

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships

Lessons Learned in Engaging Influencers

Program Overview

Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships (Start Strong) was a four year teen dating violence prevention initiative that worked to educate and engage middle schoolers in eleven communities across the country. The middle school years are a critical window of opportunity to stop dating violence before it starts. Brain science tells us that the early adolescent brain is highly receptive; early adolescence is the formative period for social emotional skills, values and empathy, which develop rapidly in a very short time. This time of rapid change, along with the power of parents and teachers as influencers in young teens' lives allows interventions during this time to greatly influence healthy relationship behaviors and impact malleable risk factors for dating violence. Targeting this younger cohort has tremendous potential to interrupt the cycle of interpersonal violence that often starts during adolescence, preventing a lifelong chain of health and behavior problems.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in collaboration with Blue Shield of California Foundation and Futures Without Violence invested more than \$18 million to develop, implement and evaluate a comprehensive community health model of healthy relationships education and teen dating violence prevention. Underlying Start Strong's comprehensive model of prevention was a belief that no single intervention or curriculum would eliminate teen dating violence. Success required a multi-faceted approach that could be adapted to work in any community.

Each site implemented four key elements of success:

- Educate youth in in-school and out-of-school settings;
- Engage those who influence young teens (parents, caregivers, older teens, health professionals and others);
- Leverage social marketing, both online and on-the-ground; and
- Change school policy and environment.

Rationale

The Start Strong framework is a prevention strategy, designed to promote factors that protect against the onset of violence among middle school age youth. The Start Strong initiative met young people where they already spent their time, connecting them to positive peer influencers, increasing their sense of self-efficacy, and establishing a community climate that promoted healthy and safe teen relationships. In addition to establishing positive social norms, the program provided stimulating opportunities for teens to strengthen their self-esteem and build leadership skills.

Engaging Influencers to Reach Youth

In conjunction with the other three key element of success—in-school and out of school education, social marketing and school policy change—Start Strong sites implemented a strategy to educate the people who influence young teens and promote them as champions of healthy relationship development. Social marketing and influencer strategies were overlapping and integrated elements. Key influencers like parents and older youth influencers were required targets, and some sites included health care providers, school personnel, clergy, coaches and others in their efforts. This paper provides the rationale for targeting influencers and what sites learned about the best ways to engage them.

Start Strong's approach to engaging influencers is based on the empirically demonstrated fact that both peers and parents hold considerable power to guide what young teens think about and choose to do. Some sites included health care providers as well, based on their trusted status among both youth and adults in most communities.

Parents

For young teens ages 11 to 14, parents continue to be important and influential in perception and decision-making. Peers and social groups do become more significant as teens age into young adulthood, but middle school-aged youth are still heavily influenced by parents. It is important to reach parents while their children are still young

enough to take advantage of these stronger ties. Younger teens are more likely to listen to and be affected by their parents than older teens, for whom peer and social influence has already eclipsed parental influence.

Indicators point to parental supervision, monitoring and connectedness as significant factors influencing teen behavior and healthy development.¹

Research has shown:

- Positive parenting is associated with reductions in antisocial behavior in middle childhood.²
- A lack of parenting skill is a risk factor for partner violence.³
- Lax parental monitoring and harsh parenting both increased the risk of males being abusive in dating relationships.⁴

Start Strong Austin reached out to parents as their kids were transitioning into middle school from elementary school. In their experience, parents of younger students tended to be more involved in schools than parents of older teens.

Barriers to Parent Engagement

Research clearly shows that parental involvement is a key protective factor against teen dating violence and other risky behavior, but most parents of 11-to-14-year-olds do not feel prepared to talk to their kids about healthy relationships and teen dating violence. They may not even want to acknowledge that their kids have started dating. And, they may not understand that controlling behaviors and bullying in pre-teen relationships can lead to dating violence and other harm later on.

Start Strong discovered a number of barriers to successful parent education; there are few effective programs targeted directly to prevention of teen dating abuse for youth age 11-14, it is generally difficult to reach parents with educational programs, and many parents were not immediately receptive to prevention messages. Start Strong sites also found that many parents were uncomfortable with discussing teen dating violence or healthy relationships with their 11-14 year-olds, and skeptical of the need to do so.

Opinion research shows that most parents are not as worried about teen dating violence as they are about other risky behaviors. Successful parent education must emphasize that healthy relationships protect teens from other dangers that are already top of mind for them; like substance abuse, increased sexual activity and self-destructive tendencies.

