,” and “just because the unsafe relationship is over does not mean the risk of violence is over” (CDC, 2019b, p. 22; CDC, 2019c, p. 27). Teens were also encouraged to help their friends in a breakup and in unhealthy relationships, by telling them to, “reach out. Tell them you are concerned,” “Listen. Use your healthy communication skills,” “believe what he or she tells you,” “Do not judge. Be careful not to make judgments about the situation or [their decisions],” “remind him or her that the violence was the other person’s choice,” and “connect him or her to resources” (CDC, 2019b, p. 28). Like the discussion on conflict, DM gives good advice for helping teens break up and to help their friends but did not address the process of the breakup conversation itself.

## **Assumptions about Communication and Conflict**

All these problems and their associated practices – talking about sex, conflict, a lack of speaking up, and breaking up – were undergirded by one overall assumption: that communication is the transmission of messages. DM focuses on sending the appropriate message to the right people at the right time. For example, parents are told they should “have a message” about sex and dating (CDC, 2019h, p. 2), and teens are told to “clearly communicate” their boundaries (Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 24) and to “say why you are breaking up once” (CDC, 2019b, p. 22; CDC, 2019c, p. 27). This approach focuses solely on what the speaker needs to say and omits the listener in the communication process and how the listener will respond to and perceive a message. DM also assumes that saying something means that it happens as the speaker intends and that the other person will easily understand. Furthermore, DM often prescribed skills such as choosing a solution in conflict or speaking up to an adult, without addressing the communication processes required to go about these conversations. In this section, I provide evidence for how DM conceptualizes communication as the transmission of messages and the influence that has on how DM defined communication problems and advised certain communication practices.

It is clear that DM thinks communication is important, as improving communication was incorporated throughout the curriculum. However, while DM defines specific types of communication within the curriculum, it does not define communication itself. For example, DM loosely defines nonverbal communication as “the things we do not say directly” and verbal communication as “the things we say and how we say them” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 40; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 41). It defines healthy

communication as feeling “heard, understood, and respected by the other person” and being able to “listen, understand, and respect what the other person is saying” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 38). With these definitions, we still do not know what *communication* itself is, or what the communication process may be. This shows that DM sees communication as taken-for-granted and that people intuitively know what communication is (e.g., Stewart, 2012; West & Turner, 2020). DM appears to assume that everyone has the same ideas of what communication is (or is not).

Although communication itself was not explicitly defined, there is nonetheless a potent implicit definition of communication as transmission within DM. For example, “Knowing your messages is key to effective communication” (CDC, 2019d, p. 1-12). Program facilitators are told to “communicate intended messages” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 3; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 3). Parents are told that too much supervision “may send the message” that the child is not trusted (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 75), and that they can “deliver their own messages” about relationships and sex (CDC, 2019h, p. 2). In other places, it is more forceful: “As parents, you *need* to communicate your message [emphasis added]” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 23) and parents “*must* have a message [emphasis added]” (CDC, 2019h, p. 1 & 2; Dating Matters®, 2019a, 1-1; Miller et al., 2019, p. 11, 12, & 13). For teens, they are told, “Your body and face are sending a message too!” beyond the words that they are saying (CDC, 2019b, p. 10; CDC, 2019c, p. 10). However, by and large, adults are the ones positioned as the *sender* of messages in DM, whereas teens and children are positioned as the *receiver* of messages. “Children receive many messages about sex” and therefore parents and facilitators must communicate their messages (CDC, 2019a, p. 2; Miller et al., 2019, p. 13).

At times, DM appears to see communication as somewhat interactive, which recognizes that both people send and receive messages when communicating (McCornack & Morrison, 2019). For example, DM repeatedly discusses that it is important to “take turns talking” (CDC, 2019a, p. 4; CDC, 2019b, p. 23; CDC, 2019c, p. 10), in order “to make sure that both people in the conversation have a chance to express their views” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 43; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 44). DM mentions that communication involves participation from both people, “Lecturing is one-way communication. Communication should be two-way to promote asking questions” (Miller et al., 2019). However, this approach still assumes a transmission view of communication. DM does not recognize that both people are sending verbal and nonverbal messages to one another *simultaneously* and that these messages influence the conversation, the other person, and the relationship – essential elements of the constitutive communication model (McCornack & Morrison, 2019; Stewart., 2012). Furthermore, DM does not discuss *why* two-way communication is better than lecturing or why it is important for both people to share their opinions. These examples show that DM sees meaning as coming from the words within a message, and not from a process of mutual meaning creation (Adler & Proctor, 2017; Sargent et al., 2011; Stewart, 2012; West & Turner, 2020). Thus, the discussion of “taking turns talking” is still based on a transmission model.

DM also takes this transmission-based approach to solving conflict and lacked a definition of conflict. As mentioned earlier, DM used words with negative connotations to describe conflict, such as “inevitable,” (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 71), “disagreement” (Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 47), or even that people may have “strong disagreements” over



“ongoing [family] issues that may lead to arguments” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 90). Conflict is seen negatively within DM because it assumes that communication is the transmission of messages. If communication is just the transmission of messages, then any problem with communication is negative, as it reflects a mistake on behalf of the receiver or sender of the message, or a problem with the effectiveness or efficiency of a message (Stewart, 2012). DM may thus fall into the “common assumption that conflict is a simple collision between two parties” (Reimer et al., 2015, p. 1), instead of seeing conflict as a complex process and an opportunity to meet people’s needs (Canfield, 2016; Hocker & Wilmont, 2017; Reimer et al., 2015).

An idea within DM—based on this transmission model—is that healthy communication skills resolve conflict. Parents are told they can “limit conflict” through healthy communication skills (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 78), and that they should “avoid arguments” (p. 79). Teens are told that healthy communication skills “prevent conflicts or problems with others” (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 43; Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 52). DM claims that mutual decision making helps teens “avoid disagreements” (CDC, 2017, p. 3) or even “avoid silly arguments” (CDC, 2019e, p. 12). Not only does this reflect that good communication should make conflict go away, but it also emphasizes seeing conflict negatively, as people are encouraged to avoid, prevent, and limit it. While healthy communication skills are important in conflict, they do not address the actual conflict itself.

