Preventing Violence and Abuse: Strategies to Engage Youth and Adults in Building Safe and Healthy Relationships

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Introduction

Domestic violence and sexual assault are not just adult issues, but prevalent crimes that affect safe environments for youth, families, and the community as a whole. Each year, approximately one in four adolescents reports verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Dating violence among peers is reported by 54% of high school students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Nationally, 44% of sexual assaults are perpetrated against children and youth under 18 years of age (Rand, 2009). As we consider how domestic violence, sexual assault, mental health, and substance abuse professionals can work together to provide more trauma-informed care to those clients we serve, it’s also important for us to consider a brighter future – a future where today’s children and youth are not plagued by the long-term impacts and risks associated with early experiences of violence and abuse.

This session addressed the impact of violence and abuse on youth, including their health, safety, and peer relationships — and one community’s effort to reduce its risks of future violence.

SafePlace’s Expect Respect Program was discussed as an example of a comprehensive prevention program that includes school-based support groups for vulnerable youth, youth leadership activities, school policy development, and efforts to engage parents and other adults in promoting healthy teen relationships. Local collaborative efforts to address bullying, sexual harassment, and dating abuse as a health issue were also discussed.

From Response to Prevention

Many adult survivors experienced their first incident of abuse from an intimate partner during adolescence. Recognition of this led SafePlace and others in the field to question themselves about what could be done to support vulnerable youth and prevent them from becoming adult victims and perpetrators. SafePlace began in 1988 by responding to requests for counseling in schools for girls in abusive relationships. Over the past 23 years, the agency has expanded its efforts to prevent dating violence by engaging the broader community in promoting safe and healthy teen relationships. What began as a
response to violence evolved into a comprehensive prevention program called *Expect Respect* that supports vulnerable youth and prevents dating and sexual violence from happening in the first place.

**Teen Dating Abuse**

Teen dating abuse describes actual or threatened acts of physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal harm, including stalking and economic coercion by a current or former partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, or someone wanting a romantic relationship. It can occur among heterosexual or same-gender couples. It can also include using internet, social networking sites, phones, or text messaging to harass, pressure or victimize (Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships, 2011).

Dating abuse is common, with studies indicating that between 20%-45% of high school students have experienced physical violence from a boyfriend or girlfriend (Silverman & Raj, et al., 2001; Foshee, 1996; O'Keefe, 1997; Davis, 2008). Among teens who experience dating violence, 29% had their first experience at age 12-13, 40% at age 14-15, and 29% at age 16-17 (Burcky, Reuterman, & Kopsky, 1988).

Dating violence has serious health consequences. Victimization is associated with substance abuse, unhealthy weight control behaviors, sexual risk behaviors, pregnancy, and suicide (Silverman & Raj, et al., 2001). Teen girls in physically abusive relationships were up to six times as likely than non-abused girls to become pregnant (Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2005) and three times as likely to become infected with an STI/HIV (Decker, Silverman, & Raj., 2005).

Like adult domestic violence, teen dating abuse includes insults, name-calling, and put-downs as well as physical and sexual violence. However, young people are at increased risk for violence in their relationships. As they experiment with new roles of boyfriend or girlfriend, teens may be more likely than adults to exaggerate gender norms learned from family, friends, and the media. Young women may perceive jealous and controlling behavior as signs of affection and be less likely than adults to recognize these behaviors as warning signs for abuse. Young men, feeling insecure in a new relationship, may try harder to control their partners through force or threats. Increased desire for intimacy as they lose physical contact with parents, peer pressure to be in a relationship, and lack of skills for coping with intense emotions may all contribute to the risk teens face for perpetration and victimization in a dating relationship.

For teens, the peer group is a primary influence on dating expectations and behavior. Therefore, effective prevention strategies should work to change social norms that support violence in relationships. It is important that advocates do not focus narrowly on dating behavior but rather address the full range of behaviors that young people experience in their relationships. These include violence at home, bullying, cyber-bullying, homophobia, hazing, sexual and other forms of harassment, as well as dating and sexual violence. By mobilizing the peer group to reject all forms of violence and
abuse, advocates can change social norms that ultimately shape individual attitudes and behaviors.

**Prevention**

The goal of dating abuse prevention is to stop violence from happening in the first place by promoting healthy behaviors and environments and reducing the likelihood or frequency of violence from occurring. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses a four-level social-ecological model to better understand violence and the effect of potential prevention strategies (Dahlberg & Krug 2002). This model addresses the interplay of individual, relationship, community, and societal factors and allows for the identification of risk and protective factors at each level. Using this framework, advocates can collaborate with community partners to target multiple levels, thereby increasing community-wide capacity for prevention.

**The Expect Respect Program**

SafePlace’s Expect Respect Program *engages* young people and adults in building safe and healthy relationships; *supports* youth who have been hurt by violence or abuse; *mobilizes* teens as leaders in preventing dating and sexual violence among their peers; and *educates* school personnel, parents, and other adults on promoting healthy teen relationships.

The Expect Respect Program is a comprehensive prevention program, offering a menu of services in schools and community settings, including school-based support groups, youth leadership training, the Changing Lives Youth Theatre Ensemble, outreach to parents, and training for school personnel and other professionals. The program collaborates with schools and community organizations to bring the topic of healthy relationships into the classroom, afterschool programs, healthcare, and other settings.

