

## **Youth Sexual Violence Prevention Programs: What We Know and What We Are Doing**

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The incidence rates of sexual/intimate partner violence by teens are alarming. Studies of high school students have found between 15% and 57% of students in a school said that they had engaged in at least one act of dating violence (Burke, Stete, & Pirog-Good, 1988; Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997; Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, & Bangdiwala, 2001) and that 12% to 59% of teens have experienced some form of physical violence (Macgowan, 1997; Foshee, Bauman, Arriaga, Helms, Koch, & Linder, 1998; Pacifici, Stoolmiller, & Nelson, 2001) or sexual coercion (Pacifici, Stoolmiller, & Nelson, 2001) from a dating partner. Among students as young as 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 25% have experienced some form of sexual/intimate partner violence (Foshee, et al., 1998).

To address this problem, many intervention and prevention programs have emerged. These programs have been implemented primarily in school settings. While evaluations of these programs suggest that they have contributed to improvements in knowledge and attitudes about sexual violence among young people, research on behavior change and long-term attitude change remains limited. The increase in prevention programs that attempt to reduce or diminish the occurrence of sexual violence is encouraging; however, few programs have been empirically evaluated, and consequently information about what works remains limited.

### **Prevention Programs**

Below is a discussion of prevention programs that have been comprehensively evaluated and discussed in the literature. While long-term affects of exposure to these

programs is not well documented, each program has components worth noting and investigating further. Please refer to the references for a more in-depth look at each program. These evaluations, and others like them, have been compiled and are located at the Michigan Resource Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

### *Elementary School*

Due to young children's varying levels of comprehension of topics dealing with sexual aggression, elementary school programs are aimed at basic interpersonal violence prevention, rather than specific sexual violence prevention (Flannery, Vazsonyi, Liao, Guo, Powell, Atha, Vesterdal, & Embry, 2003; Grossman, Neckerman, Koepsell, Liu, Asher, Beland, Frey, & Rivera, 1997; Haynes, 1998). The following programs focus on altering the school culture in order to decrease aggression and violence and to promote respect and equality.

Notable programs include:

- *Peacebuilders* (Flannery, 2003) – A long-term program designed to change the characteristics of the school culture and climate that trigger aggressive and hostile behavior.
- *Comer School Development Program* (Haynes, 1998) – A program developed to embrace children with a web of prosocial relationships and activities that create a “safe haven” that supports their healthy development, fosters optimal learning, and discourages interpersonal violence. Program goals are aimed at buffering students from violence outside of school and to prevent violence from occurring in school.

- *Second Step* (Grossman, 1997) – A teacher directed program that focuses on empathy training, impulse control, and anger management in order to prevent aggressive behavior and promote prosocial behavior.

### *Middle School*

The majority of sexual aggression prevention programs targeting middle schools aim to change dating attitudes and behaviors (Foshee, Bauman, Arriaga, Helms, Koch, Linder, 1998; Macgowan, 1997; Safer, 1994). Many researchers believe that it is important to implement these programs early in middle school in order to prevent violent dating behaviors before they begin (Foshee et al., 1998; Macgowan, 1998).

Notable programs include:

- *Safe Dates* (Foshee, 1998) – This program includes two components: (1) School-based activities (e.g., ten classroom-based instructive sessions headed by teachers, poster contest, and a play) aimed at changing norms, decreasing gender stereotyping, improving conflict management skills, raising awareness of services, and increasing help-seeking behavior; and (2) Community-based activities (e.g., special services for adolescents in abusive relationships, such as support groups, crisis lines, and materials for parents, and community service provider training) to facilitate enhanced availability of dating violence services.
- *Healthy Relationships* (Safer, 1994) – A teacher run, classroom-based program that uses holistic instructive sessions focused on education, empowerment, and skill building to end violence, promote gender equality, and build healthy relationships.

## *High School*

Dating violence prevention programs in high school settings are the most common form of school-based sexual violence prevention programs. Many of the evaluated programs consisted of classroom curriculum (Jones, 1991; Lavoie et al., 1995; Pacifici et al., 2001).

## *Dating and Sexual Violence*

Notable programs include:

- *Responsibility* (Pacifici, 2001) – Program uses a multimedia curriculum that is incorporated into health classes to prevent coercive sexual behavior in dating situations. It consists of three 80-minute periods of class instruction and one individualized virtual date.
- *Dating Violence Prevention Program* (Avery-Leaf, 1997) – Program consists of classroom-based discussion and instruction in health classes to change students' attitudes that justify dating violence.
- *Teen Dating Violence Prevention Program* (Lavoie, 1995) – This program consists of either two or four classroom-based sessions run by trained community volunteers and professional counselors. It also incorporates films, fictional letters to victims and perpetrators, a presentation by knowledgeable community members, student plays, performances by a professional theater company, and a talk by a survivor of abuse.
- *MCBW* (Jones, 1991) – This program trains teachers to implement curriculum into existing standard courses to provide young people with information about the problem of domestic violence, why this abuse occurs, and prevention methods.

It is evident in the evaluated programs that short-lived prevention curricula and/or one-shot presentations do not withstand the test of time. To date, no long-term effects and/or behavior change have been found from evaluations of these types of efforts. It is imperative that our prevention programs become a way of life. They must go beyond what is currently being done.

### **What Agencies in Michigan Are Doing**

In January of this year, MCADSV surveyed over 70 of its member agencies about their current prevention efforts. Of the 53 total respondents it is encouraging to note that 83% (44 agencies) are currently conducting prevention programs in their communities. Of these 44 agencies, 65% (34 agencies) have been involved in prevention for over 6 years and 17% (9 agencies) have been involved for over 16 years!

Michigan has been relatively successful at increasing community involvement in prevention efforts. For example, it is encouraging to learn that 32% of the 53 agencies report working with elementary school students, 47% work with middle school students, and 69% work with high school students. In addition, 28% (15 agencies) include parents in their prevention efforts, 26% (14 agencies) include teachers, 24.5% (13 agencies) work with school administrators, and 9% (5 agencies) work with sports teams.

Evaluation of prevention programs is crucial. It is important to know whether or not our efforts are in fact making a difference. Evaluators recommend pre- and post-test methodologies that include scales pertaining directly to the topics and goals relevant to the program. Currently 32% (17 agencies) reported using a pre/post-test method and about 21% (11 agencies) reported doing post-tests only.

## **Future Directions**

An overwhelming number of agencies (90%) responded to the question pertaining to what types of assistance would help them with increasing their interest and capabilities to conduct prevention programs in their communities. About 55% (29 agencies) responded that curriculum ideas would be beneficial, 43% (23 agencies) specified that contact with other agencies would be helpful and 38% (20 agencies) responded that they would like assistance with talking points pertaining to prevention. In addition, 26% (14 agencies) specified that they would like training on partnership building. MCADSV is excited about future plans to address issues pertaining to prevention education.

More information about prevention in Michigan, including information on the programs listed and the MCADSV publication, *A Vision for Prevention: Key Issues and Statewide Recommendations for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women in Michigan* are available at [www.mcadsv.org](http://www.mcadsv.org).

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