Based on a transmission model, the use of communication skills in DM assumed conflicts could be solved faster: “talk it out in person—things will get solved *twice as fast* [emphasis added]” (CDC, 2019c, p. 19) and, “Parents can use [good communication]

skills to *more quickly resolve conflicts* with their children [emphasis added]" (Fortson et al., 2019, p. 71). Again, this is based on a transmission model where communication is centered on message efficiency and effectiveness. Furthermore, previously discussed quotes highlighted that healthy communication means "nothing will come out the wrong way" (CDC, 2019c, p. 19) and speakers will be able to solve conflict "without hurting others" (Latzman et al., 2019a, p. 39). DM thus assumes that what someone intended to say is what the other person will understand. DM also forgets to include the response of the other person in these moments. Meaning, therefore, is in the words that were said as the speaker intended them to come across and is not in a mutual process of meaning creation. This assumption is also reflected in DM's advice for teens to set physical boundaries where it tells teens to "clearly communicate" them, without recognizing the other person's response or if they will even understand, as well as the speaker's own communication apprehension (Latzman et al., 2019b, p. 24). The point was to solve conflict as quickly as possible and to send the appropriate message grounded in healthy communication skills, while leaving out the conflict-management process and what the listener's response or thoughts may be.

Viewing relationships through a transmission model can cause problems (Stewart, 2012). The transmission model is in contradiction to what DM says it was to do. DM seeks to improve relationships at multiple levels of the social ecology, but this cannot be done when the focus is only on sending the appropriate message at the right time, to the right person, in the right way. This is because the transmission model cannot account for maintaining, improving, dissolving, and building relationships, or for the complexity of conversations surrounding dating violence, dating, sex, and other such topics.

Furthermore, even from a transmission model of communication standpoint, DM is still missing important concepts such as physical, psychological, and physiological noise, communication channels, the physical environment, and the background experiences of the communicators (Alder & Proctor, 2017; McCornack & Morrison, 2019; West & Turner, 2020).

Even though the transmission model can be useful for viewing specific communication scenarios such as mediated communication (Wendland, 2013), it is still the simplest communication model (Koshmann et al., 2015; Stewart, 2012). Yet, within DM, the transmission model is being applied to incredibly complex and challenging situations—talking with and to teenagers about abuse, unhealthy relationships, conflict, and sex. Transmission models are not able to fully explain the complexity of relationships (Stewart, 2012), which is perhaps why DM did not show any effects on increasing positive relationship behaviors (Niolon et al., 2019). In sum, assuming that communication is *just* the transmission of messages is problematic. These assumptions DM makes about both communication and conflict might be adequate if communication was simply getting the message across and sharing information about inconsequential issues in life. However, when you start talking about abuse, sex, relationships, and conflict – it is not useful to make incomplete or problematic assumptions about communication. Thus, DM is not able to fully accomplish its goal of fostering healthier relationships based on a transmission model because it does not account for the ingredients necessary to communicate and create healthy relationships. This next section discusses and critiques how DM addresses communication problems based on communication research.

## Discussion

In the section above, I articulated DM's practical theory of communication. DM saw communication as the transmission of messages, and recommended various ways to use healthy communication skills, resolve conflict, speak up, talk about sex, and break-up bad relationships. Many of these practices DM encouraged were useful, such as teaching teens and parents how to use I-messages instead of You-messages or how to listen actively. However, what DM failed to address in most situations was the *process* of certain conversations. For example, active listening and I-messages are both important in conflict, but they do not address how to go about the process of resolving a conflict. Parents were not given much instruction on how to go about the process of having conversations about sex once they become more complex. In conversations about breaking up, none of the advice DM gave was about *how* to communicate that a teen wants the relationship to be over or *how* to work through the other person's responses. Furthermore, DM did not ground some of their advice in communication theory and practice, assuming that if they told a teen or parent to talk about something, they would have the efficacy to do it. DM, thus, prescribed skills without addressing communication competence (Spitzberg et al., 2009). In the next section, I discuss and critique some of DM's practices in light of communication research.

### The Sex Talk

DM took a fear-based approach to parent-child conversations about sex: if parents do not talk about sex with their teens, negative consequences will occur. Therefore, DM

focused on parents sending the appropriate messages to their teens about sex—based in the transmission model. While research does support the idea that if parents talk to their teens about sex, they are less likely to engage in unhealthy or unsafe sexual practices (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Widman et al., 2016), using fear appeals are not always effective to inspire action (Basile & Witte, 2012). For fear appeals to be effective, people need to believe that they have the skills needed to alleviate the fear, as well as believe that these skills will work (Basile & Witte, 2012; Maloney et al., 2011).

DM extended this fear approach by discussing that talking about sex is full of barriers and awkwardness that parents must overcome—implying that parents have a lot of communication apprehension surrounding talking to their teens about sex. Other approaches, while not ignoring the fact that these conversations may be awkward, see these conversations as opportunities for growth and connection (Afifi et al., 2008; Byers et al., 2018; Schalet, 2004). Talking to teens about sex does *not* have to be framed as a hurdle to jump over; instead, it can be seen as a normal and natural part of teens' growing up and of being a parent that is trying to empower their children to make good decisions (Scalet, 2004). In fact, if parents have positive outcome expectations, believe they have the skills to talk to their teens about sex, and feel comfortable doing so – parents are *more* likely to talk to their teens about sex (Byers et al., 2018).

DM does try to address some skills that might improve parents' efficacy in these conversations, like listening or asking good questions. However, these skills do not necessarily prepare parents for the complexity of talking to teens about sex. For example, in DM parents are not given preparation to discuss issues like sexual assault, pornography, how to handle a difference of opinion between parents and teens, or if teens

and parents disagree on boundaries. Thus, DM teaches parents to send their messages about sex, and to do so frequently, without improving their efficacy and teaching them *how* to have these conversations once they get more difficult (e.g., Affi et al., 2008; Byers et al., 2018). DM seemed to fall into the “common practice [of using] fear-based messages without building efficacy perceptions... messages that include threat in the absence of an efficacy component may scare audiences” (Maloney et al., 2011, p. 212). DM also did not address the process of parents overcoming their communication apprehension about talking to their teens about sex, something that is needed if conversations surrounding sex have obstacles as DM claims.