A qualitative research survey conducted by Hart Research on behalf of Start Strong found that parents were most concerned about:

- Children having sex too early (72%)
- Violence in the media (70%)
- Illegal drug use (63%)
- Online bullying, rumors, sexting (55%)
- Pressure to be in a relationship (53%)
- Gangs (49%)
- Depression (42%)
- Abusive relationship (37%)

Research also revealed disconnects in communication between parents and youth:

- In a 2009 survey of parents, 3 out of 4 parents said they had spoken with their teen about what it means to be in a healthy relationship within the past year, but 3 out of 4 sons and 2 out of 3 daughters said they had not had a conversation about dating abuse with a parent in the past year.

¹ Elizabeth Miller, MD, PhD, Dept of Pediatrics, University of California Davis. Presentation slides to parent caregiver advisory group, Nov. 5, 2009. Based on multiple research findings including Brendgen et al, 2001.

² Kazdin, 1993; Dishion and Kavanagh, 2003; Morretti and Obsuth, 2009 Positive parenting research findings in the “Connect” program includes “the building blocks of secure attachment: parental sensitivity, cooperation, reflective capacity, and effective dyadic affect regulation. Through didactic and experiential activities, parents develop the competence necessary to identify, understand and respond to the needs of their teen in a manner that provides structure and safety while safeguarding the quality of the parent-teen relationship.

³ Capaldi and Clark, 1998; “unskilled parenting, especially ineffective and coercive discipline practices and low levels of parental monitoring are associated with the development of antisocial behavior that includes in young adulthood coercive, aggressive and violent tactics toward intimate partners”. Also Andrews et al, 2000.

⁴ LaVoie et al, 2002

- Though more than 80% of parents felt confident that they would be able to recognize if their child was experiencing dating abuse, almost 60% of parents could not correctly identify all of the warning signs of abuse.
- Among teens that had experienced relationship abuse, only 1 out of 3 confided in their parents about their abusive relationship.

These findings resulted in a strategy designed to both convince parents of the importance of teen dating violence for young teens and implement programs to help parents improve conversation skills and overcome discomfort.

Tips for Success

Choose a comprehensive approach: One of the biggest challenges in engaging parents is overcoming their skepticism about the topic. As noted above, parents are much more likely to buy in when they understand that teen dating violence is often associated with other issues like failing grades, dropping out of school, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior and self-destructive thoughts and behavior.

Parents need to be drawn in before they will take action. Here are some entry points that worked for Start Strong:

- How to prepare your child to develop healthy relationships before they start dating
- How to parent in a digital age (setting ground rules for cell phone use and social media)
- Teach your child to be a good friend and speak up against bullying and other unhealthy behaviors

Build Parental Confidence: Parents need tools and training to help them overcome discomfort discussing healthy relationships and dating violence with their children. They need straight talk to become confident and ready to talk to their kids about relationships, especially since language about romantic relationships is likely to differ between youth and parents. Parents need words to use, tips on how to engage their kids in discussions, and the space to become more comfortable. Start Strong Austin engaged parents by making it personal, asking parents to think about how old they were when they first started thinking about a relationship. Start Strong Los Angeles gave parents space to talk about things they were worried about, and wove their issues into the program.

Family Dinner Workshops Reinforce Research: Several Start Strong sites used family dinner workshops to engage parents. This tactic helped drive home the importance of family dinners, underscoring the academic evidence that eating dinner as a family is a protective factor. Dinner workshops also served the practical purpose of removing a barrier to parent participation: the need to feed their kids in the evening. Start Strong Idaho offered family meals where parents and youth separated into discussion groups following the meal and came back together to share experiences over dessert. The Start Strong parent website offers dinner recipes and conversation cards, to help families discuss healthy relationship development over dinner.

Joint Programming Is Effective: Start Strong found that when programs partnered with other organizations like school resource centers and parent/teacher organizations, event attendance went up and cost and planning time went down. Some sites connected with parent groups already doing work in related areas and then helped them become more informed about healthy relationships. One site held their workshop alongside a parent/teacher organization awards ceremony. Other sites were able to add their programming on to an event that they knew parents would be present for. Start Strong Bronx conducted a parenting program at school when parents were scheduled to pick up report cards.

Culture and Fun Together: Weaving culture and community into programs enticed parents to participate, and made them more fun. For Start Strong Los Angeles, this translated into celebrating Dia de los Muertos and hosting a mole sauce contest. Start Strong Austin and Bridgeport offered teen theater performances about healthy relationships in which parents enjoyed seeing their kids perform.

Tested Messaging Concept

Be a Parent that Matters: Start Relating Before They Start Dating
Start Strong communities used the theme “Be a Parent that Matters” for creative placement as posters, print ads and radio spots. Materials were used to reach parents, engage them in educational activities, and drive them to online resources.

