

## ***Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships***

### **Lessons Learned: Educating Middle School Students In and Out of School**

#### **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.

## Meeting Middle Schoolers Where They Are

In-school and out-of-school programming allowed the Start Strong initiative to meet students where they were, leveraging in-school settings for education and curricula implementation, and bolstering it with out-of school engagement opportunities through club, community group, and extracurricular as additional engagement opportunities.

### In-School Curriculum Delivery

Healthy relationships education and teen dating violence prevention work intersect with academic interests in many ways. Research shows that school programs influence healthy behavior in teens, and that kids with healthier behaviors do better in school. For some young teens, the classroom may be the only place in their lives where they receive health information, feel safe, or learn positive behavior. To Start Strong leaders, it was clear that implementation of an in-school healthy relationships education curriculum would be critical to program success.

As the initiative launched, a literature review revealed no evidence-based, healthy relationship curricula specifically targeting middle school age youth. And in the absence of a program tailored to the middle school age bracket, an expert National Advisory Committee was convened to review available options. After extensive review of curricula, the committee chose two well-evaluated programs for implementation based on findings indicating effectiveness in reducing youth dating violence in school settings.

**Safe Dates Curricula:** Safe Dates is a 10-session program that focuses on understanding and identifying abusive relationships and gender stereotypes, helping friends in an abusive relationship, and developing communication skills for relationships.

**Fourth R Curricula:** Fourth R is a universal prevention program that targets dating violence and related risk behaviors. The curriculum includes lessons on healthy relationships, substance abuse and on healthy sexuality, and is based on evidence that addressing risky behaviors in any area of a teen’s life increases skills in resisting all kinds of risky behavior.

### Curricula Overview

Safe Dates	Fourth R
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on teen dating violence prevention</li><li>• A 10-session program</li><li>• Led by the classroom teacher or outside instructor</li><li>• Implemented by seven Start Strong sites</li><li>• Implemented in: 247 grade 7 classes; 76 grade 8 classes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Universal prevention program with focus on dating violence prevention, healthy sexuality, and substance abuse</li><li>• Program required 17 of 21 total sessions</li><li>• Led by the classroom teacher</li><li>• Implemented by four Start Strong sites</li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offered in Health (43%); Science (22%)</li> <li>• Appropriate to grade level reported 91% of the time</li> <li>• Equally well received by boys and girls</li> <li>• Many teachers reported that the length of class time was “too short”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implemented in 151 grade 7 classes; 166 grade 8 classes</li> <li>• Offered mostly in Health class (73%)</li> <li>• Appropriate to grade level reported 81% to 97% of the time</li> <li>• Equally well-received by both girls and boys</li> <li>• Many teachers commented on length of sessions being too long to complete within the constraints of class time</li> </ul>
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### Curriculum: Self-Reported Results

Instructors for Safe Dates and Fourth R were required to submit self-reported curriculum and implementation evaluations, indicating the number of students, teacher satisfaction, challenges in teaching the curriculum and how much of the curriculum was completed. Start Strong’s central program office developed a database to monitor implementation and fidelity, and gather qualitative input from instructors. While information qualitative is self-reported, rather than quantitative evaluation data, this direct input from instructors did prove useful to helping Start Strong overcome challenges and implement program improvements.

Teachers reported that the most effective lessons involved interactive and participatory activities that engaged students. As least effective, teachers ranked readings and worksheets. While teachers noted that overall, the curriculum was equally received by boys and girls, some did mention some instances where boys felt uncomfortable when scenario examples consistently framed boys as perpetrators. Assessments reported high levels of satisfaction by teachers for both programs, as well as high levels of completion among sites.

### Lessons Learned: Getting Started in Schools

*Teaching Sinks In:* Start Strong’s program evaluation found healthy relationships education to be well received by and influential to middle school age youth<sup>1</sup>. Because the early teen years are a developmental stage where romantic relationships, and the skills required to navigate them, are paramount, there positive results are particularly promising.