DM also fails to discuss the positive relational aspects that could occur from talking about sex (and conflict for that matter) with their teen, including deepening the relationship between parents and children (Byers et al., 2018; Martino, 2008; Schalet, 2004). Last, DM sees the sex conversation as a means for parents to share their expectations and opinions. While this is not wrong, it does not necessarily help teens create, set, and communicate their own boundaries (Shalet, 2004). Historically, research on conversations about sex has been a means of sharing the parent’s perspective and expectations, instead of taking a child-centered and conversational approach to talking about sex (Afifi et al., 2008; Holman & Koeing Kella, 2018; Flores & Barroso, 2017). Thus, DM focuses on the speaker – the parent – rather than on the child in these conversations. This shows DM’s general focus on considering what the speaker needs to say and forgetting to include the listener in the process. This approach is not surprising given the underlying transmission model of communication in this curriculum that focuses on sending the proper message and assumes the other person will understand it,

agree, and offer no feedback of their own. Instead, what might be more helpful is for DM to take a constitutive approach to these conversations – focusing on positive outcomes, connection with the teen, on what the teen needs are and how they might respond to these conversations, the creation of meaning about sex between parents and teens, and helping to empower the teen to make their own healthy choices.

### **Parent-Teen Conflict**

As noted earlier, what is interesting about the discussion about parent-teen conflict in DM is that DM does not articulate between helpful, unhelpful, and abusive ways of conflict management between parents and teens. There is no evaluation of what conflict management methods parents can use that will help or hurt their relationship with their children, and no statement that physical violence and other negative behaviors on the behalf of parents are not okay. This finding is interesting given that violence and abuse experienced in the home make teens *more* likely to perpetrate or be victimized by violence in other relationships (Aloia & Solomon, 2013; Davis et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2020; Vagi et al., 2013), and that destructive conflict management causes negative effects for parents and their children (Aolia & Solomon, 2013; Curran et al., 2019; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019; Moed et al., 2017). Research further shows that parents' *negative* conflict-management behavior has more of an effect on youth than their positive conflict management behavior (Lu et al., 2020; Tschann, 2009). This means youth are more likely to emulate their parents' negative behaviors than their positive behaviors in their dating relationships (Lu et al., 2020). Perhaps, based on a transmission model, DM thinks that the outcome of the message (that parents get what they want in conflict with

their children) matters more than the *process* of how they get there. While DM does address some positive things parents can do during conflict, such as listening and using I-statements, Lu et al. (2020) writes that interventions cannot just focus on increasing positive behaviors between parents and their children, but also on decreasing negative ones.

DM did include a conflict-management method for parents. While the communication skills and steps that are encouraged are useful, important, and backed in research, DM does not fully discuss the process of resolving conflict and how to communicate during each of the prescribed steps. For one, emotions are inherent to and important in conflict—yet how to manage emotions in conflict was not addressed in DM’s method for parents (Hocker & Wilmont, 2018; Sargent et al., 2011). Parents and teens are told to define the issue or problem, but they are not taught how to reach a consensus on what the definition of the problem is (Cupach et al., 2010; Heath & Isbell, 2017). Addressing underlying needs and interests is important in conflict—which many scholars say should be done *before* discussing solutions (Fisher et al., 2011; Heath & Isbell, 2017; Reimer et al., 2015). Yet, DM does not include this crucial element of conflict management. How to create solutions through brainstorming or other methods, and how to choose a solution through voting, creating criteria, or other approaches were also not discussed (Hocker & Wilmont, 2018; Heath & Isbell, 2017).

Thus, there is no discussion on ways to choose the best solution in DM; parents are just told to do it. Furthermore, there is no recognition of the power differences between parents and children that might affect the solutions that get chosen or the process as a whole (Bugental & Happaney, 2000; Gordon & Chen, 2013; Heath & Isbell, 2017;



Sagrestano, 1992). This advice makes sense given the transmission model, where meaning is in the words that someone says, that power is not a factor, that the speaker's intent is more important than what the listener perceives, and that the outcome is more important than the process. However, the research reviewed here points to using a constitutive model—such as considering needs, power, and the *process* of how to have conversations about conflict.

### **Speaking up, Setting Boundaries, and Breaking Up**

DM encouraged teens to speak up if something bothers them, to set boundaries, and to end unhealthy romantic relationships. What is interesting about all these suggestions, however, is that none of them were followed by a discussion on *how* to be assertive, speak up, break up, or set boundaries, or what to do about a teen's communication apprehension. Rooted in the transmission model, the assumption was that if a teen states a boundary or speaks up, it will happen, the other person will understand and respect what they had to say, and the other person will not try to push them or change their boundaries. We know from research, though, that teens are often poor at communicating and respecting boundaries (de Bruijn, 2006; Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal & Peart, 1996). Further, DM only addressed physical boundaries and not emotional ones, and only discussed setting boundaries ahead of time, rather than in the moment.

Similar advice was offered for break-ups. Teens were told to break up, without being given much instruction on how to commutatively navigate those conversations. Furthermore, like other practices DM encouraged, the listener's response was not included in DM's discussion of breakups (apart from the person potentially responding

violently). In abusive relationships, research shows that breaking up is *not* a teen's general response to being in an abusive relationship or having a bad dating experience; instead, they tend to engage in behaviors of "crying, being sad or upset, talking to their partner, or avoiding their partner in person" (Reed et al., 2020, p. 7). DM also encourages teens to break-up over text or the phone if the relationship is unsafe. While this is wise advice, it ignores the fact that teens are *especially* likely to be upset over a breakup that is not done in person, and that breaking up over text is considered rude and disrespectful amongst teens (Reed et al., 2020). One study of over 900 teens on the reasons teens broke up shows that teens most often break up because of unmet needs, not because of violence (Connolley & McIssac, 2009). This is interesting given that we know that up to 77% of teens experience dating abuse (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Niolon et al., 2015; Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011). In this study, only one student broke up because of physical abuse, and seven broke up over poor treatment (Connolley & McIssac, 2009). Thus, DM may not help teens to break up because it does not teach them how or how those conversations will go, because they do not frame the problem of breaking up along the lines of how teenagers think about breaking up, and because DM does not teach teens how to communicatively navigate the break-up conversation