Creative concepts and message testing showed positive parent reactions:

- After seeing four of the executions, 89% felt “Positive” or “Very Positive” about the content overall
- A clear majority of parents considered one or more ads to be interesting and relevant to them

Older Youth as Influencers

Older teens have an important role to play as mentors to their younger peers. Middle schoolers look up to high school and college students and trust them to offer knowledgeable, relevant guidance, without patronizing or judging them. Peer influencers can include older students, siblings, older teens, or college students. Start Strong sites found that working with older youth as influencers was beneficial in multiple ways. Teens informed programming and were creative sources of content that appealed to middle school youth; they were experts in social marketing and social media⁵; and working with older youth contributed to larger social norm change in communities. This strategy saw great success and offered many advantages. However, working with teens also came with its own set of unique challenges.

Lessons Learned

Training is Essential: Older teens are strong, effective influencers and leaders on the topic of healthy relationships but they are inexperienced and may accept unhealthy behaviors around them. Every Start Strong site found it essential to begin with training, education and exploration for older youth. Start Strong Boston developed a summer program in partnership with Youth Employment that paid teens for specific responsibilities in the program. Some sites found that young men and women who had experienced teen dating violence made eloquent and motivational leaders. At Start Strong Idaho, a teen mom who experienced dating abuse was a committed advocate, teaching others and helping build support for the program within the community. Start Strong Kansas created student leadership teams at local middle and high schools and sustained the approach by creating a committee of district and community adults to advise club leadership. Start Strong Los Angeles sustained its youth training as part of a summer training program for high school club members.

Positive Side Effects: When Start Strong programs are introduced in schools, students become more comfortable reporting inappropriate behaviors to teachers and administrators. And when teens become educated about healthy relationships, they become bolder and more empowered to speak up when they see unacceptable relationship behaviors among their friends and classmates and contribute to a broader change in social norms. And they notice the change: “For the first time, I feel comfortable talking about dating violence with my friends,” one participant said.

Adults Need to Share the Power: Youth leaders need to be heard and respected. They need to be guided, but also trusted to take a real role in decision making. Embrace youth and really include them—be willing to accept the input they offer. Give them meaningful roles in developing the program. Use skillful facilitation to combine adult and youth input to produce the best product. Start Strong staff recognized their need to develop their own skills to work effectively with youth leaders, and their concerted effort led to a productive balance of creative input and guidance, resulting in successful events, campaigns and other activities.

Recognize Youth Limitations: Don’t set expectations of youth leaders too high. They are still learning about healthy relationships themselves, shifting their own values and evaluating their own relationships as they go through the program. They still make mistakes, which should be used as teachable, rather than punitive, moments. It is important to recognize that youth leaders are at different levels—and help foster their growth and development as leaders.

Leverage Resources: Partner with other youth-focused organizations, even if they do not have programs about healthy relationships or teen dating violence. Start Strong Rhode Island partnered with Young Voices, a nonprofit advocacy organization for urban youth, and helped them incorporate healthy relationships content into their programming.

Navigating Roadblocks: Recognize and address the practical barriers to participation for older teens. In Idaho, youths from migrant farmworker families needed gas money; others needed babysitting for younger relatives. Programs for older teen influencers need to be during after school hours, so Start Strong sites found it helpful to be sensitive to homework loads. Stipends were also extremely helpful if possible, especially for older students who might otherwise spend their after school hours working for pay.

⁵ See *Lessons Learned: Social Marketing* paper for more information about social marketing and social media strategies that older youth informed and implemented.

Health Care Providers as Influencers

Due to their status as trusted experts in most communities, health care providers can serve as effective influencers. School nurses, family doctors, health clinics and medical centers are safe places for many teens, positioning health care organizations and professionals to be effective teammates in teen dating violence prevention work.

“School nurses are frequently the first people a teen will confide in on a school campus, so it is critical that they be prepared to recognize, respond to and prevent dating abuse.” -Laura Cotton, RN, Start Strong

Lessons Learned

Training Needs Vary Greatly: School nurses and other professionals who have regular personal interactions with teens may be very familiar with teen dating violence, where professionals who are more accustomed to diagnosing conditions or spend less personal interaction time with youth may not be as attuned to the issue. Although huge strides have been made in training health care providers to screen for relationship abuse, most doctors and nurses still do not screen for it unless they suspect a problem. Start Strong Austin developed training materials and data monitoring systems and implemented policies to sustain their approach throughout schools. Start Strong Bronx developed a pediatric residency training program to prepare physicians to discuss healthy relationship development with parents and youth. Their training focuses on “Dating Violence 101” and offers real life scenarios and training on how to ask questions.