*Think Efficiency:* To maximize likelihood of administration buy-in, consider how to stretch resources, creatively build on existing infrastructure, or accomplish multiple goals. As one Start Strong leader noted, “We had to remember that we came into an environment that already had a lot of other programs going on. We needed to persuade

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<sup>2</sup> The complete evaluation report and data can be found at [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org)

the administration that our program complimented something that was already going on or would replace something.” Each site chose curricula based on specific, local considerations such as existing health education programs and requirements for middle schools, the number of the sessions required by each program, and the resources needed to implement the curriculum.

*Weigh Curricula Decisions:* Number of sessions mattered for sites’ curriculum implementation. Especially in school districts without a health class requirement, carving out time for the longer Fourth R (17 sessions) was challenging. Because in Austin, there was no health class in middle school, they had to convince the school district and administrators to carve out time from core curriculum classes such as English and science to implement Safe Dates (10 sessions), which was still difficult, even with the shorter program. But for some, the comprehensive nature of Fourth R allowed it to complement or replace existing programming. Start Strong Idaho was able to convince schools to meet the state requirement for health curriculum by adopting Fourth R. The comprehensive breadth of Fourth R, covering dating violence, substance use, sexuality, and violence, persuaded authorities to adopt it.

*Considerations About Delivery Method:* In Fourth R, teachers were required to implement the curriculum but the comfort level and willingness of each teacher to participate differed greatly. Safe Dates can be implemented by either teachers or trained outside educators. The use of outside educators allowed for more consistency in delivery of the lessons across classrooms, and teacher turnover or administration turmoil did not impact the delivery of the program. Some sites noted, however, that outside educators had difficulty connecting with students because they had no prior relationships with them. However, in Bridgeport, where Start Strong used AmeriCorps volunteers, the students loved the outside educators. The AmeriCorps volunteers established a youthful, trusted presence in the schools, and quickly built rapport with students. In this instance, they were the perfect messengers.

## Pros and Cons: Curriculum Delivery

### Teachers Deliver Curriculum

#### PRO

- Have strong connections with students already.
- Can become champions and hold leverage within the school system.
- Using existing teaching resources may decrease implementation costs.
- Increases capacity of school to prevent and respond to TDV

#### CON

- Teachers' comfort levels and willingness to participate may differ greatly.

### Outside Educators Deliver Curriculum

#### PRO

- Gives you more control of the delivery of the lessons (more consistency and fidelity to the curriculum).
- Insulates program from teacher or administration turnover.
- Presents opportunity to use volunteers (so long as they are trained).
- Fresh faces can change the school climate.
- Younger educators may establish better rapport with students.

#### CON

- Can take longer to build credibility, support and rapport with students and staff.
- Can be more costly.

*Find Your Champion:* Successful adoption of the curricula depended on identifying the right champion within the school or district, which was different in each location and school. In Start Strong Wichita, the critical point of leverage was a school counselor, but finding the right point of contact and developing school champions varied across communities. Start Strong sites found champions in athletic directors, school nurses, principals, and board members.

*Foster Teacher Enthusiasm:* Enthusiastic teachers make anything possible. Start Strong sites found that teachers' enthusiasm for and comfort with the material was the single biggest predictor of a program's success at any given school. Many teachers did not begin with an interest in teen dating violence or healthy relationship skills, but once bought into the program, they became enthusiastic, and were instrumental to its success.

Safe Dates and Fourth R were implemented in a variety of classes: health, humanities/English, science, advisory/homeroom, PE, social studies/history, and math. Start Strong sites did not find a difference in implementation or fidelity to the curricula based on the setting. The enthusiasm and comfort level of the teacher was the critical determining factor.

### Lessons Learned: Implementation Strategy

*Invest in Teachers:* Ensure curriculum success by investing in teachers through training, support and supplies. Start Strong found that if an instructor or teacher valued the curriculum and felt comfortable delivering it, then implementation and fidelity followed. To foster interest and expertise among teachers, keep an open dialogue with them. Start Strong Kansas brought all of the 4<sup>th</sup> R teachers together once or twice a year to share

experiences and learn from one another. Responding to teacher need was critical as well. Some of the subjects covered may be difficult for teachers to discuss; in one site where a teacher felt uncomfortable with certain lessons, so they arranged to have the guidance counselor teach those lessons.