Research on TDV prevention shows that if a curriculum does not develop communication skills, like setting boundaries, being assertive, and breaking up, then the intervention will not make much of an impact on behavior change (Cornerlius & Resseguie, 2007). Self-efficacy theories posit that people will not speak up if they have negative outcome expectations, do not have the skills to do so, or do not have a good environment (Malony et al., 2011; Roberto et al., 2007; Yzer, 2012). Furthermore, if an

intervention attempts to create an intention like setting boundaries or breaking up, it will not work unless someone has the efficacy and skills to accomplish the intention (Yzer, 2012). Therefore, a teen is unlikely to set boundaries, speak up, or break up if they think it will go poorly, does not believe they have the efficacy and skills to do so, or their environment is not conducive. This is in stark contrast to what DM is supposed to do, which is “enhance self-efficacy... encouraging youth to... define their own healthy and safe boundaries and comfort levels in dating and relationships” (CDC, 2019g, p. 3). Maybe DM does help them define boundaries, but it certainly does not give them the efficacy to communicate and keep those boundaries or engage in other behaviors related to speaking up.

Furthermore, DM does not discuss how teens can approach adults about the violence they may be experiencing—which it encourages teens to do time and time again. Research shows that teens are very *unlikely* to talk to an adult about dating violence (Madkour et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2020; Weisz & Black, 2009) and that they are afraid adults will overreact (Black & Preble, 2016). This may be because teens feel uncomfortable seeking help from adults and they might experience various barriers to speaking to an adult (Madkour et al., 2019). Thus, beyond telling teens they need to talk to an adult when they are experiencing abuse or something else problematic in their relationships, teens should be empowered to know how to do so. Furthermore, there are some conflicts, such as conflict in healthy friendships and dating relationships, that teens can learn to solve by themselves without the help of adults. They should be empowered to learn how to solve these kinds of conflicts (Close & Lechman, 1997; Moldovan & Bocoş, 2021). Thus, perhaps a distinction should be made in DM about what types of

conflict teens should bring to an adult and what types they can learn to solve on their own. Again, all of this makes sense from a transmission model. If a teen needs to communicate something to an adult, they should be able to do it—there are no other things to consider like barriers, feelings, efficacy, group norms, or how the other person will respond.

### **Teen-to-Teen Conflict**

Based in the transmission model, DM assumed that teen's use of healthy communication skills, such as choosing their words and actions well, solving conflict in-person, and having a willingness to compromise, would solve their conflicts. While healthy communication skills are certainly helpful, they do not address the conflict itself. Furthermore, the idea that healthy communication skills are the cure to most problems is misleading. Healthy communication skills do not erase past behaviors that hurt someone's feelings, or the fact that teens can try their best to use healthy communication skills and still hurt the other person's feelings (Sargent et al., 2011). Healthy communication also does not change the fact that difficult conversations are still difficult, and we may learn things we do not want to know. Furthermore, people can also use healthy communication skills out of selfishness, manipulation, control, or a desire to escalate conflict (The Arbinger Institute, 2018, 2020; Spitzberg et al., 2009). Therefore, it might be more accurate for DM to say that using healthy communication skills decreases the likelihood of hurting someone's feelings or causing extra problems in relationships, without promising that healthy communication skills will always lead to positive outcomes or that healthy communication skills always come from good intentions

As discussed earlier, teens were often told to speak up when they have a problem. They were also told to compromise, without telling them how to compromise (or how to assert themselves and not compromise). What is appropriate and not appropriate to compromise on, as well as how to compromise effectively, was not included in DM (e.g., Hocker & Wilmont, 2018). In communication research, compromise is *not* the best conflict management method because people only partially get their needs met (Adler & Proctor, 2017; Hocker & Wilmont, 2018; Kurylo, 2010). Instead, in healthy relationships, both collaboration and boundary-setting are encouraged to solve problems (Canfield, 2016; Kurylo, 2010), and in unhealthy or abusive relationships, assertiveness and boundary-setting are used to keep people safe and get their needs met (B. Brown, 2010; 2017; Bolton, 1979; Speed et al., 2017). Yet, how to go about the process of collaboration, being assertive, and setting boundaries was not included in DM. Telling teens to compromise or set boundaries, without telling them how, makes sense based on a transmission model. If teens send the appropriate messages, compromise should be easily reached, and if they need to be assertive about their needs, then that should happen easily as well.

In summary, DM's practical theory of communication rests in the transmission model, and therefore affects how DM sees communication problems and the practices it suggests to address those problems. Because DM takes a transmission-based approach to communication, it limits its discussion of how to go about the process of certain conversations, how to consider the listener's perspective and responses, and thinks that saying things like "send a message" and "clearly communicate" will easily work. The next section will offer some different ways DM could talk about communication and

conflict from a communicative perspective that would lead to improved outcomes for teens and their parents regarding healthy relationship behaviors and positive conflict management.

### **Re-imagining the Dating Matters Curriculum from a Communicative Perspective**

A central goal of Grounded Practical Theory is to offer normative claims based on the reconstruction of a practical theory of communication (Craig & K. Tracy, 1995, 2014). Therefore, in this next section, I offer specific suggestions about how DM could have a more productive conceptualization of communication as well as how DM ought to teach communication and communication skills more productively (Craig, 2015). Indeed, as Craig and K. Tracy (2014) explain, GPT is most useful when problems are complex and *do not* call for straightforward answers. Relationships, in and of themselves, are complicated. When layering on abusive and unhealthy behaviors, they get even more complex.

While DM showed significant results in the reduction of TDV and other problematic behaviors, it did not show a reduction in negative conflict management strategies or an increase in positive relationship behaviors (Niolon et al., 2019). In a curriculum meant to create and improve healthy relationships, we should expect to see some results regarding positive relationship behaviors. Yet, that change was not there. Perhaps this is because, as the analysis above showed, DM told people to “set boundaries” and “have a message” without teaching them *how* to perform these skills or what to do in moments of difficulty or complexity.

