

## Book Reviews

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Totten, M.D. (2001). Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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Mark D. Totten's book, Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse presents the issue of adolescent male abuse on female girlfriends, and sets out to answer how these adolescent males are socialized by parents, peers and society to act in a certain manner that establishes masculinity. Totten explains how class, race, and gender do not play an individual role in adolescent girlfriend abuse, but rather how all three factors are linked together through parental figures, social groupings and the socially formed definition of what it means to be a man. The incorporation of detailed first hand statements of the studies subjects can be seen as offensive and graphic however, the statements demonstrate the reality of adolescent male violence against girlfriends. Totten's study demonstrates the importance of social influences on young males and helps us further understand the motivation behind girlfriend abuse, the justification of girlfriend abuse and conditions under which adolescent male's abuse their girlfriends.

Totten began both his book and research with explaining how different sociological theories fall into his research and how they begin to explain why adolescent males abuse their girlfriends. Totten states "the theoretical approach of this study is an integrative perspective that draws on social learning, sex/gender roles and socialization, lifestyle/routine activities, social construction of masculinity, youth subcultures, and peer group/gang theories and models" (p. 25). Both Totten's book is well organized, explanatory, and even though explicit it shows the true depth and accuracy of his research on adolescent male violence. Evidence through subjects first hand statements in the book is supportive of Totten's conclusions, and extremely

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informative both in the form of examples and supporting statistics displayed in easily readable tables. Totten's research is easy to understand, well organized, and through the first hand statements made by the subjects demonstrate the depth and detail of the research is demonstrated.

Children are socialized from a young age to learn the preverbal difference between right and wrong, Totten believes that young boys who are at risk of being abusive towards others can be identified early on. Children are greatly influenced by their parents or the parental figure in their lives. Parents can tell their children the proper way to behave however, as Totten's study shows, it's the parent's actions that have the greatest influence over their children. Totten states that "if it can be shown that males who rigidly adhere to a patriarchal-authoritarian model of family and gender are most likely to use direct force to keep women in line" (p. 69). In other words when the male is head of household he is more than likely going to be the greatest influence in the family unit.

The role gender plays in the family structure is also a huge influence on the attitude and mind set of adolescent males; the mother is often seen as the traditional homemaker and the father as the traditional bread winner. One subject called Steve, whose mother received welfare checks and whose father was unemployed most of the time, made the following statement "It's still his money. And even if he hasn't worked much, he's been looking for work. And like I said, he usually has worked one or two weeks every year. My mom has never worked" (p. 75). This statement made in the interview with Steve is among many strong, shocking and eye opening statements made by subjects throughout the study. Statements such as these demonstrate the strength of parental influences, and social norms on adolescent males and where the idea of abusing a girlfriend begins to be seen as both acceptable and justifiable from what they have

learned in the home. As Totten concludes at the end of chapter 3 “findings of this study suggest confirmation of many reports regarding the serious consequences of witnessing wife assault” (p.111), demonstrating the significance of family influence on young males.

Totten believes one main factor behind adolescent male girlfriend abuse is how males are influenced by the male parental or father figure in the family unit and how they act towards the female parental or mother figure. When adolescent males see their female parental or mother figure treated in a certain way by their male parental or father figure, they begin to believe that is how all adult relationships are supposed to be modeled.

Being a part of a social society, Totten believes another influence on adolescent male abusive behaviour is the group of friends these young males have. The need to show their masculinity, through the use of verbal, sexual, and physical abuse is also greatly influenced by the adolescent male’s social grouping. As the study found the need to demonstrate masculinity to a young male’s social grouping was not only influential on the abuse of women, but also on the abuse of men known to be homosexual. Throughout Totten’s book he is very consistent with telling it how it is, in other words he doesn’t hold back when reporting what the male subjects stated in the study. Throughout the book, first account statements about what the subject’s believed made them men, or asserted their masculinity may be crude, yet demonstrated their mentality and justification of their actions. Subjects made statements about explicit acts against adolescent girlfriends and homosexual males, and how the actions they take part in establish their masculinity and assert their status as a man (pp. 120 - 129). Not only has this study shown the influence of social groups on young males, it has also shown that one of the biggest motivations of abusive behaviour is belonging to gangs or groups of friends that act in a abusive and delinquent manner. Totten found that these adolescent men tried to be “the “ideal man”,

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using a common set of masculine ideals” (p. 150). For these adolescent males being the “ideal man”, is earned through proving who they are in the way they act around their social grouping, and how they are perceived by their social groupings.

Totten’s study took a new look into the issue of adolescent males their abusive behaviour towards girlfriends, and what influences these males to act in such a way. Totten’s study is significant, informative and can apply to almost anyone. Sociologists, and criminologists would be most interested in Totten’s, research and information collected about the issue of adolescent violence against girlfriends. The content of Totten’s research contains sexually explicit language and violent material, but can be of great value to parents and the education of adolescent violence. Totten’s book would also be of great value to adolescent males and females, to learn and understand the seriousness of adolescent violence and how to possibly avoid being caught up in an abusive relationship. Regardless of the harsh content, Totten’s book is an important read for anyone who has an interest in the topic or has close relations with individuals they care about.

Totten’s book, Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse presents the issue of adolescent male abuse on girlfriends. Class, race, and gender all play a role in how parental figures, social groups and the socially defined role of what being masculine means, and how adolescent males are influenced to act out in violence. The research from Totten’s study allows the reader to see how social and parental influences can effect males from a very young age, and how the role of proving one’s masculinity can lead to violence. All of the subject’s firsthand accounts collected and published by Totten, demonstrate how strong the beliefs, actions and justifications of the adolescent males are. As well as how past experiences have shaped their abusive behaviour and attitudes towards others. Totten’s book holds great value for anyone who shows interest in the topic, or for anyone who has individuals close to them of whom they care for. Totten provides

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the reader with strong information into the minds of adolescent males who abuse their girlfriends, how these males justify their actions and most importantly how these males are influenced through society to act out in violence. The educative value in Guys, Gangs, and Girlfriend Abuse should not be overlooked, and is a must read for everyone.