*Use Reporting to Improve Support:* Fidelity reporting—while initially perceived as burdensome—developed into an effective way to foster relationships with the teachers delivering the lessons. It enabled Start Strong staff to understand the challenges teachers were facing, to intervene when teachers were struggling and to develop ways to support them. When Start Strong leaders in Georgia noticed that teachers were not doing the poster contest required for Safe Dates, they intervened to help teachers obtain the materials they needed.

*Curriculum Implementation Leads to Community Implementation:* Start Strong sites forged school relationships during the initiative that fostered a range of related supports for students. Peace Over Violence, the lead organization for Start Strong Los Angeles, leveraged its relationship with the school district during implementation of Safe Dates to begin offering intervention services for students who reported abuse.

Likewise in Idaho, the lead Start Strong organization, Idaho Coalition for Sexual and Domestic Violence was able to extend an existing high school poetry contest to the middle schools, and deepen their prevention work by braiding in-school and out-of-school activities. Working with English teachers in middle school, Start Strong Idaho received more than 2,000 poetry submissions around the theme of healthy relationships. The top 100 poems were published in a book and celebrated at a poetry slam in Boise with over 450 students, parents and teachers in attendance. The following year, Start Strong Idaho extended the concept further to art classes. By reaching out to art teachers, Start Strong Idaho got 30 schools to participate in a Chalk Art contest illustrating one of the poems from the poetry contest. Both efforts were a huge success, reinforcing the in-school curriculum for students and engaging parents and teachers not previously involved.

*Face Your Challenges:* Using an in-school curriculum has the potential to impact a huge number of students, yet can also pose big challenges. In Start Strong's experience, in-school programming required intensive preparation and troubleshooting. Factors like school staffing and administration changes, testing and budget issues can all disrupt curriculum delivery, but programs can still make a difference even when faced with unexpected bumps along the way.

Sometimes problems arise on the macro level. For instance, Start Strong Atlanta faced a potentially catastrophic situation when virtually all of the school administrators were removed from office. The Start Strong leaders in Georgia had to scramble to establish new relationships in order to continue the program.

Problems also arise on the micro level. Snow days or testing may prevent lessons from being delivered; a teacher leaves mid-semester. It is important to stay close and responsive to creative solutions as well as steadfast about requirements.

### **Lessons Learned: Out-of-School Curricula**

*Get Active:* In out-of-school settings, kids want and need to be physically active. Think about how to weave activity into your programs through dance, games, sports, acting and more.

*Work with Existing Programs:* Partnering with an existing organization such as Boys & Girls Clubs of America or the YMCA gives you access to existing facilities, infrastructure and standing within the community. But these organizations already have activities in place and it may prove difficult to implement additional curriculum. In addition to or instead of having your own team run the curriculum, consider training after-school program staff to lead sessions. With training, they can gain the expertise to have an ongoing impact, changing the environment of their program to promote healthy relationship development and taking advantage of teachable moments. Start Strong Idaho trained staff at after school programs such as Boys and Girls clubs, YMCA staff and Girl Scout troop leaders, which they credit with aiding in community culture change.

*Recognize Limitations:* Out of school programs for middle schoolers have potential to reach students and allow the flexibility for instructors to cover topics or devote time to priorities raised by students. These are important advantages yet the consistent implementation of a formalized curriculum in out-of-school settings can be difficult to achieve. In settings outside of school, attendance can vary widely. Groups change and evolve quickly, making a set curriculum difficult to adhere to. Freestanding activities and sessions that don't need to be implemented in a specific order are ideal.

Start Strong Rhode Island tried to work with the juvenile justice system by implementing Safe Dates curriculum, but the population was so transitional that it was hard to administer the curriculum.

### **Summary**

Start Strong communities were successful in delivering teen dating violence curricula to thousands of students over the initiative. One of the best ways to reach kids is through in-school programming and after-school activities. Those are the places where they spend the most time and go to grow and learn.

Start Strong found, however, that the in-school and after-school settings are very different places, each with their own unique set of opportunities and challenges. In addition, the partnerships developed between Start Strong programs and other youth-serving community organizations led to programs and activities that enhanced formal curricula.

## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 provide 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.

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<sup>2</sup> The complete evaluation report and data can be found at [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org)