One challenge of offering an explanation of what DM ought to teach is because the “ought” changes for healthy and unhealthy relationships. People ought to collaborate when solving problems in healthy relationships, instead of avoiding the topic or insisting on their own way. However, in abusive relationships, telling people to collaborate may be problematic and instead, they should be encouraged to set boundaries or even avoid unsafe conversations. The solutions and the way DM ought to teach communication is complicated, and in the next section, I pay particular attention to this challenge.

### **Communication and Conflict as Constitutive and Constructive**

DM assumes that people intuitively know what communication and conflict are. Communication is the transmission of messages, and therefore, conflict is bad. It does not define either concept. To begin a more productive conversation on both communication and conflict, DM should include defining what they are. Specifically, it could address the idea that communication and conflict are constitutive of relationships (Cupach, 2000; Manning, 2016, 2020). While DM may not have time to articulate the depths of the constitutive model of communication, it certainly could incorporate some of its ideas. Furthermore, DM could discuss ideas within the constitutive model without removing all the language about messages. For example, it is important for parents to have a good message about sex to their teens. DM could keep those ideas. What it should add or incorporate, however, is that the process of these conversations and the impact these conversations have on the relationship is important as well, and for parents to think about the greater context of the relationship.

For example, definitions like, “interpersonal communication is a dynamic form of communication between two (or more) people in which the messages exchanged significantly influence their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships” (West & Turner, 2020, p. 5), or communication is “the strategic process of message transaction between people to create and sustain shared meaning” (McCornack & Morrison, 2019, p. 9) might work well in this curriculum. These ideas could be woven throughout the curriculum, reminding people that communication is a process, it influences us, has consequences, impacts the future state of our relationships, creates our relationships, and so on. This would also give DM room to also address communication climates or the overall emotional tones of relationships which have a considerable influence on how difficult conversations and conflict are experienced and addressed (Adler & Proctor, 2017; Galvin et al, 2015). It could also frame communication as a *choice* – particularly abusive communication – and how our communication choices have positive or negative consequences on the interaction, the individual, or the relationship (Bancroft, 2002; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Furthermore, DM could discuss how our current communication impacts the future state of the relationship (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002) and that our present communication is influenced by both past and anticipated communication (Baxter et al., 2021; Manning, 2014, 2020; Stewart, 2012).

DM could also define conflict and highlight that communication is an especially important element of the conflict process (Hocker & Wilmont, 2018). One definition argues that, “conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interferences from others in achieving their goals” (Hocket & Wilmont, 2018, p. 3). Other definitions include that



conflict is a significant difference between people (LeBaron & Pillay, 2006) or that conflict is a “perceived struggle or tension” (Punches & Salazar, 2022, p. 229). All these definitions get at a few ideas. First, conflict is often based on perception, and understanding the perceptions of others in conflict is an important first step in conflict management (Cupach et al., 2010; Sargent et al., 2011). Second, conflict reflects a difference or struggle that is significant and that is communicated within relationships (Hocker & Wilmont, 2018). From having a baseline understanding of conflict, DM could incorporate ideas from within the constitutive model: that our communication can create conflict, that our communication behavior might be an outcome of experiencing conflict in a relationship, and that it is through communication that conflict is managed constructively or destructively (Hocker & Wilmont, 2018).

From there, DM could also make an explicit distinction between constructive and destructive conflict, especially for parents as it already does for teenagers (Cupach et al., 2010). It cannot ignore destructive conflict because the curriculum is supposed to help prevent destructive conflict in unhealthy relationships. However, DM is also supposed to help people create and foster healthy relationships as well. One of the ways that it could do this is by discussing conflict more positively in *healthy* relationships. Several scholars argue that conflict does not always have to be negative, but that conflict can also be *transformative*. DM could ask participants how conflict might benefit their relationships. Possible answers could include that conflict helps you express, understand, and meet one another’s needs, learn more about each other, learn to work together, create a deeper relationship, show us where we need to grow, and bring about some sort of desired change (Canfield, 2016; Reiner et al. 2015; Wilmont & Hocker, 2018). DM could weave

these ideas throughout the curriculum and be more explicit about the positive outcomes of experiencing conflict in healthy relationships. This could reframe some of the problems DM addresses, such as seeing conversations about sex to be beneficial to the relationship instead of as a huge hurdle to jump over.

### **Changing the Problems and Solutions about a Lack of Communication and Conflict**

Based on the transmission model of communication, teens and parents are told to send their message, speak up, set boundaries, resolve conflicts, and compromise, without being told what the process of enacting these behaviors is or *how* to accomplish these skills. DM assumes that if it just told someone to do something, then they would have the efficacy to do so. We know, based on communication theory and research, that neither of these things is always true. For one, healthy communication skills do not work when attitudes are poor, and people do not always have the efficacy to set boundaries and send messages. Next, the process of having certain conversations was often left out in DM, especially regarding working through conflicts. Therefore, DM needs to address underlying attitudes, how to improve efficacy when enacting certain skills, and emphasize the process of working through conflict and problems.

#### ***Attitudes***

DM assumes that if teens and parents just use better skills, their communication would be more effective. While that can be true in some situations, scholars argue that communication skills will not make much difference without the development of communication competence or the ability to know what communication is appropriate in

a given context (Spitzberg et al., 2009). A constitutive approach would also allow DM to address teens' and parents' attitudes towards one another, going deeper than skills alone. In a transmission model, attitudes are not accounted for because meaning lies only in the words that are said. Scholars have argued that you can use all the "healthy communication skills" you want – but if you have selfishness, bitterness, jealousy, anger, frustration, and other such feelings towards someone, healthy communication skills will only have minimal effects (The Arbinger Institute, 2018, 2020). For people who struggle with enacting abusive or unhealthy behaviors in relationships, checking their underlying attitudes may be particularly important, as their behavior is often rooted in selfishness and a lack of concern for the other's wellbeing and needs (Bancroft, 2002). Thus, DM would benefit from an approach that not only asks people to use good communication skills, but also asks participants to check their attitudes towards people in their life (The Arbinger Institute, 2018, 2020). DM cannot have the level of healthy communication and relationships it aspires to without addressing people's underlying attitudes towards each other.