Assess the Needs: Health care professionals need tailored, multi-faceted training that is easy to implement as part of their ongoing coursework or practice. Start Strong sites found it helpful to suggest ways to incorporate dating violence topics into existing procedures or screening requirements.

Training checklist:

- Why teen dating violence is an important issue
- How to recognize teen dating violence
- How to interview teens in a health setting
- How to respond when a teen is a victim of teen dating violence
- How to talk to parents.

Time and Privacy Are in Short Supply: Most health care providers lack the time needed to adequately address teen dating violence with young patients and their parents, or the privacy needed to do so comfortably. They need workable solutions. Start Strong Austin heard from school nurses that environment was a huge barrier for them; their shared office usually had more than one student present, and did not offer a private place for a students to confide. They also heard that due to the high student to nurse ratio, nurses did not feel they had the time to give students’ problems adequate attention. Other health practitioners face similar time constraints as well; doctors generally have a short time with each patient, and many topics they need to cover. One provider that Start Strong worked with effectively addressed this issue by dedicating one visit after the age of 14 to discussing dating and relationships issues.

Create tools and guides: Health care providers need tested, effective tools that they can easily embed into existing systems. When policies require screening for teen dating violence, Start Strong found it extremely helpful to provide a guided process that doctors and others could incorporate into their patient questionnaires. Topics related to healthy relationships can also be incorporated into required school and sports physicals if easy-to-embed resources are available.

Partners and Clinical Champions: As with other groups of influencers, health care providers were effectively engaged when other partners were involved as well. Start Strong found success working with groups that were already committed to teen dating violence issues, such as teen health clinics. This leverages resources and time, and is particularly successful when a strong “champion” is identified. Start Strong Atlanta developed a strong relationship with Grady Teen Services Clinic, where a clinical champion was committed to the issue. They trained their providers on screening questions and adopted procedures for screening youth. Existing programs dedicated to related issues such as teen pregnancy and HIV prevention can be another gateway for introducing discussions or training on teen dating violence and healthy relationships.

Other Influencers

While parents, peers and health care providers were the primary influencers that most sites worked with, a few attempted to connect with youth organizations, the faith community, government programs and other influencers. Idaho tried repeatedly to engage the faith community. They met resistance initially, but found success by focusing on the issue of adolescent healthy relationships as opposed to the more sensitive topics of teen dating violence and sexual assault.

Program Considerations: Engaging Influencers

Parent, older teen and health professional engagement was a successful program element that aimed to educate those who influence teens, and contribute to building positive community norms about healthy relationships. The Start Strong evaluation was not designed to measure the significance of individual program objectives, yet the evaluation did report sustained impact, including lower acceptance of teen dating violence and more positive attitudes toward gender equality. Sustainability of peer influencer partnerships and approaches was partially successful through policy and organizational changes in clinics and school nurse protocols; however, the ongoing activities for older youth in particular requires sustained funding.

Program Outcomes

On behalf of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Blue Shield of California Foundation, RTI International conducted an independent evaluation of Start Strong.⁶ The Start Strong evaluation is one of the few studies to look in-depth at the dating relationships of middle school students. Although it is not nationally representative, the study sample included more than 1,500 7th-grade students from diverse geographical locations. The study collected data on teen dating violence behaviors, as well as risk factors linked to dating violence, such as gender stereotypes, sexual harassment and the acceptance of teen dating violence. The baseline data provides important insights into teen dating violence behaviors and risk factors among middle school students. In fact, 75% of students surveyed reported having had a boyfriend or girlfriend. And teen dating violence is not happening behind closed doors; more than 1 in 3 (37%) of students surveyed reported having witnessed physical dating violence in the last 6 months.

The outcome evaluation of Start Strong found sustained positive impact in a number of variables studied. Compared with students in comparison schools, short-term results reported for students in Start Strong schools included:

- Lower acceptance of teen dating violence
- More positive attitudes toward gender equality
- More parent-child communication about relationships
- More support and satisfaction in their boyfriend/girlfriend relationships

Sustained impact on attitudes was reported:

- Lower acceptance of teen dating violence
- More positive attitudes toward gender equality

The policy evaluation assessed the adoption, implementation and sustainability of teen dating violence prevention policy efforts in *Start Strong* sites over the course of two years (2010 to 2012).

- By fall 2012, six of the 11 *Start Strong* communities achieved significant policy wins.
- As a direct result of their work, five sites secured important changes to teen dating violence -related school district policies. Sites also provided technical assistance and awareness-building to inform changes to state legislation.
- State legislation was strengthened in three states.
- All 11 sites established one or more practice changes that remained in place in the school year after the completion of *Start Strong* funding. Practice change included prevention education, staff training and parent education.

⁶ The complete evaluation report and data can be found at www.rwjf.org