**Support Groups**

The Expect Respect Support Group Program provides 24-weekly sessions in middle and high schools for youth who have been exposed to violence. Typically referred by school personnel, students share their experiences, give and receive emotional support, and learn new skills for healthy relationships. Boys and girls meet in separate groups with a same-sex facilitator employed by SafePlace. Groups are held in a private location, and confidentiality rules are strictly enforced. School support, absence of stigma associated with being in the group, and facilitators who relate well to youth are essential to the program’s success.

Support groups are a unique and effective intervention strategy for vulnerable youth. They provide youth the opportunity to build supportive relationships with peers and a caring adult facilitator. The facilitator’s role is to model respectful relationships, use the curriculum to teach healthy relationship skills, and to gently challenge youth to reject
violence and abuse in their relationships. In the words of one group participant, “Group is like a family, except better because you can trust each other.”

With support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, SafePlace is evaluating the effectiveness of Expect Respect Support Groups in reducing victimization and perpetration and increasing healthy relationships among youth.

**Youth Leadership Training**

The Expect Respect Youth Leadership Training provides an 8-session curriculum followed by a youth-led prevention project in middle and high schools. Through this program component, youth explore the impact of harassment and bullying at school and design a project to educate their peers on stopping it. The SafePlace educator often partners with a classroom teacher or organization in the school in order to maximize resources and generate a bigger impact on campus. Examples of youth leadership can be viewed at www.startstrongaustin.org.

Engaging youth as leaders is key to preventing teen dating abuse. Youth are the experts. They know which strategies will work and which will fail. They are knowledgeable about popular culture, technology, and the kind of messages that will influence their peers. Given opportunities to create art, music, poetry, or theater, young people often choose to share their personal experiences with abuse and their vision for a world without violence.

**Changing Lives Youth Theatre Ensemble**

The [Changing Lives Youth Theatre Ensemble](#) is co-directed by SafePlace and [Theatre Action Project](#) (TAP), a local theater arts organization. This program component engages youth in creating original performances to spark dialogue about teen relationship issues, including cyber-bullying, sexting, and dating abuse. Each year a new group of middle and high school-age students devise original scenes based on real-life experiences. They meet twice weekly with the SafePlace and TAP facilitators during the Fall semester to craft and rehearse a show they will tour during the Spring semester to more than 2,000 audience members. While the content is new each year, the message is often similar – stand up, speak out, and make your school a better place.

**Professional Training**

Expect Respect provides training on preventing bullying, sexual harassment, and dating violence to parents, school personnel, nurses, and other professionals who work with youth. Topics include: recognizing and responding to incidents and disclosures of violence or abuse; helping children have safe and healthy relationships; using prevention curricula in the classroom; developing school policies and practices to
increase student safety and positive school climate; and engaging youth as leaders in promoting safe and healthy relationships.

**Community Collaboration**

Teachers, parents, nurses, afterschool program providers, and other adults have an important role to play in promoting healthy relationships. SafePlace partnerships with schools and community organizations include the Austin Independent School District, Dell Children’s Medical Center/Seton Family of Hospitals, Boys and Girls Clubs of the Austin Area, The Austin Project, Theatre Action Project, and other organizations. Support for community collaboration is provided by the National Start Strong: Building Healthy Relationships Initiative, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Through this initiative, school and community partners in Austin and 10 other sites around the country work together to prevent dating abuse before it starts. Visit www.startstrongteens.org to learn more about Start Strong.

SafePlace’s Expect Respect Program and its partners are finding new ways to make healthy relationships a priority for youth and the important people in their lives.

**Other resources:**

- [Choose Respect](http://www.cdc.gov/chooserespect/), a national initiative that helps teens form healthy relationships to prevent dating violence before it starts; produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- [Dating Matters](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/DatingMatters/index.html/), the CDC’s new teen dating violence prevention initiative focusing on 11- to 14-year-olds in high-risk, urban communities. It includes preventive strategies for individuals, peers, families, schools, and neighborhoods, and training for teachers and others who work with youth.
- [Start Strong](http://www.startstrongteens.org/), a national initiative to promote healthy relationships as a way to prevent teen dating violence and abuse among 11-14 year olds. This effort is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Blue Shield of California Foundation.
- [That’s Not Cool](www.thatsnotcool.com) – a website that gives digital space for teenagers to learn and talk to each other about abuse and harassment through cell phones, the internet, and social media.

**Session Brainstorming – Recommendations for Service Providers**

Attendees identified the following recommendations for service providers for preventing dating and sexual violence among youth:

- Assume it is happening.
- Listen to youth as human beings.
• Remember that adults are role models. Consider how staff members treat teens and other staff who work with teens.
• Allow teens choice – don’t take over the situation.
• Just ask what teens need. Ask how you can help.
• Focus on preventing perpetration – seek opportunities to engage men and boys.
• Work with your school district to establish policies and training on teen dating violence and bullying prevention.

Contact information

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References


Start Strong Austin, SafePlace, [www.startstrongaustin.org](http://www.startstrongaustin.org)

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation available from [www.startstrongteens.org/resources](http://www.startstrongteens.org/resources)