One way that people can check themselves and their attitudes is to consider if they are able to extend some level of empathy in a situation. Empathy is a skill that has been shown to decrease TDV (Basile et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Espelage et al., 2020), especially dating violence perpetrated by males (Loudin et al., 2003; Ramons et al., 2017). Research also shows that being empathetic increases bystander intervention in cases of domestic violence, even in cases where the bystander does not feel they have the skills to intervene (Muralidharan & Kim, 2019). Furthermore, adolescents who are empathetic have better relationships and conflict management skills because they are

better able to solve problems and are less likely to engage in destructive conflict (Chow et al., 2013; de Wied et al., 2007; Van Lissa et al., 2016). Empathy, however, was not a topic included in DM. This is interesting, given that increasing empathy is a stated goal of DM (Espelage et al., 2020; Niolon et al., 2021).

One intervention called Cognitive-Based Compassion Training has been shown to be effective in increasing teens' empathy and compassion (Reddy et al., 2012). Elements of this intervention could be used to help DM include a discussion on empathy. As empathy has been a skill shown to be especially effective at decreasing violence perpetrated by males (Loudin et al., 2003; Ramons et al., 2017), this could address the problem that DM had less or no significant results for males, and that it did not show an increase in positive relationship behaviors (Debman & Temple, 2021; Niolon et al., 2019). Furthermore, it might also have an extra effect of increasing bystander intervention and constructive conflict management. DM could also address the need for parents to be empathetic towards their children (Preble et al., 2018; Stern et al., 2014; Trumpeter et al., 2008). As DM should include that empathy is important, it also needs to teach students and parents *how* to practice and communicate it (e.g., Carr & Koeing Kellas, 2017; Koeing Kellas et al., 2013; Koeing Kellas & Baker et al., 2020; Koeing Kellas & Morgan et al., 2020; Youngvorst & Jones, 2017).

It is important to note, and for DM to include, that having empathy and checking your underlying attitudes towards someone does not mean putting up with bad or abusive behavior, but it does mean recognizing and stopping your own bad behavior. Some research does point to the idea that people high in empathy might be more accepting of others' abusive behavior (Dodaj et al., 2020). In these cases, it is important for people to

remember that someone's escalation of frustration, hurt feelings, anger, or conflict to an abusive or unhealthy level is a choice (Bancroft, 2002). In fact, being empathic can mean setting boundaries, holding others accountable, and bringing forth other people's problematic behavior to light (B. Brown, 2010, 2017; The Arbinger Institute, 2018, 2020).

### *Efficacy*

Research on self-efficacy shows that even if people have the intention, they will not enact a behavior unless they have the skills to do it, the appropriate environment, and believe that the skills they have been taught will actually work (Basil & Witte, 2012; Malony et al., 2011; Roberto et al., 2007; Yzer, 2012). DM might have increased participants' intention to do things like “send a message,” “set boundaries” and “speak up.” However, it did not seem to increase their efficacy as DM did not tell them how to enact these behaviors or give them the proper tools to do so. Thus, incorporating health communication models to increase efficacy would be an important step for DM, such as Extended Parallel Process Model (Basil & Witte, 2012; Maloney et al., 2011) and The Integrated Model of Behavioral Prediction (Yzer, 2012). The following paragraphs will address how DM could increase both parents' and teens' efficacy.

**Parents.** Regarding conversations about sexual topics, the instructions given to parents in DM do not provide them with the efficacy to deal with the complexity of these conversations. . Parents were told to “send their message” while using “healthy communication skills” but were not prepared for the myriad of topics or responses the teen may bring up. If DM is to keep their fear-appeal based discussion of parents and

teens talking about sex, DM not only needs to convince parents that there is a significant threat of not talking about sex, but that they have the efficacy and confidence to respond appropriately (Basil & Witte, 2012; Maloney et al., 2011). In the Extended Parallel Process Model, self-efficacy messages need to be stronger than fear messages (Basil & Witte, 2012). DM could improve by preparing parents for the complexity of talking to their teens about sex, including having actionable responses to their teens' concerns and questions – perhaps about topics like pornography and sexual assault (Basil & Witte, 2012). Some of the ways DM might be able to improve parent's efficacy are to increase parent's motivation, increase parent's knowledge about sex, make parents more comfortable with sexual topics, help parents encourage questions about sex, and help them develop skills related to talking about sex (Byers, 2011).

Another way to enhance parent self-efficacy is to discuss the positives that can come from talking to their teens about sex, which diverges from the fear-based approach. Using the Integrated Model of Behavioral Prediction, if parents foresee the conversation about sex going well and believe they have the skills to do it, they will be more likely to talk to their teens about sex (Byers et al., 2018). Thus, Byers et al. (2018) argues that interventions need to increase positive outcome expectations while decreasing negative outcome expectations. Holman and Koeing Kellas (2018) argue that centering the sex conversations around comprehensive education and sexual safety might increase the chances of the conversations going positively because this is what adolescents are specifically looking for from their parents. Interventions can then teach comprehensive sex education and sexual safety to parents (Holman & Koeing Kellas, 2018).

DM could also take a child-centered approach to talking about sex, where parents see themselves as supporting their child as they learn to make healthy decisions (Preble et al., 2018; Schalet, 2004). Other ways parents might be able to have these conversations better and increase their efficacy is through being relaxed, composed, and responsive to their child. This has further shown to reduce the child's anxious and avoidant behavior of talking with their parents about sex (Afifi et al., 2008). These behaviors will also increase the chances of subsequent sex conversations going well in the future (Sears et al., 2020). Finally, parents are only one half of the puzzle. Adolescent's intentions and responses matter too. Interventions, such as DM, can also target adolescents to help them think about and improve their communication with their parents about sexual topics (Sears et al., 2020).

**Teens.** Teens were told to speak up, set boundaries, and break up in their relationships without being told how to do these things. Thus, DM might have given teens the intent to do these things without the proper tools and efficacy to do it. The Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction argues that people need to have both intention and efficacy to accomplish a particular behavior—such as speaking up or setting boundaries (Yzer, 2012). Most of the research surrounding self-efficacy and intent in sexual situations with teenagers, however, revolves around whether or not teens have the intention and efficacy to engage in sexual behavior, *not* if they have the intention and efficacy to speak up, talk about their problems, break up, or set boundaries regarding sexual behavior (e.g., Bleakly et al., 2010, 2011; Chan, 2017; Dai et al., 2018; Gottfried et al., 2011; Hull et al., 2013; Rios-Zertuche et al., 2017; Wombacher et al., 2018). Overall, research has a gap in understanding self-efficacy and intent as it related to

speaking up and setting boundaries, so it is not surprising that DM reflected this gap. Nonetheless, *how* to speak up and set boundaries still needs to be addressed within DM.

There has, however, been research on assertiveness interventions for teenagers. Assertiveness training has proven to be effective with youth (e.g., Hoiyat et al., 2016; Kennedy & Jenkins, 2011; Kolb & Griffeth, 2009; Rothman & Armstrong, 1980; Speed et al., 2017; Widman et al., 2018). It recognizes that speaking up is hard, and that some people may be more naturally inclined to speak up than others. Assertiveness training helps people learn how to stand up for themselves and “[exercise] one’s own rights without denying the rights of others” (Speed et al., 2017, p. 2). This training teaches teens how to speak up in appropriate and respectful ways (Speed et al., 2017) and has been shown to decrease a number of negative outcomes (Speed et al., 2017; Agbakwuru & Stella, 2012). Therefore, incorporating elements and the research on assertiveness training would be useful in DM.

How to set and communicate boundaries should also be included within DM. Teens who do not have the efficacy to communicate their sexual boundaries are more at risk for sexual violence (de Bruijn et al., 2006). There have been many books written to help people and teenagers set and communicate boundaries, which could provide a helpful framework for DM (e.g., B. Brown, 2010, 2018; Cloud & Townsend, 2000; Cole, 2021; Tawwab, 2021). As DM only mentioned setting boundaries ahead of time, teens could also be taught how to set boundaries in the moment or when someone may know your boundary but still tries to cross it. Beyond sexual and physical boundaries, DM could also expand to teaching emotional boundaries. It would also be helpful to teach teens what respecting someone’s boundaries looks like in action, not just in words.



Furthermore, it is possible that people will respond defensively or aggressively to assertiveness and boundary-setting. Teens could be given strategies to deal with defensiveness and the unhelpful and problematic ways people may respond to expressing needs and setting boundaries (Cole, 2021; Bolton, 1979; Tawwab, 2021).

### *Process*

Within DM, the process of how to have certain conversations was left out. In particular, the process of how to solve conflict, set boundaries, break up, and have conversations about sex was not discussed productively. If the process were addressed, participants could develop more self-efficacy to set boundaries, solve conflict, break up, and have good conversations surrounding sex, particularly as it relates to productively managing conflict. Taking a process-based approach would also help DM discuss how people can overcome their communication apprehension, as well as to consider the needs of the listener when working through conflict in healthy relationships.

Focusing on the process of conflict would allow DM to address several things it either ignores or minimally discusses (note that the following suggestions apply to solving conflict in healthy relationships, not in unhealthy or abusive ones. In unhealthy or abusive relationships, the focus should be on safety and boundary-setting, as was already discussed). In particular, DM could move away from an approach where conflict needs to be resolved quickly and be avoided in healthy relationships. This would give DM space to discuss the complexity of conflict. Further, DM could teach conflict management to parents and teens, not just to parents. DM could include how important emotions are in the process of conflict as well as nonverbal behaviors (Cupach et al., 2010; Hocker &

Wilmont, 2018), instead of just focusing on “logic” as their model currently does. In fact, parents and teens with good emotional regulation during conflict have better relational outcomes (Branje, 2018). DM could also consider the various goals and needs people have in conflict, including underlying values, expectations on how others could act, how identity is at play in conflict, and the needs people have to maintain face, protect themselves, maintain the relationship, and consider their impact on the other person (e.g., Fisher et al., 2011; Hocker & Wilmont, 2018; Sargent et al., 2011; Samp, 2013). DM could focus on how conflict is not about just communicating a particular message and finding resolution – conflict is also (or should be) about maintaining and improving relationships as well as meeting the needs of the people involved (Hocker & Wilmont, 2018; Sargent et al., 2011).

A focus on process rather than outcomes would be helpful as DM tries to teach better ways of solving conflict and having good conversations (Sargent et al., 2011). One idea DM could incorporate is that there is more than one way to solve conflict and that it is important to be able to have cognitive complexity and be able to choose the appropriate way to communicate and solve conflict in a given situation (Adler & Proctor, 2017; Cupach et al., 2010; Koesten & Anderson, 2004; Youngvorst & Jones, 2017). DM could include conflict management styles such as avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating. There is ample research on various adolescent and parent conflict management styles that could be incorporated into DM (e.g., Boersma-van Dam et al., 2019; Bonache, Gonzalez-Mendez, & Ramirez-Santana, 2016; de Wied, 2007; Missotten, Luyckx, Branje, & Van Petegem, 2017; Staats et al., 2017). From there, DM could include a discussion that different styles are needed or useful in different

situations and that people generally gravitate towards certain styles (J. G. Brown, 2012; Hocker & Wilmont, 2018). In discussing these styles, DM could highlight the process of how to go about a particular method, when certain methods are and are not appropriate, as well as other things to keep in mind, including the dynamics of the relationship, power, and individual personalities (Hocker & Wilmont, 2018; Riemer et al, 2015).

Positive problem-solving methods have been shown to have positive impacts on parent-child relationships, teen friend relationships, and on the decreased use of destructive conflict (de Weid et al., 2007; Missotten, Luyckx, Branje, Hale, & Meeus, 2017; Staats et al., 2017). Collaboration is one such method that DM could include in the discussion of healthy relationships. Collaborative conflict management works to meet both people's needs, and therefore it could be included when discussing conflict as positive and productive. One collaborative process DM could use principled negotiation, which is based on Fisher and Ury's work. DM could incorporate the steps of the principled negotiation process, which would address many of the problems of how DM recommends solving conflicts that were pointed out previously. This could include sharing power in the decision-making process, seeing the problem as separate from the other person in the conflict, seeking to maintain the relationship in a positive state, keeping good communication throughout the conflict, getting to people's underlying needs and interests, brainstorming solutions, creating criteria for choosing the best solution, and planning the implementation (Fisher et al., 2011; Heath & Isbell, 2017; Hocker & Wilmont, 2018).

## Conclusion

This analysis identified the practical theory of communication within *Dating Matters*. DM's conceptualization of communication was rooted in a transmission model of communication which focuses on sending and receiving messages. DM did not focus on ideas related to communication being a process, that it happens simultaneously between interactants, that our present communication is influenced by both past and future communication, and that our communication can have both positive and negative effects on individuals and on relationships. This led to DM heavily emphasizing communicating the proper message, and it left out misunderstanding, meaning, intent, motives, and underlying attitudes that impact how messages are understood and received.

These notions undergirded the communication problems and solutions that DM discussed. One of the problems salient throughout the curriculum was that a lack of communication was causing issues in relationships. For parents, this was a lack of communication about sex, and for teens, this was a lack of speaking up and expressing oneself. The solutions to these problems were to send the appropriate message about sex and to speak up and set boundaries. While these are well-intentioned pieces of advice, DM did not adequately discuss how to accomplish these things. Thus, DM might have given participants the intention without the efficacy to enact certain behaviors. For example, parents were not taught how to manage the complexity of talking to teens about sex, and teens were not taught how to speak up and set boundaries effectively with adults or peers.

These findings have important implications for TDV prevention and communication research. For TDV prevention, it addresses the need for including communication theory in these programs. Communication theory would allow these programs to address the complexity of relationships and communication itself. Further, it would allow programs to focus more on the process of enacting certain behaviors, as well as giving people the efficacy to accomplish them, instead of just telling participants to act or not act a certain way. As other analyses have found, TDV prevention programs do not always accomplish actual skill development (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007), perhaps that is because telling people to use certain skills does not necessarily make them communicatively competent or help them believe that they have the ability to use certain skills (Basil & Witte, 2012; Spitzberg et al., 2009; Yzer, 2012). Thus, to increase both competence and efficacy, people need to be taught what the processes of enacting certain skills are. TDV prevention programs, therefore, need to incorporate communication theory because it can address the complexity of relationships and communication *and* offer useful solutions to the various problems people may face in their relationships.

This study also has important implications for communication research. For one, it highlights how communication theories, models, and concepts can be expanded to study adolescents and can be used in an applied intervention context. As communication scholarship has primarily focused on studying intimate partner violence in adult contexts, this study is an important first step to understanding communication, dating abuse, and prevention amongst teenagers. As Messinger et al. (2012) write, researchers must be cautious comparing how adults experience intimate partner violence and dating violence to that of teenagers. Thus, studying abuse in teenagers' relationships is ripe for research

and theory from within the communication discipline. Although research with minors is much more difficult and complicated because they are a protected class, communication scholars should make the extra effort to do this work. Communication studies should join academics from other fields in studying and preventing teen dating violence and should offer a unique perspective and theoretical tradition to the topic. Furthermore, preventing abuse at the teen level would be helpful for decreasing intimate partner violence in adulthood. Communication scholars studying abuse, then, should begin to focus more attention on understanding and preventing abuse among teenagers.

Like any study, this research has some limitations. Because DM is so expansive and targets multiple levels of the social ecology, I made choices about what documents to include and exclude in my analysis. I excluded documents related to administration and policy, training models, and supplemental videos. Although I achieved saturation for what I was looking for using GPT, there may have been important information contained in these deliverables that could have been useful to this analysis. Future research could analyze the *Dating Matters* curriculum in its entirety. Furthermore, the notions of power and gender were set outside of this GPT analysis. I did not have the theoretical space to address power dynamics and gender differences sufficiently, although I saw that DM almost entirely ignores power and gender, which other scholars have also noticed (Baken & Stein, 2016). Future research could take a critical approach to evaluate this curriculum—or TDV prevention curricula in general

Future research could include more curricula in the analysis, as scholars could analyze how different curricula teach communication. Researchers could also observe DM (and other curricula) being taught. They could also conduct interviews or have focus

groups with parents, teens, and educators to see what they think about this curriculum, the skills that they were taught, and other information. As this curriculum showed no change in positive relationship behaviors, scholars could try to develop better measures to see what the teens are improving in as it is possible that this finding was due to measurement problems. Furthermore, scholars could develop or use measures related to communication competence specifically to discover the exact communication skills that are being affected (or not) by this curriculum. Overall, there are many opportunities for this curriculum (and other TDV prevention curricula) to be studied from interpretivist, post-positivist, and critical research traditions within the field of communication. Research coming from these various traditions would add depth and richness to our understanding of the DM curriculum and TDV prevention in general.

APPENDICES



## Appendix: Documents Used

Below is a list of the documents I used for the analysis. These documents are available for free on the *Dating Matters* website (<https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/dating-matters-toolkit/explore-component#/>). They are each also marked with an asterisk in the references section. These are the documents I analyzed:

- Dating Matters for 6<sup>th</sup> Graders Facilitator Guide (Latzman et al., 2019a).
- Dating Matters for 7<sup>th</sup> Graders Facilitator Guide (Latzman et al., 2019b).
- Parents Matter! For Dating Matters (Miller et al., 2019).
- Dating Matters for Parents Facilitator Guide (Fortson et al., 2019).
- 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Parent Slides (Dating Matters®, 2019a).
- 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Parent Slides (Dating Matters®, 2019b).
- Parents Matter! For Dating Matters, Parent Handbook (CDC, 2019h).
- Dating Matters for Parents, Parent Handbook (CDC, 2019a).
- Dating Matters Handbook for 6<sup>th</sup> Graders (CDC, 2019b).
- Dating Matters Handbook for 7<sup>th</sup> Graders (CDC, 2019c).
- i2i Brand Ambassador Handbook (CDC, 2017).
- i2i Program Facilitator Guide (CDC, 2019d).
- i2i Comic (CDC, 2019f).
- i2i iGuide: Good Stuff to Know When You're Dating Workbook (CDC, 2019e).

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*\*References marked with an asterisk were the materials used for the data analysis.*

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